

Waterfowl ID Guide



Ducks Unlimited
Canada

Have fun watching waterfowl. Ducks Unlimited Canada is happy to provide you with this special pocket guide to help you identify and learn about your favourite species.

What does Ducks Unlimited Canada do?

Ducks Unlimited Canada delivers wetland conservation that benefits every Canadian. By conserving critical wetlands and other natural habitat, DUC is helping create a healthier world with clean water, abundant wildlife and beautiful places for people to enjoy nature. The wetlands we save aren't just for ducks, they're for all of us.

This guide is a collaboration of Ducks Unlimited Inc., Ducks Unlimited Canada and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



Toll-free: 1-800-665-DUCK(3825)

ducks.ca

Cover: Harlequin, p. 38
Above: Common Goldeneye, p. 30

Identification is Important

Identifying waterfowl gives many hours of enjoyment to millions of people. This guide will help you recognize birds on the wing – it emphasizes their annual plumage patterns as well as size, shape and flight characteristics. It does not include local names.



What to Look For

Differences in size, shape, plumage patterns and colours, wing beat, flocking behaviour, voice and habitat all help to distinguish one species from another.

Flock manoeuvres in the air are clues. Mallards, pintails and wigeons form loose groups; teal and shovelers flash by in small, compact bunches; at a distance, canvasbacks shift from waving lines to temporary V formations.

Closer up, individual silhouettes are important. Variations of head shapes and sizes, lengths of wings and tails, and fat bodies or slim can be seen. Colour areas can be important. Light conditions might make waterfowl look different, but their size and location are positive keys.

The sound of their wings can help as much as their calls. Flying goldeneyes make a whistling sound; wood ducks move with a swish; canvasbacks make a steady rushing sound. Not all ducks quack; many whistle, squeal or grunt.

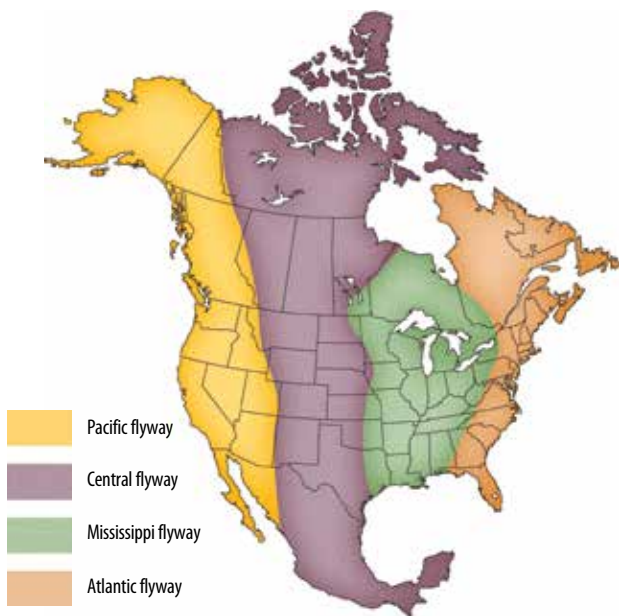
Although not a hard and fast rule, different species tend to use different types of habitat. Dabblers like shallow marshes and creeks while diving ducks prefer larger, deeper and more open waters.



Migration Pathways

The term “flyway” is used to describe the general migration paths of waterfowl. Many of these migratory routes run essentially north-south across most parts of Canada. There are four major flyways in North America that were established in 1948 for waterfowl management purposes: Pacific, Central, Mississippi and Atlantic.

Where you live in Canada will determine the main types of waterfowl species that you will see during migration. Fall and spring migration offer the best opportunities to see large flocks of birds, but we hope you use this identification guide to make waterfowl watching a year-round adventure.



Eclipse Plumage



Drake: Spring Plumage



Hen



Drake: Full Eclipse

Drakes Emerging
from Eclipse



Drake: Fall Plumage

Most ducks shed their body feathers twice each year. Nearly all drakes lose their bright plumage after mating, and for a few weeks resemble females. This hen-like appearance is called the eclipse plumage. The return to breeding colouration varies in species and individuals of each species. Blue-winged teal and shovelers may retain the eclipse plumage until well into the winter.

Wing feathers are shed only once a year; wing colours are always the same.



Dabblers

Dabblers – also known as puddle ducks – are typically birds of fresh, shallow marshes and rivers rather than of large lakes and bays. They are

The speculum, or coloured wing patch, is generally iridescent and bright, and often a telltale field mark.

Any duck feeding in croplands will likely be a puddle duck, for most of this group are sure-footed and can walk and run well on land.



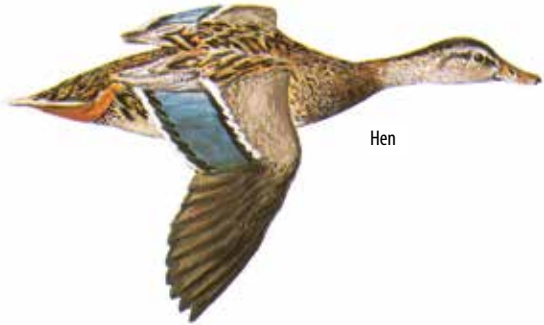
Mallard

Length: 58 cm.

Weight: 1.25 kg.



Eclipse Drake



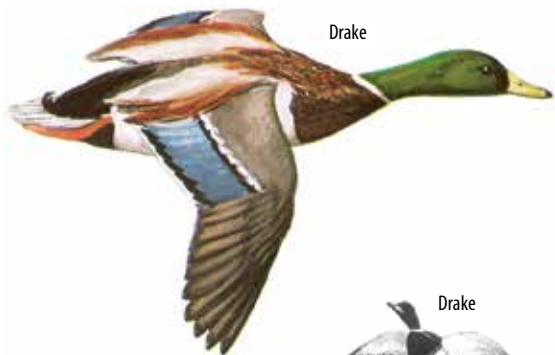
Hen

Mallards use all four flyways and are the most common duck in Canada.

