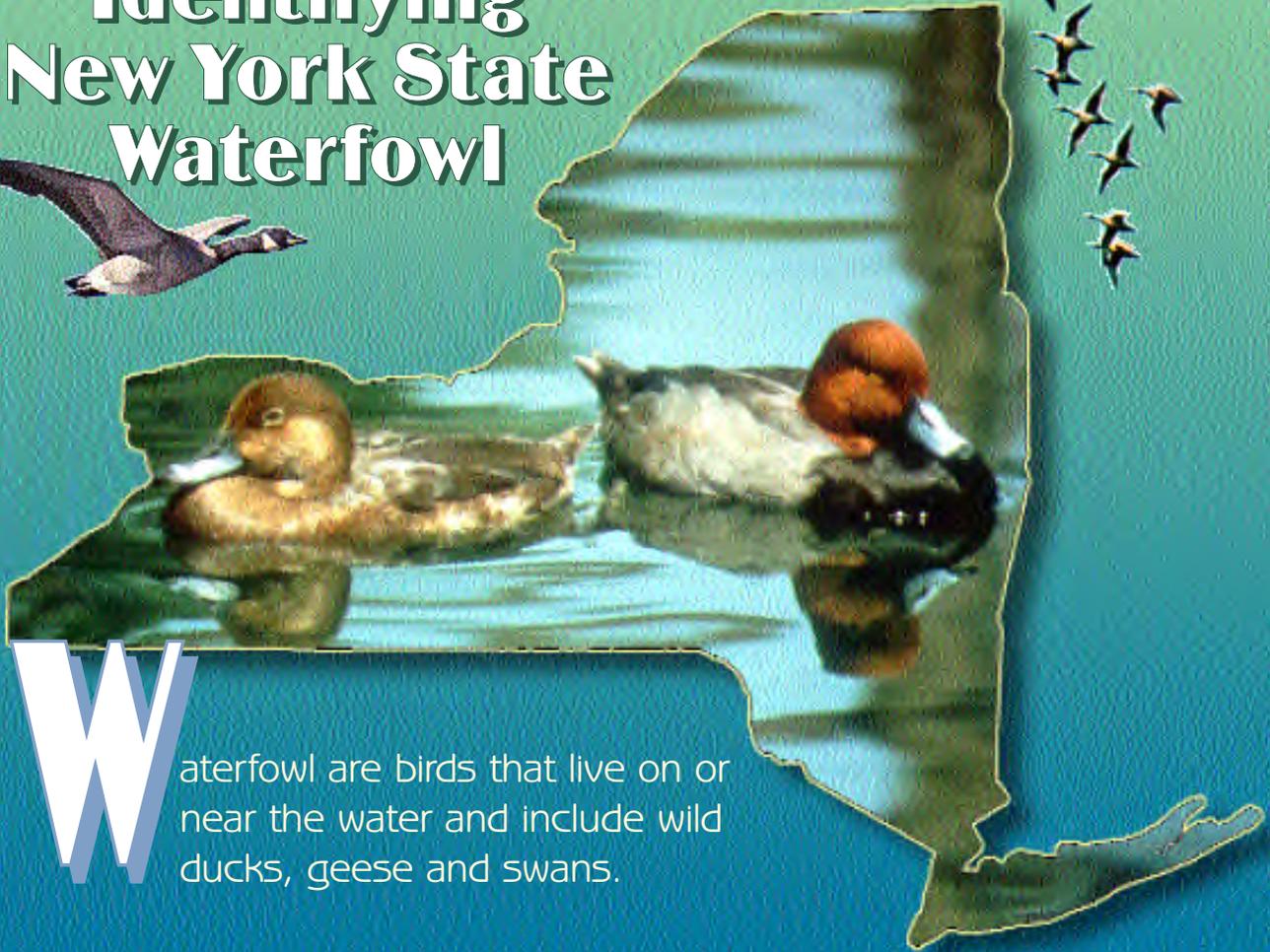


Identifying New York State Waterfowl



W

aterfowl are birds that live on or near the water and include wild ducks, geese and swans.

