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# Waterfowl of North America: Identification Key to North American Waterfowl

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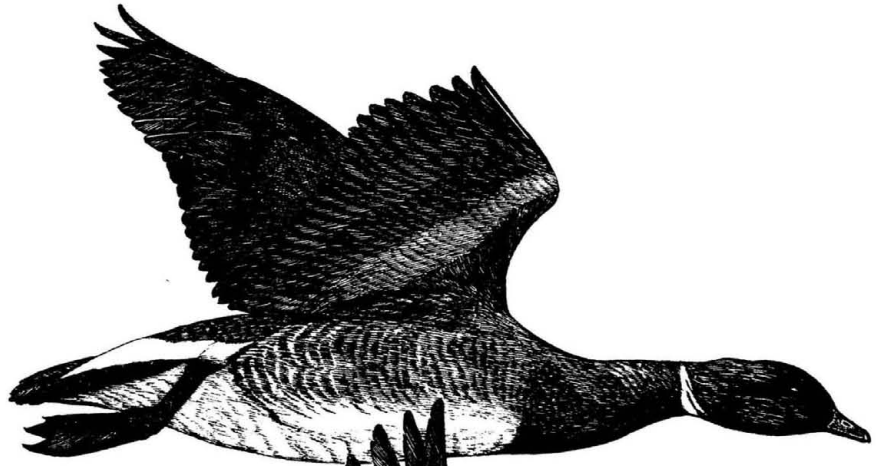
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# Identification Key to North American Waterfowl

The key on the following pages provides an efficient means of identifying virtually all North American waterfowl that may be examined in the hand. The procedure for using it is comparable to that used for all such dual-choice or “dichotomous” keys. One simply chooses which of the initial descriptive couplets (A or A’) best fits the unknown bird. Having chosen one of these, the pair of descriptive couplets (a and a’) immediately below the chosen alternative is next considered, without further regard for the rejected one. Subsequent choices, which are sequentially numbered (1 and 1’, 2 and 2’, etc.) must then be considered until the name of a species has been reached. In no case will more than eleven choices be required to identify any of the 52 waterfowl species or subspecies represented in the key. After having tentatively determined the identity of the unknown bird, one should refer to the appropriate “Identification” sections of the text, to confirm or reject the initial determination. Illustrations in this book or other references should also be consulted, bearing in mind that sexual or seasonal variations in plumage may exist.

- A. Legs with completely reticulated (networklike) scale pattern, iridescent colors absent from plumage (geese, swans, and whistling ducks)
  - a. Smaller (folded wing under 300 mm.\*), legs extended beyond the tail (whistling ducks)
    - 1. Bill blackish, upper wing surface lacking white patterning
    - 2. Buffy stripes present on flanks . . . **Fulvous Whistling Duck**
    - 2’. Black and white spots present on flanks . . . **Cuban Whistling Duck**

\*Wing lengths are of folded, unflattened wings; culmen length is measured from tip of bill to edge of forehead feathers.

- 1'. Bill red (in adults), extensively white on upper wing surface . . . **Black-bellied Whistling Duck**
- a'. Larger (folded wing over 300 mm.), legs not extending beyond the tail
  - 1. Primaries white (swans)
    - 2. Bill usually reddish, with variably large black knob at base, longest primaries more than 7 cm. longer than outer ones . . . **Mute Swan**
    - 2'. Bill usually black (flesh-colored in juveniles), longest primaries not more than 7 cm. longer than outer ones, bill never with knob at base
    - 3. Bill usually with yellow present in front of eyes, weight under 20 pounds, folded wing under 575 mm., less than 50 mm. from tip of bill to anterior end of nostril . . . **Whistling Swan**
    - 3'. Bill usually without any yellow in front of eyes, weight often over 20 pounds, folded wing at least 540 mm. in adults, usually at least 50 mm. from tip of bill to anterior end of nostril . . . **Trumpeter Swan**
  - 1'. Primaries not white (geese)
    - 2. Legs, feet, and bill black, head and neck plumage mostly black
    - 3. White present on cheeks
      - 4. White cheeks extending above eyes and across forehead, breast black . . . **Barnacle Goose**
      - 4'. White cheeks not extending in front of eyes, breast brown . . . **Canada Goose**
    - 3'. White absent from cheeks . . . **Brant Goose**
  - 2'. Legs, feet, and bill variously reddish, yellow, or flesh-colored, never black
    - 3. Under tail coverts white, throat brown or white
      - 4. Feet orange to yellow, white on head lacking or limited to narrow area in front of eyes . . . **White-fronted Goose**
      - 4'. Feet red, pink, or flesh-colored, head often entirely white
        - 5. Smaller (folded wing under 400 mm.), bill short and often warty at base, lacking definite black "grinning patch" . . . **Ross Goose**
        - 5'. Larger (wing over 400 mm.), bill longer and never warty at base, with definite black "grinning patch" at sides . . . **Snow (and "Blue") Goose**
    - 3'. Under tail coverts gray, throat black . . . **Emperor Goose**
- A'. Legs with lower part of tarsus having scutellate (vertically aligned) scales, iridescent coloration often present on wings or body (typical ducks)
  - a. Feet with weakly lobed hind toe, middle toe longer than outer toe, iridescent color usually present on wing surface (perching and dabbling ducks)
    - 1. Upper wing surface mostly iridescent bluish or purplish, tail long and rather square-tipped, claws relatively sharp (perching ducks)