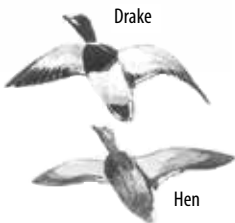


Hen

Drake



Drake



Drake

Hen

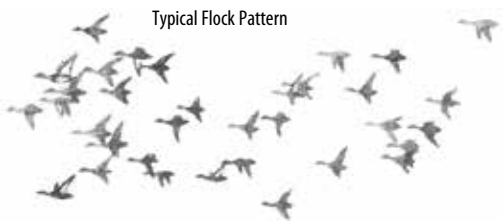
Flocks often feed in early morning and late afternoon in nearby harvested fields, returning to marshes and creeks to spend the night.

The flight is not particularly rapid. Hens have a loud *quack*; the drake's voice is a low-pitched *kwek-kwek*.



Drake

Hen

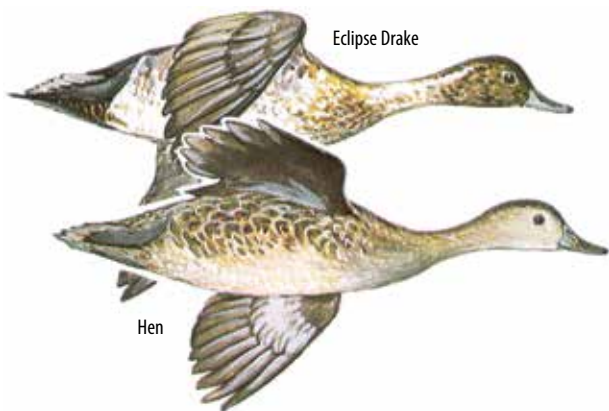


Typical Flock Pattern

Northern Pintail

Length: 66 cm.

Weight: 0.8 kg.

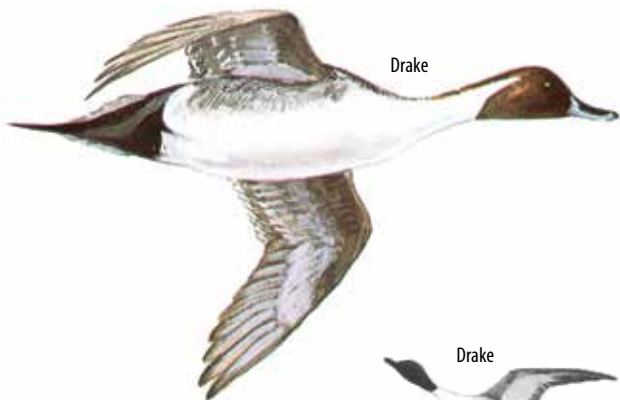


Pintails are extremely graceful and fast fliers, fond of zig-zagging from great heights before levelling off to land.

A long neck and tail make pintails appear longer than mallards, but in body size and weight they are smaller.

They are agile on land and often feed in grain fields. The drakes whistle; the hens have a coarse *quack*.





Pintails are one of the first ducks to migrate south in the fall. They use all four flyways but are most common in the west.

In southern Canada – particularly across the Prairies – populations have declined dramatically. A primary factor believed responsible for the decline is loss of grasslands and changing cropping practices. Pintails are more likely to nest in cropland than any other duck.



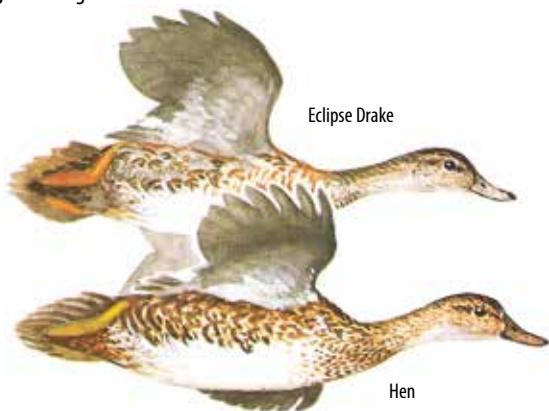
Typical Flock Pattern



Gadwall

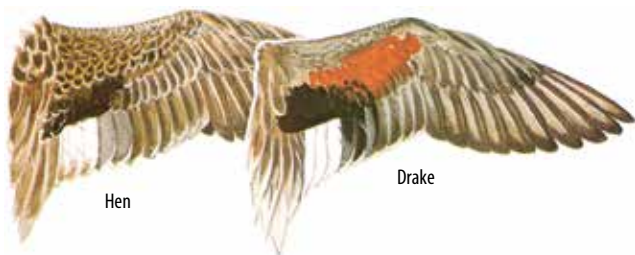
Length: 51 cm.

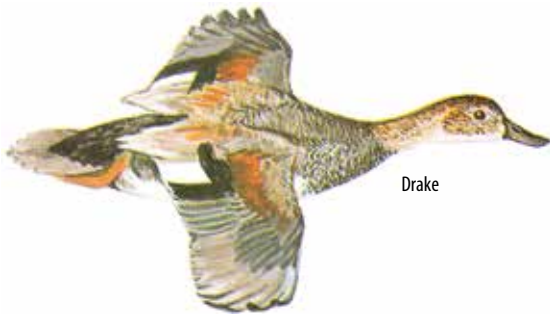
Weight: 0.9 kg.



Gadwalls reside primarily in the Central flyway, but are not too common anywhere. They are one of the earliest migrants – seldom facing cold weather.

They are the only dabblers with a white speculum.





Drake



Drake



Hen

Small, compact flocks fly swiftly, usually in a direct line. Wingbeats are rapid.

Drakes whistle and *kack-kack*; hens *quack* like a mallard, but softer.



Drake



Hen

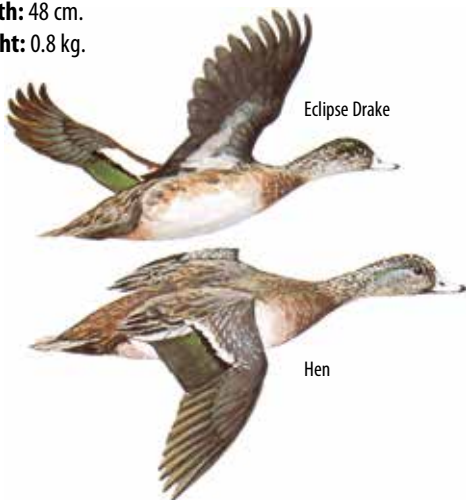
Typical Flock Pattern



American Wigeon

Length: 48 cm.