W

ell adapted to their lives on the water, these birds have broad, flattened bills that allow them to feed on plants and animals in the water. Their wide-set legs and webbed feet make them excellent swimmers, and their waterproof plumage and thick layers of down feathers keep them warm in cold weather.

Numerous species of waterfowl visit or make New York State their home, with more than 30 different waterfowl species commonly seen here. Watching and identifying the various species can be an entertaining and sometimes tricky task. While both sexes of swans and geese look alike, in most species of ducks, the males (drakes) and females

(hens) look different from each other. However, in the summer and early fall you may see ducks that are undergoing their annual molt when the males will lack their bright breeding plumage and resemble the more dull-colored females. With so much variation, it can be difficult to tell one species from another. Add to that the fact that often you see the birds as they are quickly flying by, making an accurate identification quite challenging. Fortunately, there are a number of clues to look for that make it easier to identify the waterfowl you see. The information provided in this guide will aid you in recognizing these birds.

Identifying NYS Waterfowl

The best way to become better at identifying waterfowl is to practice seeing them in their own environment. Knowing the habitat preferences, food habits, molting schedules, and flight habits for various species makes it easier to locate and identify them. Learn what waterfowl species are most common in your

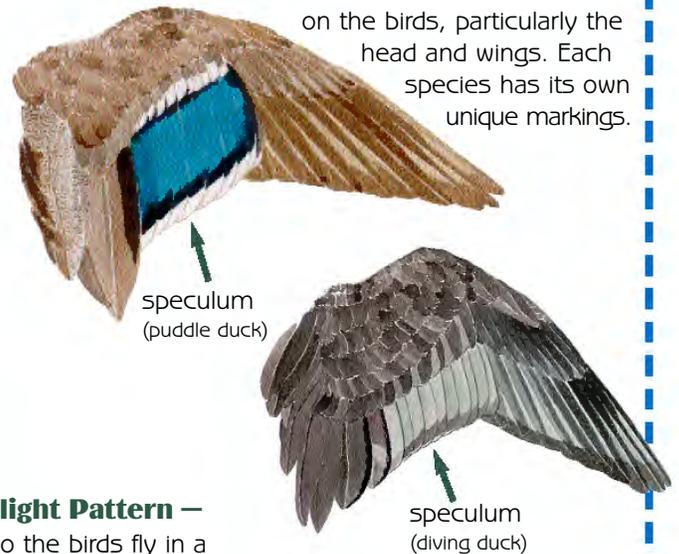
area and what time of year they are likely to occur. Of the more than 30 species regularly seen in NY, only seven are likely to be seen during the summer. So, grab your binoculars, field guide, and your family and head down to your local river, bay, or marsh and have fun getting to know your waterfowl.

What to look for:

Habitat — First, consider where you see the waterfowl. Are they in a large open body of water (like a river or lake), on a small pond or marsh, or feeding in crop fields?



Colors — Notice the colors you see on the birds, particularly the head and wings. Each species has its own unique markings.

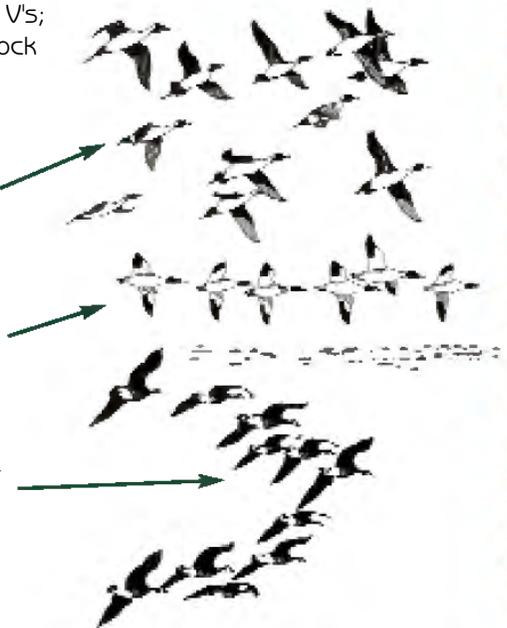


Flight Pattern — Do the birds fly in a particular pattern? Are they in a single, straight line close to the water; in Vs; or in loose flock formations?