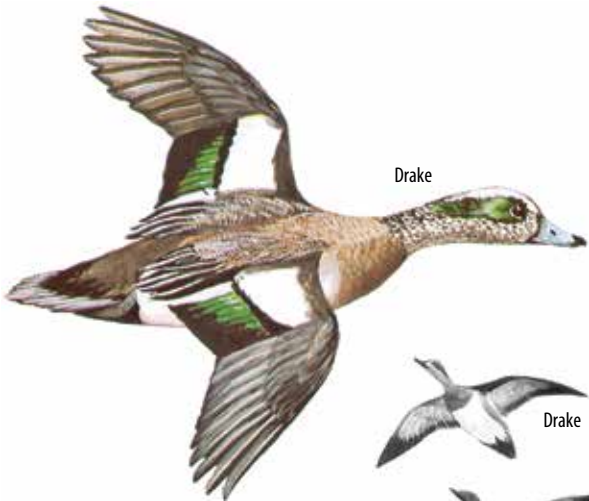
Weight: 0.8 kg.



Wigeons are nervous birds, quick to take alarm. Their flight is fast and irregular, with many twists and turns. In a bunched flock, their movements have been compared to those of pigeons.

When open water is handy, wigeons often raft up offshore until late afternoon when they move to marshes and ponds to feed.





Drake



Drake



Hen



Drake



Hen

The white belly and forewing are very showy in the air. Drakes whistle; hens have a loud *kaow* and a lower *qua-awk*.

The American wigeon is widespread and uses the Pacific, Central and Mississippi flyways during migration.

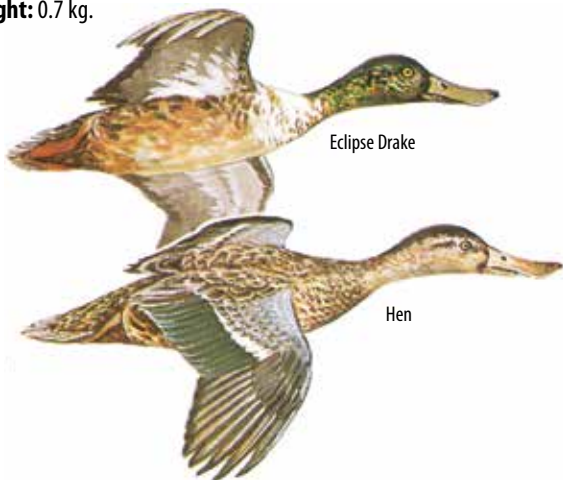
Typical Flock Pattern



Northern Shoveler

Length: 48 cm.

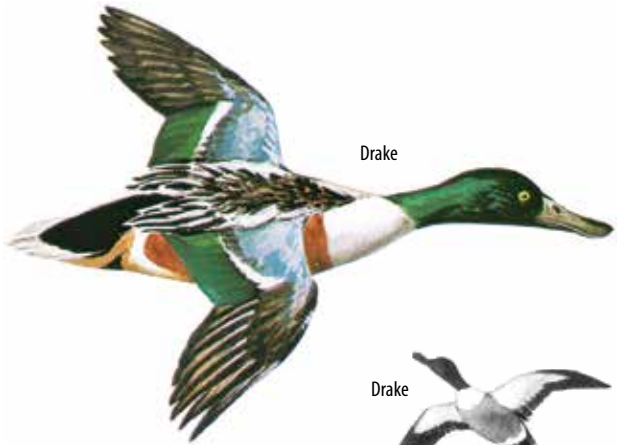
Weight: 0.7 kg.



Shovelers are early migrants, moving south at the first frost. The largest numbers are in the Central and Pacific flyways.

The usual flight is steady and direct. When startled, the small flocks twist and turn in the air like teal.





Drake



Drake



Hen

Shoveler drakes call *woh-woh* and *took-took*; the hen's *quack* is softer and feebler than a mallard's.

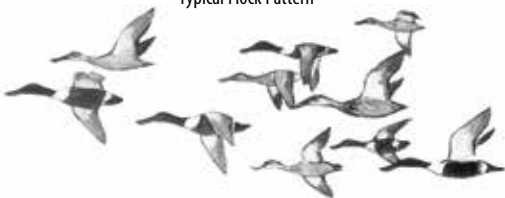


Drake



Hen

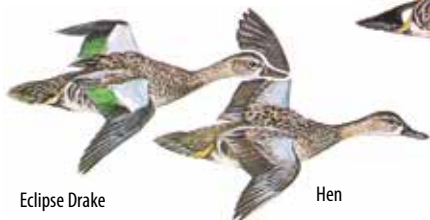
Typical Flock Pattern



Blue-winged Teal

Length: 39 cm.

Weight: 0.4 kg.



Eclipse Drake

Hen



Drake

Their small size and twisting, turning flight gives the illusion of great speed. The small, compact flocks commonly fly low over the marshes. They are more vocal than most ducks—their high-pitched peeping and nasal quacking is commonly heard in spring and to a lesser extent in fall.

These teal are among the first ducks to migrate each fall, and one of the last in the spring.



Drake

Hen

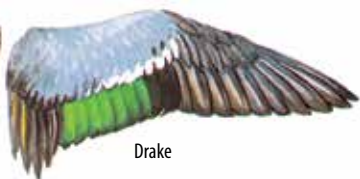


Drake

Hen



Hen



Drake

Green-winged Teal

Length: 37 cm.

Weight: 0.4 kg.



Hen

Eclipse Drake



Drake



Quite hardy—some birds stay as far north as open water is found.

The smallest and one of the most common of our ducks. Their tiny size gives the impression of great speed, but mallards can fly faster. Their flight is often low, erratic, with the entire flock twisting and turning as one unit.

Drake



Hen



They migrate in all four flyways. Early fall drakes are usually still in full eclipse plumage.

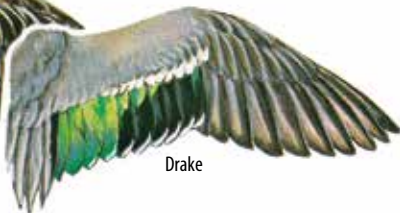
Drake



Hen



Hen

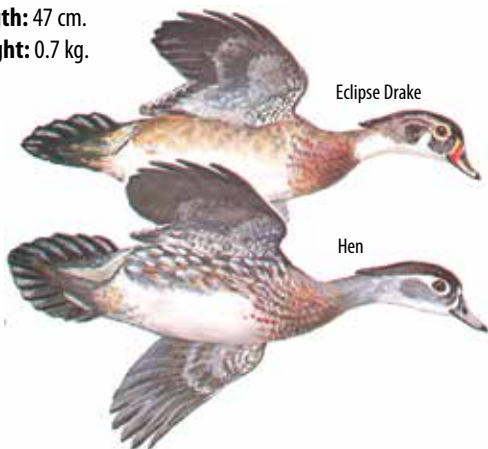


Drake

Wood Duck

Length: 47 cm.