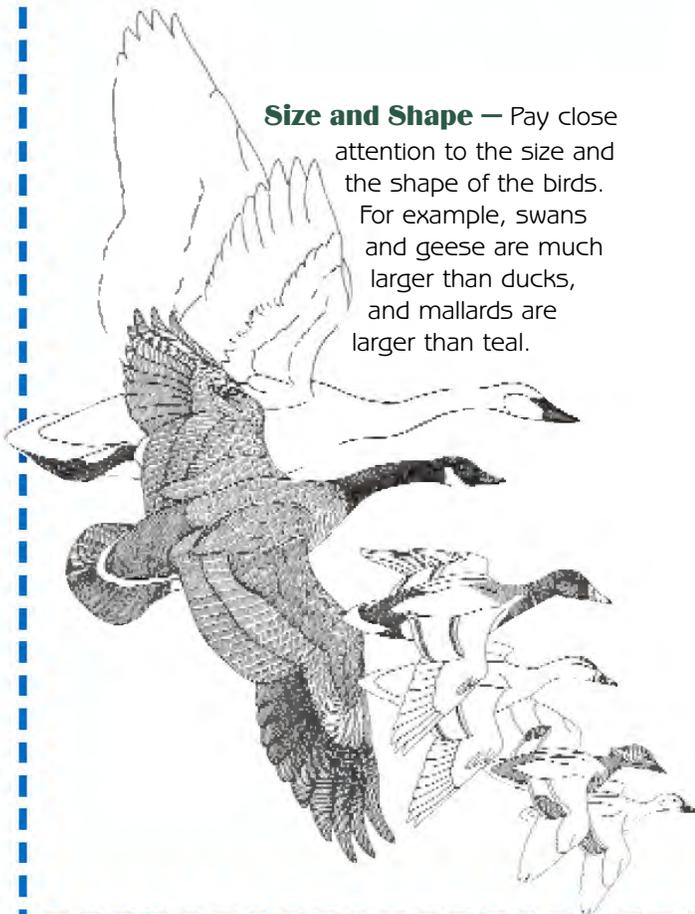
Pintails - loose flock formation

Mergansers - straight line, close to water

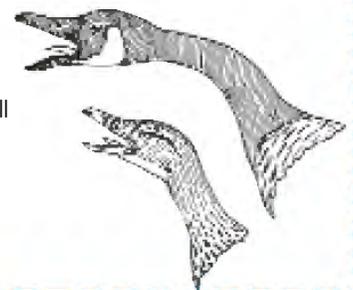
Canada Geese - V-formation



Size and Shape — Pay close attention to the size and the shape of the birds. For example, swans and geese are much larger than ducks, and mallards are larger than teal.



Sound — Do you hear them? Not all geese honk — some cackle, yelp or croak. And not all ducks quack — some whistle, growl or squeal.



Major Groups of Waterfowl

Ducks: There are two basic types of ducks — puddle (or dabbling) ducks and diving ducks.

Puddle Ducks — Puddle ducks are commonly found in shallow marshes or small rivers. They have colored wing patches (speculum) that are usually iridescent. They prefer to feed on or just below the surface of the water by dabbling or tipping up with their rump pointing up. They walk well on land and are often seen feeding in croplands. They sit high with their tail out of the water and can take off directly from the water to flight. Puddle ducks include mallards, black ducks, wood ducks, teal and pintails.