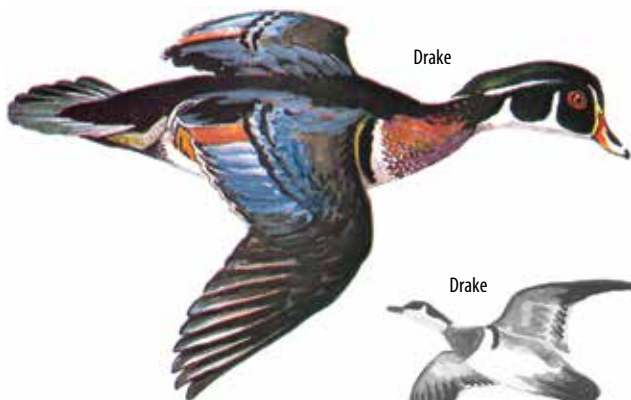
Weight: 0.7 kg.



Wood ducks can be found locally across southern Canada, but are most common in the Mississippi flyway and least common in the Central flyway. They are early migrants.

They frequent wooded streams and ponds, and perch in trees. Wood ducks fly through thick timber with speed and ease and often feed on acorns and berries on the forest floor.

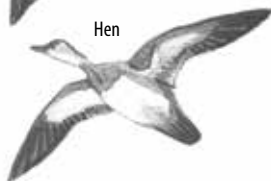




Drake



Drake



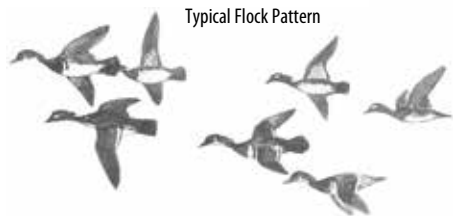
Hen



Drake



Hen



Typical Flock Pattern

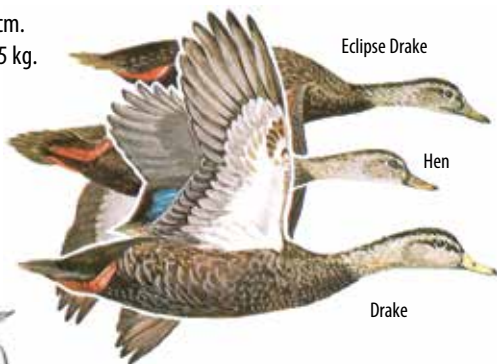
Flight is swift and direct; flocks are usually small.

In the air, their wings make a rustling, swishing sound. Drakes call *hoo-w-ett*, often in flight; hens have a *cr-r-ek* when frightened.

Black Duck

Length: 58 cm.

Weight: 1.25 kg.



Similar Sexes



Typical Flock Pattern



A bird of the eastern provinces, present primarily in the Atlantic flyway and to a lesser extent, the Mississippi flyway.

Regarded as the wariest of all ducks. Often seen in company of mallards, but along the Atlantic coast frequents salt marshes and ocean more than mallards.

Flight is swift, usually in small flocks.

White wing lining in contrast to very dark body plumage is a good identification clue.

The hen's *quack* and the drake's *kwek-kwek* are duplicates of the mallards.



Hen

Drake

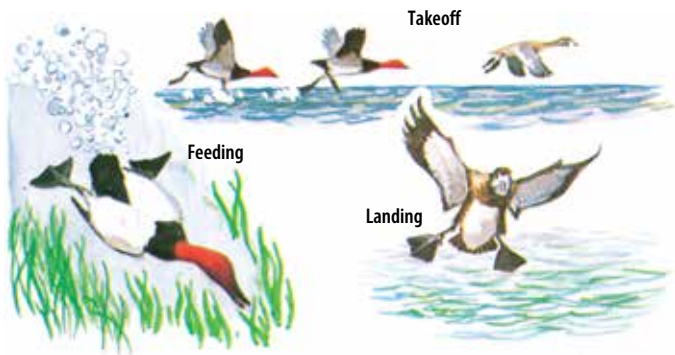
Diving Ducks

Diving ducks frequent the larger, deeper lakes and rivers, and coastal bays and inlets.

The coloured wing patches of these birds lack the brilliance of the speculums of dabblers. Since many of them have short tails, their huge, paddle feet may be used as rudders in flight, and are often visible on flying birds. When launching into flight, most of this group patter along the water before becoming airborne.

They feed by diving, often to considerable depths. To escape danger, they can travel great distances underwater, emerging only enough to show their head before submerging again. Their diets consist of fish, shellfish, mollusks and aquatic plants.

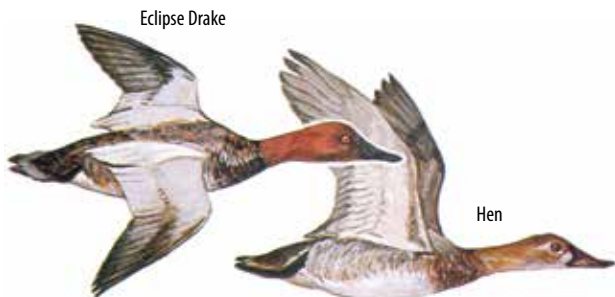
Since their wings are smaller in proportion to the size and weight of their bodies, they have a more rapid wingbeat than dabblers.



Canvasback

Length: 53 cm.

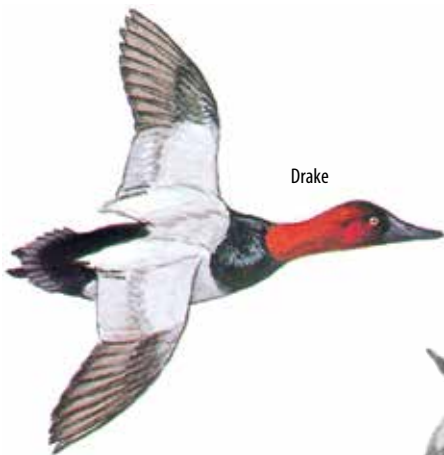
Weight: 1.35 kg.



Normally late to start south, canvasbacks migrate in lines and irregular V formations. They are a common nester in the Prairie provinces. They migrate using the Mississippi, Central and Pacific flyways.

In feeding areas, compact flocks fly in indefinite formations. Wingbeats are rapid and noisy, and canvasbacks are the swiftest of all our ducks.





Drake



Drake



Hen

Feeding behaviour is highly variable. In some areas they feed at night and spend the day rafted up in open waters; in other areas they feed inshore mornings and evenings.

On the water, body size and head shape distinguish them from scaups and redheads.

Drakes *croak*, *peep*, and *growl*; hens have a mallard-like *quack*.



Drake



Hen

Typical Flock Pattern



Redhead

Length: 48 cm.

Weight: 1.1 kg.



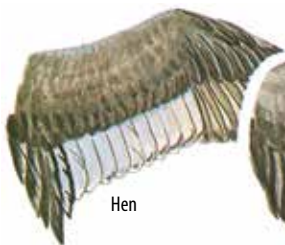
Eclipse Drake



Hen

Redheads are found primarily in the Prairie provinces, with the largest numbers in the Central flyway. Migratory flocks travel in V formations, and they move in irregular formations over feeding areas. Often found with canvasbacks.

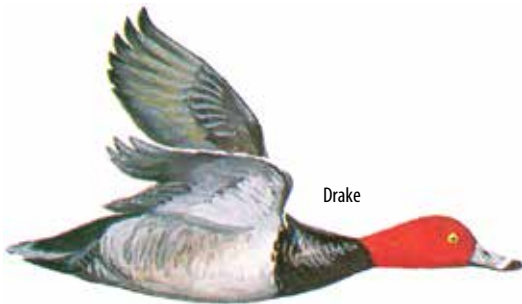
In the air, they give the impression of always being in a hurry.



Hen



Drake



Drake



Drake



Hen



Drake



Hen

They usually spend the day in large rafts in deep water, and feed morning and evening in shallower sections.

Drakes *purr* and *meow*; hens have a loud *squak*, higher than a hen mallard's.

Typical Flock Pattern



Ring-necked Duck

Length: 43 cm.

Weight: 1.1 kg.



Eclipse Drake

Similar in appearance to scaups, but more often found in fresh marshes and wooded ponds. In flight, the dark wings are different from the white-edged wings of scaup.

Faint brown ring on drake's neck never shows in the field; light bands at tip and base of bill are conspicuous.





Drake



Drake



Hen



Drake

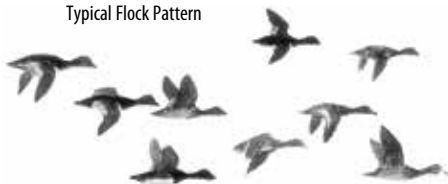


Hen

Fly as small flocks in open formation;
often land without circling. Drakes *purr*;
hens are usually silent.

The majority of ring-necked ducks
migrate using the Central and
Mississippi flyways.

Typical Flock Pattern



Scaup

Greater Scaup

Length: 46 cm.

Weight: 0.9 kg.

Lesser Scaup

Length: 42 cm.

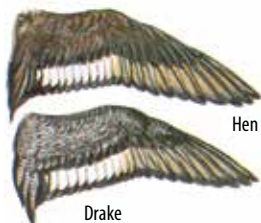
Weight: 0.85 kg.



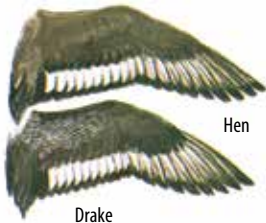
Except for wing marks, greater and lesser scaup appear nearly identical in the field. The light band near the trailing edges of the wings runs almost to the tip in the greater scaup, but only about halfway in the lesser scaup.

Greater scaup prefer large open water areas, and migrate using the Atlantic, Mississippi and Pacific flyways. Lesser scaup prefer marshes and ponds, and primarily use the Mississippi and Central flyways during migration.

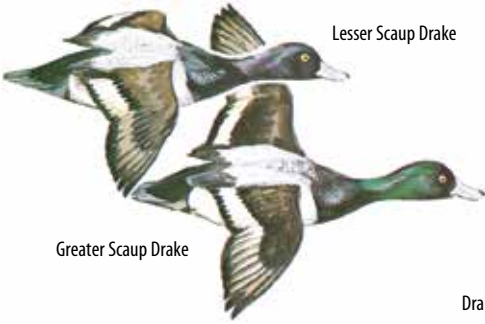
Lesser Scaup



Greater Scaup



Lesser Scaup Drake



Greater Scaup Drake

Both species migrate late, sometimes just before freeze-up.

Flock movements are rapid, often erratic, usually in compact groups.

Hens are silent; drake lesser scaup purr; drake greater scaup have a discordant scaup, scaup.

Scaup remain a species of conservation concern. The reasons for their population trends are unknown.

Drake



Lesser Scaup



Hen

Greater Scaup



Drake



Hen

Lesser Scaup



Drake



Hen

Typical Flock Pattern



Goldeneye

Common Goldeneye

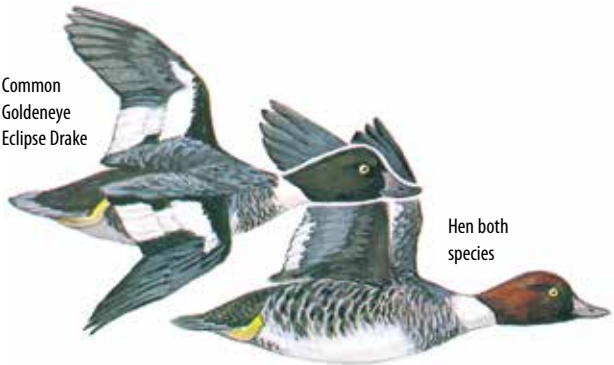
Length: 47 cm.

Weight: 1 kg.

Barrow's Goldeneye

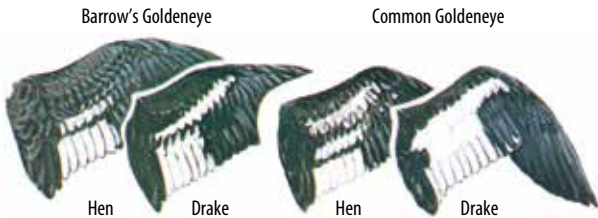
Length: 46 cm.