Diving Ducks — Diving ducks are usually found on larger bodies of water. Diving ducks are better at diving under the water than puddle ducks. Their wing patches are usually dull white or grey colored. Their legs are positioned far back on their body and their larger feet help make them better underwater swimmers. However, the position of their legs makes it more difficult for them to walk on land

so you will seldom see them feeding in farm fields or resting on shore. Most diving ducks need to run along the surface of the water to gain speed for flight. Diving ducks include scaup, canvasback, redhead, goldeneye, bufflehead, mergansers, and scoters.

Geese and Swans: Geese and swans are distinguished from other waterfowl by their large size. Males and females look alike.

Geese — Geese are larger, heavier, and have longer necks than ducks. During migration times, you may see large flocks (sometimes numbering in the thousands) flying in a line or in V-shaped formations in order to reduce wind resistance. Geese include Canada geese, snow geese, and brant.

Swans — Swans are the largest of all waterfowl and have much longer necks than geese. Adults of these three species are completely white. Swans you may see in NYS include mute swans, tundra swans, and trumpeter swans.



Edward Jakubowski

Viewing Waterfowl

If you know where, when and how to look for waterfowl you will see more birds. Here are a few guidelines for successfully viewing waterfowl:

- Look for waterfowl in ponds, lakes, streams, marshes and bays.
- Watch for waterfowl during their spring and fall migrations. Early morning or evenings are the best times of the day to view these birds as they fly off and land on the water.
- Move slowly and quietly. Waterfowl see colors very well, so wear a hat and clothing that blends in with your surroundings. Resist the urge to look up at the sky exposing your face and neck, instead move your eyes and head slowly.
- The use of man-made or natural blinds (vegetation) will help keep you concealed and improve your chances of seeing more birds.
- Watch and listen carefully for movement in the air, water and surrounding vegetation.
- Bring your field guide and binoculars to help you identify birds and their calls.

Finally, just relax and enjoy waterfowl watching. Soon you'll know how to identify many of New York's waterfowl.

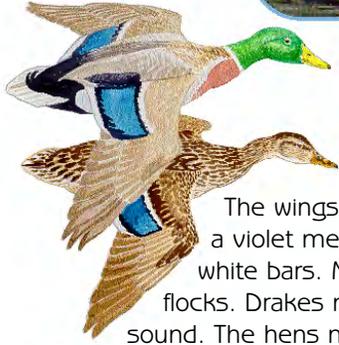
A Sampler of New York's Waterfowl Species

Puddle Ducks

Mallards are the most common duck year-round in NY, found in a wide variety of habitats, including urban park ponds. The drake has a metallic green head with a white neck ring, chestnut-colored chest, and white tail with black curled central tail feathers.



Mike Anich



The hen is a mottled brown color. The wings of both the drake and hen have a violet metallic speculum bordered by two white bars. Mallards usually fly in small flocks. Drakes make a low "kwek" or "yeeb" sound. The hens make the well-known loud quack.

Black Ducks are similar in size to the mallard, but they are darker overall and at a distance look black. The drake and hen are identical with the head and neck a lighter brown. A dark streak



runs through the eye from the bill across the cheek. The underside of



their wings are white and the contrast between the white on the wings and dark

body is a good identification clue when seeing the birds in flight. Black duck wings have a violet-blue speculum and lack the two white bars present on the mallard's wings. Adults make sounds similar to mallards.

Wood Ducks have a crested head, broad wings and rectangular tail. The drake is beautifully colored with an iridescent green



Eric Dresser

and purple head, back, wings and tail. The drake's crest is much more pronounced than

the hen's. The hen is dark brown with tan and grey sides and has a white teardrop-shaped ring around her eye. Drakes make a loud "whoo-wett" sound when distressed and a high-pitched whistle in courtship. Hens make a squeeling "crrek-crrek" sound.

Blue-Winged Teal are easy to identify by their small size and erratic flight. Both drakes and hens have slate-blue wing patches and a green speculum. Drakes have a white crescent on each side of their



Edward Jakubowski

face. The hen lacks the facial crescent and is a mottled brown color. Drakes make whistling "peep" sounds. Hens make a faint quack.

Green-Winged Teal are small pigeon-sized ducks. Both drakes and hens have a green speculum. The drake has a rusty-colored head and a bright green slash across the eye. A white vertical bar separates the buff-colored chest from the grey

Deanne C. Cunningham



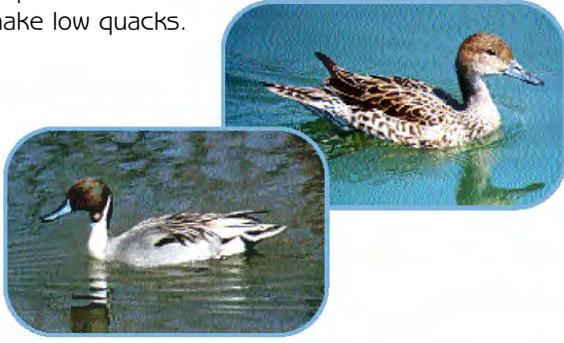
back and sides. The hen is a mottled brown color. Drakes make short whistle and peeping sounds. Hens make a high-pitched quack.



Pintails (Sprig) are large, mallard-sized ducks and can be easily identified by their long, pointed tail feathers and long, slender profile in flight. The drake has a chocolate brown head with a white stripe running up both sides of its neck. His throat, chest and belly are white. The hen's long, slender shape is not as distinct as the drake's, but she



still has a longer tail than most ducks. The hen is a mottled brown color. Drakes make a double tone "prip, prrip" whistle. Hens make low quacks.



Diving Ducks

Scaup (bluebill, broadbill) are often seen in large groups (called rafts) on large bodies of water. Both drakes and hens have a blue-grey bill with a black tip and have a broad white stripe on the trailing edge of the wing.

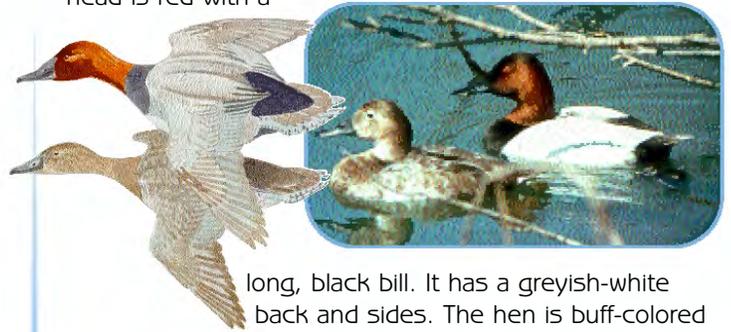
The **Lesser Scaup** is the most common species of diving duck. The drake's head has a purplish-black sheen and often appears angular. The drake's neck, head, chest and rump are black and the sides and undersides are pale grey to white. The hen is dark brown with whitish undersides. She has a distinctive white patch at the base of her bill. The wings of both the drake and the hen are charcoal brown with a long white patch or stripe running down the trailing edge of the wing. Drakes make a low, single note whistle or a loud quack. Hens make purring or low growling sounds.



Greater Scaup are slightly larger than the lesser scaup and are very similar in appearance. The drake's head has a greenish-black sheen and is more rounded in shape. The wings are similar to the lesser scaup's, but the coloration is more brown and the white wing patch or stripe is longer. Drakes make a "scaup, scaup" sound. Hens are usually silent.



The **Canvasback** is the fastest flying duck. It is easily identified by its "doorstop" shaped head. The drake's head is red with a



long, black bill. It has a greyish-white back and sides. The hen is buff-colored with a rusty-brown head and chest, and dusky-grey back. Canvasbacks usually shift from waving lines to temporary V's in flight. Drakes make a low croak, peep and even growl. Hens quack.