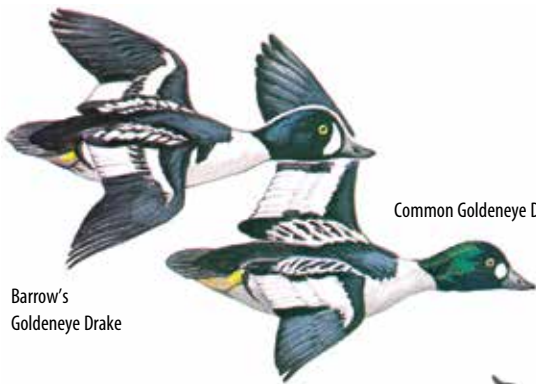
Weight: 1.25 kg.



These are active, strong-winged fliers moving singly or in small flocks, often high in the air. Distinctive wing-whistling sound in flight has earned them the name of whistlers.

Goldeneyes generally migrate late in the season.





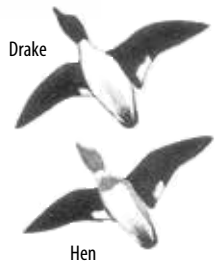
Common Goldeneye Drake

Barrow's
Goldeneye Drake

Barrow's goldeneye, predominantly a westerner, is less wary than the common goldeneye.

Hens of both species look alike.

Drakes have a piercing *speer-speer*—hens a low *quack*. Both are usually quiet.



Drake

Hen



Drake

Typical Flock Pattern



Hen

Bufflehead

Length: 34 cm.

Weight: 0.45 kg.



Stragglers migrate south in mid-fall, but the largest numbers move just ahead of freeze-up. Most flocks in feeding areas are small groups of five or six birds, with more hens and immatures than adult drakes.





Drake



Drake



Hen

Very small size, bold black-and-white colour pattern, and low, swift flight are field marks. Unlike most divers, they can fly straight up from a watery takeoff.

Usually silent. Drakes *squeak* and have a guttural note; hens *quack* weakly.



Drake



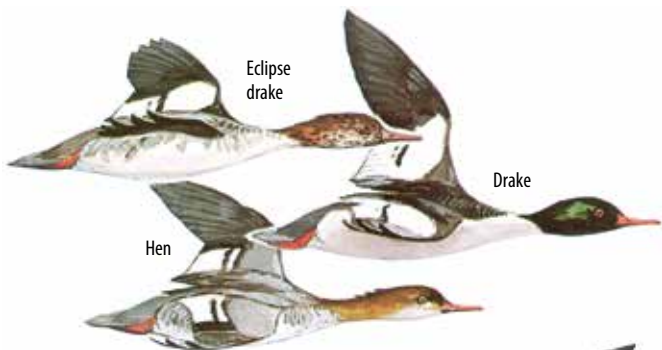
Hen

Typical Flock Pattern



Common Merganser

Length: 65 cm. **Weight:** 1.13 kg.



This species is larger than the red-breasted merganser (not featured in guide), and is one of the largest of our ducks. It is one of the last to migrate south, and is more common than the red-breasted merganser on inland waters.

Flocks move in “follow the leader” style, low over the water. The only call seems to be a startled croak.



Drake



Hen



Drake



Hen

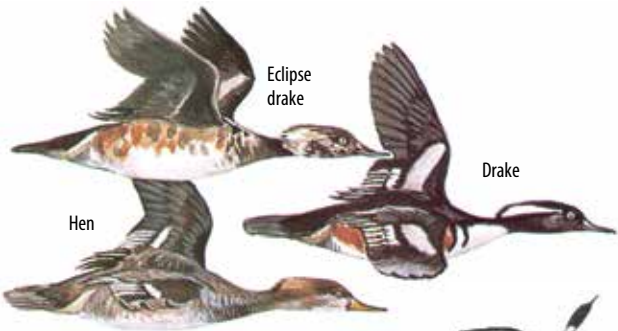


Hen

Drake

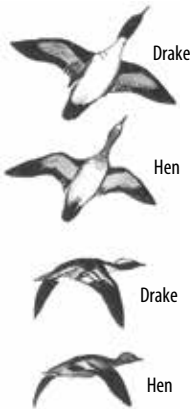
Hooded Merganser

Length: 46 cm. **Weight:** 0.7 kg.



Often seen in pairs, or very small flocks. Short rapid wingstrokes create an impression of great speed.

Voice: Seldom heard in fall.



White-winged Scoter

Length: 55 cm. **Weight:** 1.6 kg.



The three scoters in this section are sea ducks, wintering on open coastal waters. White-wings are among the heaviest and largest of all ducks.

Surf Scoter

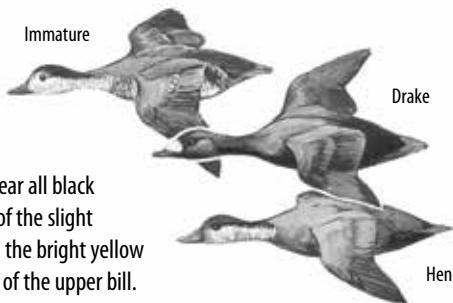
Length: 50 cm. **Weight:** 0.9 kg.



Like all scoters, these birds move along our coasts in loose flocks, stringing into irregular, wavy lines. Drakes can be distinguished from other scoters by two white patches on their head and bright colour of the bill. Flight is strong, direct, usually close to the waves.

Black Scoter

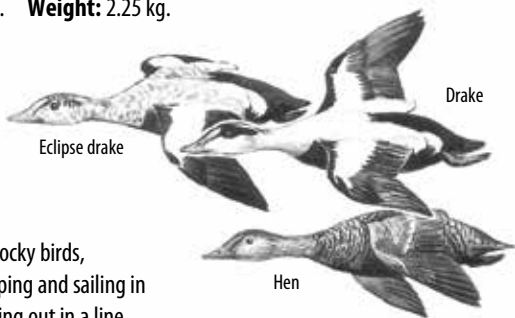
Length: 50 cm. **Weight:** 1.13 kg.