The **Redhead** has a more rounded head and shorter bill than the canvasback. The drake has a reddish head, but is slightly



smaller and has a darker back and sides. The bill is blue-grey with a narrow white ring located behind the black tip. The hen has a reddish-brown head and breast with drab brown back and sides. Drakes "purr" and make a catlike "meow" sound. Hens make a high, loud "squak" and a soft growling sound.

The **Common Goldeneye (Whistler)** is named for its gold-colored eye. The



drake's head is black with a greenish sheen and has a white round spot in front of the eye. A row of black and white feathers separate the black back and rump from the white chest and undersides. The hen's head is dark brown with no facial spot. Her sides and back are greyish-brown with a white chest. The wings of the common goldeneye whistle in flight. Drakes make a nasal double-note "pee-ik" sound. Hens make a low quack.



The **Bufflehead (Butterball)** is a very small duck with a rounded shape. The drake's head is black with a greenish-purple sheen and has a white



wedge-shaped patch behind the eye. The hen's head is dark brown with a small white patch behind the eye. Her back is dark brown with greyish sides and a white belly. They are usually silent, but drakes make a hoarse "squeek" sound and hens make a harsh quack.

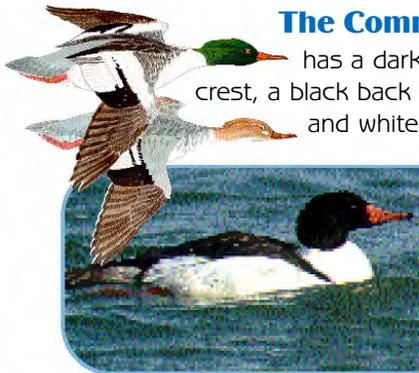


Edward Jakubowski

Mergansers are streamlined-shaped ducks with long pointed bills with saw-edge mandibles used for grasping fish. They are often seen on rivers and large streams. Mergansers usually fly in a single straight line close to the water.

The Common Merganser drake

has a dark green head with no crest, a black back and white

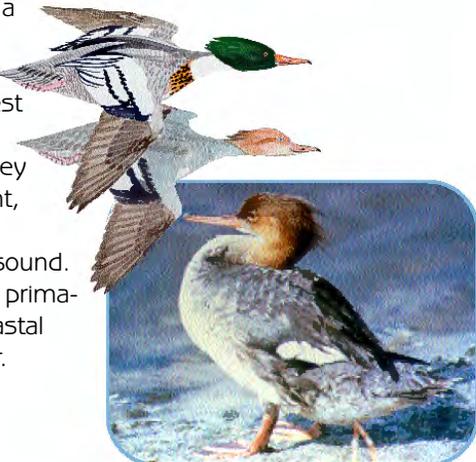


sides and belly. The hen has a brown crested

head. Her back, chest and sides are grey and her belly is white. Drakes make low "croak" sounds and hens make a harsh, guttural sound.

Edward Jakubowski

The Red-Breasted Merganser drake has a crested green head, a reddish-brown chest, a black back and a white belly. The hen has a less pronounced crest and reddish-brown head. They are usually silent, but make a hoarse "croak" sound. These birds are primarily seen on coastal waters in winter.



The **Hooded Merganser** is the smallest of the mergansers. The drake has a pronounced fan-shaped, black and white crest. His back is black with white stripes with brownish sides. The hen



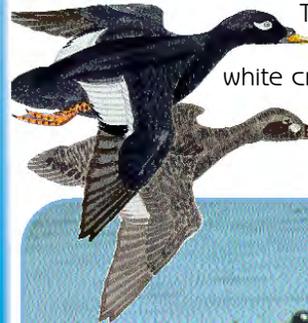
Edward Jakubowski

has a reddish-brown crested head and dark back. They make low grunting or croaking sounds.

Scoters are sea ducks commonly seen in coastal waters and around the Great Lakes.

The White-Winged Scoter (Sea coot)

is the most numerous of the scoters in NYS.



The drake is all black except the white wing patch and the small white crescent around the eye. His orange-yellow bill is knobbed and has a reddish tip. The hen is slightly lighter in color and has a smaller white speculum. She has tan-colored cheek patches and a greyish bill with no knob. They fly in a stringy line or V-formation, and make bell-like whistle sounds.



Geese and Swans

Canada Geese are probably the most easily recognized waterfowl in NYS. Their large size, black neck and head with white cheek patches extending under the throat, and brownish-grey body make them easy to identify. They fly in long strings in V-formation. Canada geese make a loud, deep "honking" sound.



Edward Jakubowski

Most Adult **Snow Geese** have an all white body and black wing tips. Young often have an ashy-gray appearance, and some adults, called "blue geese," have very dark bodies with just a white head. Snow geese have a shorter neck than swans. Very noisy birds, their call is a shrill honk, higher-pitched than the Canada goose.



The **Tundra Swan (Whistling)** has an all white body, black feet, and a small yellow spot at the base of its black bill. Tundra Swans make high-pitched cooing sounds.



Edward Jakubowski

The **Mute Swan** is probably the most familiar swan in NYS with its S-shaped curved neck. It was an import to North America from Europe, but has established breeding populations. Adults have an orange bill with a black knob on the forehead, and black feet. They will make grunting or wheezing noises.

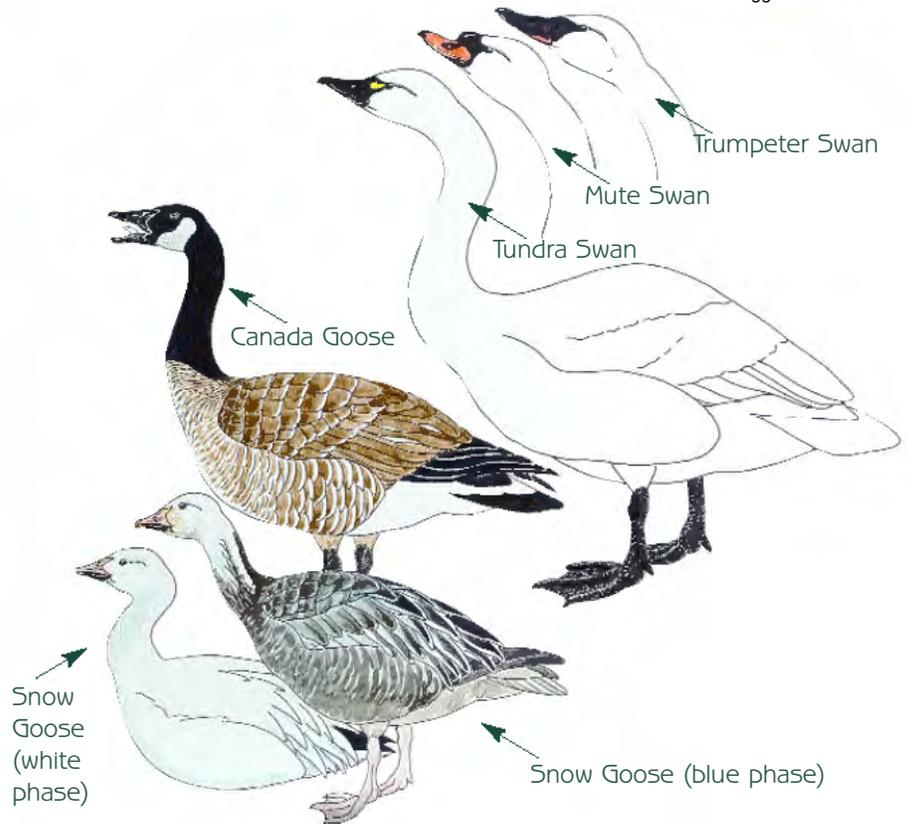


John Huggard



Donna Aitkenhead

The **Trumpeter Swan** is slightly larger than the Tundra Swan and has an all black bill. Its name comes from the bird's distinctive loud, brassy voice. The first pair of recently-recorded nesting trumpeter swans in NYS was found in 1996.