In flight, drakes appear all black except for the flash of the slight gray underwing and the bright yellow swelling at the base of the upper bill. Scoters feed on mollusks, crabs, and some fish and very little vegetation.

Common Eider

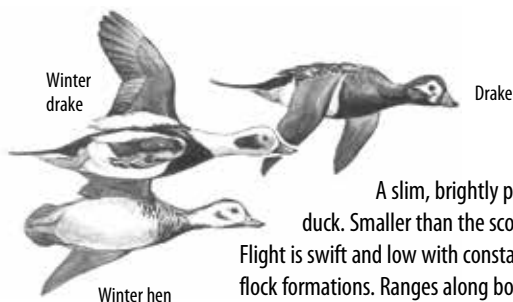
Length: 60 cm. **Weight:** 2.25 kg.



Thick-necked stocky birds, alternately flapping and sailing in flight; flocks string out in a line, close to the water. Occurs chiefly along the Atlantic coast. Other eiders – king, spectacled and Steller's – occur in the Arctic and are not pictured here. King eiders occasionally are found in north Atlantic coastal waters.

Long-tailed Duck

Length: 52 cm. **Weight:** 0.9 kg.



A slim, brightly plumaged sea duck. Smaller than the scoters or eiders. Flight is swift and low with constantly changing flock formations. Ranges along both coasts and the Great Lakes. One of the most vocal of ducks; drakes have a loud *caloo caloo*, constantly heard.

Harlequin Duck

Length: 43 cm. **Weight:** 0.68 kg.

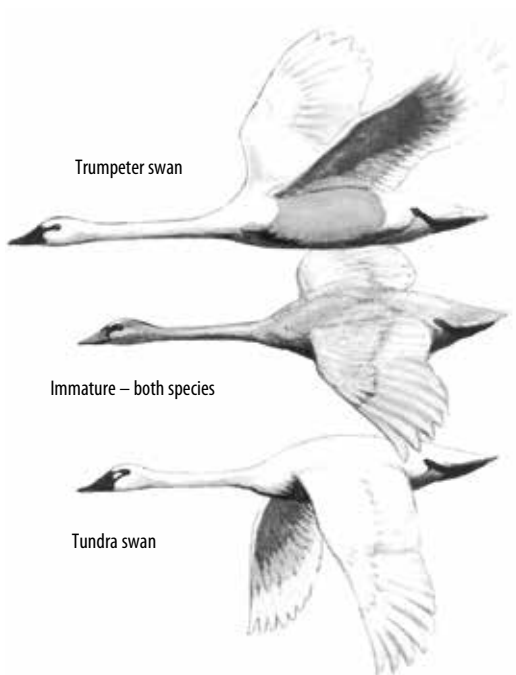


Glossy slate-blue plumage enlivened by white stripes and spots give the adult male a striking appearance. The female resembles a small female scoter. At a distance, both sexes look black. Inland, they like rapids and fast water. Winters along both coasts. Uncommon.

Swans

Trumpeter Swan Length: 1.5 m. **Weight:** 12.6 kg.

Tundra Swan Length: 1.3 m. **Weight:** 7.25 kg.



Once thought to be rare, trumpeter swans are slowly increasing throughout their range. Tundra swans are common and increasing. Both swans winter in the Pacific flyway, and tundra swans also migrate through the Central and Mississippi flyways. Occasionally found feeding in fields. Both species are large with pure white plumage.

Canada Goose

Length: 64-114 cm.

Weight: 1.35-5.45 kg



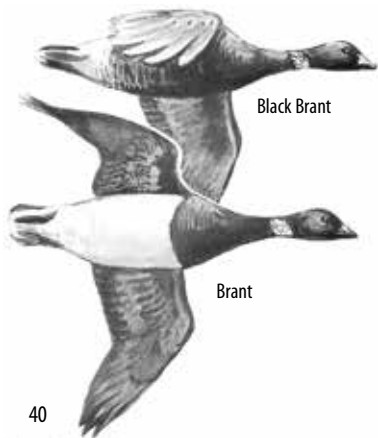
Canada geese use all four flyways. Canada Geese are often seen in flight moving in pairs or flocks; flocks often assume a V formation.

All have black heads and necks, white cheeks, similar habitats and voices. Sexes are identical. Includes several races varying in weight and size. Canada Geese tend to be smaller as you move northward; plumage tends to be darker as you move westward.

Brant

Length: 61-64 cm.

Weight: 1.45-1.7 kg.



Black Brant

Brant

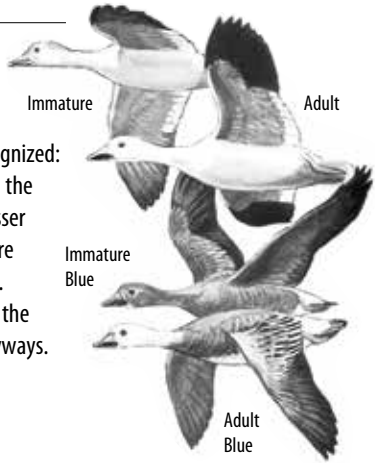
These are sea geese. The black brant subspecies uses the Pacific flyway during migration, while the Atlantic race stays east. Flight is swift, in irregular and changing flock patterns.

Snow Goose

Length: 66-84 cm.

Weight: 2.95-3.4 kg.

Two races of snow geese are recognized: greater snows migrating through the St. Lawrence River Valley, and lesser snows further west. Blue geese are a colour phase of the lesser snow. Lesser snow geese migrate using the Mississippi, Central and Pacific flyways.

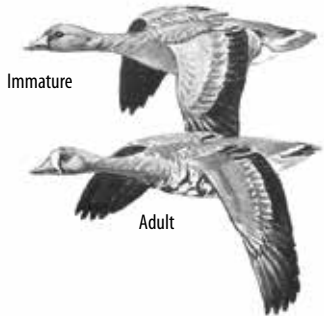


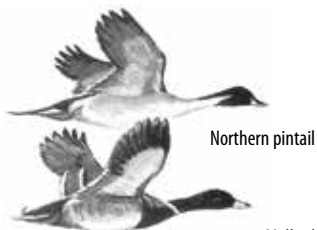
White-fronted Goose

Length: 71 cm.

Weight: 2.8 kg.

White-fronted geese migrate along the Pacific and Central flyways. Appears brownish grey at a distance. Often called “specklebelly.” Most distinctive characteristic of the V-shaped flocks is the high pitched call *kow-kow-kow-kow*.