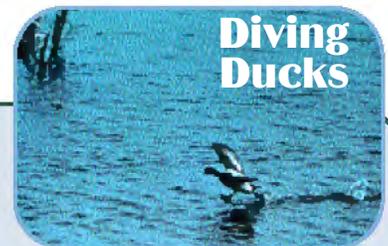
General Characteristics of Puddle and Diving Ducks



Puddle Ducks

Eric Dresser

- shallow marshes and rivers
- colored, iridescent wing patch
- legs near middle of body, walks well on land
- feeds on or just below water surface by tipping or dabbling
- most feed primarily on aquatic vegetation
- sits high with tail out of water
- larger wings, slower wingbeat
- can take right off and fly from water



Diving Ducks

- large lakes, rivers, bays
- white, grey, and black wing patch
- legs farther back on body, prefers to stay in water
- dives beneath the surface to feed
- most feed on fish and invertebrates
- sits lower with tail close to water
- smaller wings, shorter, faster wingbeat
- runs on water to gain speed for take-off

NYS Waterfowl Checklist

Puddle ducks (9)

- ___ mallard
- ___ black duck
- ___ wood duck
- ___ pintail
- ___ blue-winged teal
- ___ green-winged teal
- ___ American wigeon
- ___ shoveler
- ___ gadwall

Mergansers (3)

- ___ hooded
- ___ red-breasted
- ___ common

Geese and Swans (6)

- ___ Canada goose
- ___ brant
- ___ snow goose
- ___ tundra swan
- ___ mute swan
- ___ trumpeter swan

Divers (8)

- ___ canvasback
- ___ redhead
- ___ ring-necked duck
- ___ greater scaup
- ___ lesser scaup
- ___ common goldeneye
- ___ ruddy duck
- ___ bufflehead

Sea Ducks (7)

- ___ white-winged scoter
- ___ surf scoter
- ___ black scoter
- ___ common eider
- ___ king eider
- ___ oldsquaw
- ___ harlequin duck



1999 Migratory Bird Print and Stamp
"Hudson River Heritage" by Richard Clifton

New York Migratory Bird Print and Stamp Program

In 1985, New York developed the Migratory Bird Print and Stamp Program, a revenue generating program to address the rapid decline in wetland habitat triggered by changes in land use practices. Through the sale of collector prints, posters, pins and stamps, more than \$2.5 million has been generated to acquire and manage wetlands in New York and Canada. Preservation of these habitats provides many waterfowl species with improved nesting, feeding and resting areas, while also enhancing opportunities for wildlife photography and observation.

For further information regarding the program visit our website at www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/migrbird/index.html or call 1-800-325-2370.

Waterfowl Identification Course

Included in DEC Waterfowl Hunter Education Course

The DEC waterfowl hunter education course is a great course for both hunters and non-hunters alike because it includes a complete course in waterfowl identification. The three-hour (minimum) course teaches you about waterfowl life history, habits, and key features to look for to identify birds in the field, in addition to other information that hunters will find helpful.

Upon successful completion of the course, participants receive a DEC certificate of completion. The course is not required for hunting waterfowl in general. However, a few public waterfowl hunting areas that have limited access require hunters to pass a waterfowl identification course, or may give preference to those with course certificates. State and federal agencies with such limitations let hunters know about this when they apply for area hunting permits.

For information about courses, contact the Sportsman Education Coordinator at your DEC Regional Office, or the Sportsman Education Program at 50 Wolf Road, Albany, N.Y. 12233-4800, or call 1-888-HUNT ED2. Course listings are also available on DEC's website at www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/edhunt.htm



Artwork by Jean Gawalt, text by Cheryl O'Brien