Northern pintail

Mallard



Black duck



Gadwall



American wigeon



Northern shoveler



Wood duck



Cinnamon teal †



Blue-winged teal



Green-winged teal

Bufflehead



Ruddy duck †



Ring-necked duck



Lesser scaup



Greater scaup



Common goldeneye



Redhead



Canvasback



Hooded merganser



Red-breasted merganser †



Common merganser





Trumpeter swan



Tundra swan



Canada goose



Greater snow goose



White-fronted goose



Lesser Canada goose*



Lesser snow goose



Blue phase



Emperor goose**



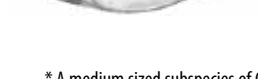
Brant



Black brant



Cackling
Canada goose



Ross' goose †

Comparative sizes of waterfowl

All birds on these pages are
drawn to the same scale.

Harlequin
duck



Long-tailed
duck



Whistling
ducks**



Surf scoter



Black scoter



White-winged
scoter



Common
eider

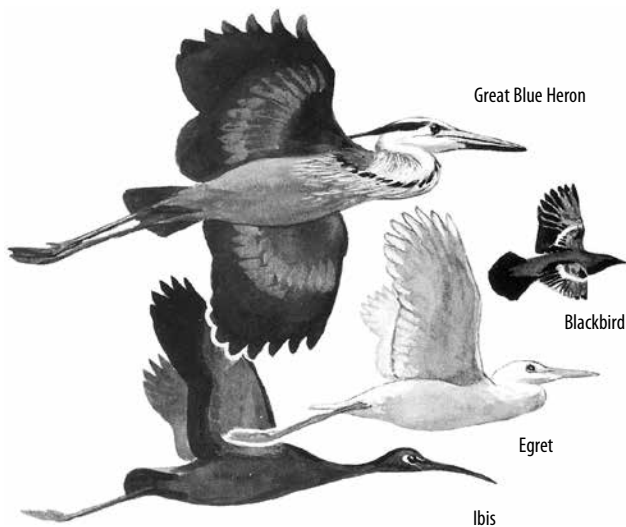


* A medium sized subspecies of Canada Goose

** Do not occur in Canada.

Wetlands Attract Wildlife

There's more than just ducks in our marshes. Knowing and identifying other birds and animals add to the enjoyment of being outdoors. The same sources of food and shelter that draw waterfowl to ponds and marshes also attract other forms of wildlife.





Cormorant

White Pelican



Black Tern



Common Tern



Northern Harrier



Yellowlegs



Herring Gull



Dowitcher



Grebe



Short-eared Owl

Waterfowling Heritage

DUC was founded in 1938 by hunters who recognized the importance of conserving habitat to ensure healthy waterfowl populations for the future. DUC continues this tradition by supporting groups that introduce novice hunters to safe, ethical waterfowling recognizing the important role they play in conserving wetlands and waterfowl.

For more information about DUC's education programs and resources, visit education.ducks.ca or email us at education@ducks.ca



Why is it important to conserve wetlands?

Wetlands (such as marshes and ponds) provide homes for the waterfowl species shown in this guide, and other wildlife too. They also provide many important benefits for people.

Here are **five reasons** why it's important for us to conserve wetlands:

1. **Clean water** – The plants, bacteria and animals that live in wetlands help clean our water long before it reaches our taps.
2. **Clear lakes** – Wetlands act as filters that keep our lakes healthy.
3. **Wildlife** – All kinds of wildlife – including species at risk – call wetlands home.
4. **Learning experiences** – Wetlands are great “outdoor classrooms,” as they are full of life and filled with fun things to explore.
5. **Recreational spots** – A wetland is a great place to relax and have fun! Wildlife watching, fishing, camping and canoeing are just some of the things people do in wetland areas.

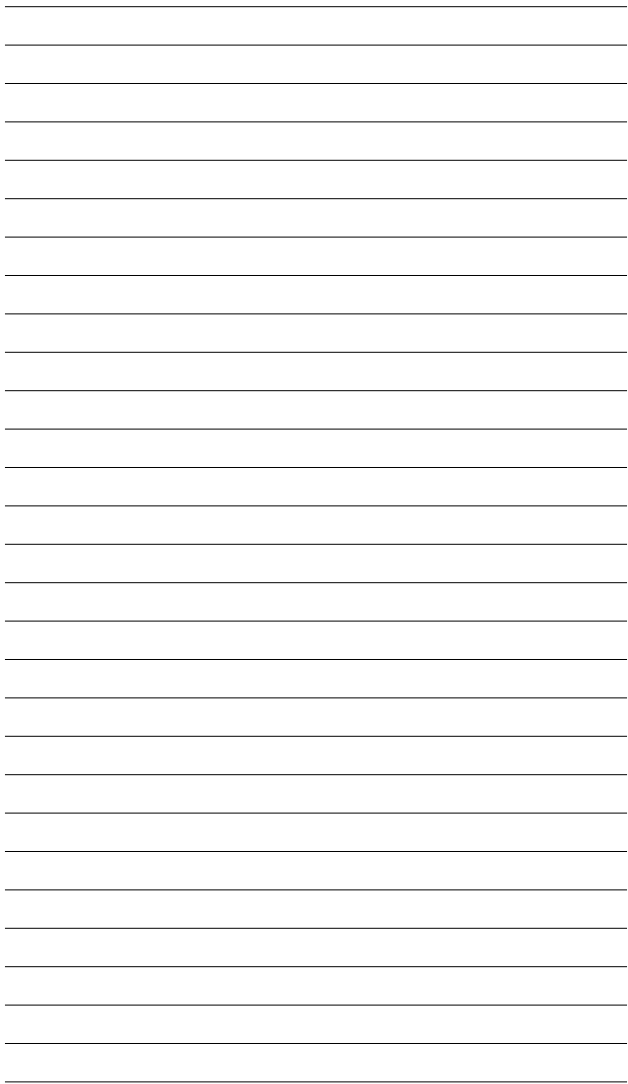
Despite the many benefits they offer, **80 acres of wetlands are lost every day**. This is the equivalent of about **45 soccer fields every 24 hours**.

This loss has to stop.
Wetlands need your help –
donate today.



Notes

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Ducks Unlimited
Canada

ducks.ca

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