2. White on upper wing surface lacking or limited to upper coverts, folded wing over 300 mm. long . . . **Muscovy Duck**
- 2'. White on upper wing surface limited to tips of secondaries, wing under 300 mm. long . . . **Wood Duck**
- 1'. Upper wing surface not iridescent except on secondary feathers, tail usually short and rounded (sometimes pointed), claws not especially sharp (dabbling ducks)
  2. Middle and lesser upper wing coverts white, pale gray, or light blue
  3. Feet gray, upper wing coverts gray or white
    4. Tertials greatly elongated and sickle-shaped, underwing lining white, head crested . . . **Falcated Duck**
    - 4'. Tertials not greatly elongated or sickle-shaped, underwing lining gray, head uncrested
      5. Axillar feathers mottled with dark gray . . . **European Wigeon**
      - 5'. Axillar feathers white or only slightly flecked with gray . . . **American Wigeon**
  - 3'. Feet yellow or orange, upper wing coverts bluish
    4. Bill spatulate (spoon-shaped) . . . **Shoveler**
    - 4'. Bill normally shaped or only slightly spatulate
      5. Bill uniformly narrow for most of its length (maximum 44 mm.), rusty cinnamon color absent, head with white crescent (males) or brownish with clear buffy to white spot between eye and bill . . . **Blue-winged Teal**
      - 5'. Bill longer (minimum 41 mm.) and slightly spatulate toward tip, rusty cinnamon or yellowish color often present on body, head uniformly cinnamon (males) or brownish with darker streaking that usually obscures the pale area between the eye and bill . . . **Cinnamon Teal**
- 2'. Middle and lesser upper wing coverts grayish brown or brown
  3. Wing speculum iridescent blue, violet, or bluish green, with black (or black and white) bars in front and behind; feet yellow to reddish
  4. White present both in front of and behind the speculum
    5. Vermiculations present on tertials (males), or the tertials grayish (females); females with white or nearly white under tail coverts and white on most or all rectrices . . . **Common Mallard**
    - 5'. Vermiculations never present on tertials, the tertials brownish with green cast; under tail coverts dark brown with lighter edging; white, if present on rectrices, limited to three outer feathers . . . **Mexican Mallard**
  - 4'. White present only behind the speculum, or altogether absent from upper wing surface
    5. Tawny coloration present in front of black bar on greater sec-

- ondary coverts, predominant body color tawny brown . . . **Florida and Mottled Mallards**
- 5'. Tawny coloration absent from secondary coverts, predominant body color dark brown . . . **Black Duck**
- 3'. Wing speculum not as described above, legs and feet usually grayish
4. Speculum iridescent green and black, lined in front with cinnamon buff or buffy white
5. Folded wing over 220 mm., buffy white present in front of speculum, which is green on outer secondaries . . . **Falcated Duck**
- 5'. Folded wing under 220 mm., cinnamon-tinted in front of speculum, which is black on outer secondaries
6. Middle tail feathers over 75 mm., black outer secondaries widely tipped with white . . . **Baikal Teal**
- 6'. Middle tail feathers under 75 mm., black outer secondaries only narrowly tipped with white . . . **Green-winged Teal**
- 4'. Speculum not green and black; if green is present at all it is limited to the anterior half of the speculum
5. Secondaries white, gray, and black, with black extending to the secondary coverts, tail rounded, underwing lining white . . . **Gadwall**
- 5'. Secondaries lacking black, or black is limited to a narrow bar at rear of speculum; tail variably pointed; underwing lining dusky or brownish
6. Speculum iridescent green anteriorly, throat and cheeks white, bill reddish at base . . . **Bahama Pintail**
- 6'. Speculum bronze to copper-colored, or lacking iridescence and brownish; cheeks never white and bill never with reddish color . . . **Pintail**
- a'. Feet with strongly lobed hind toe, iridescent coloration usually lacking on wings (two exceptions), length of outer toe usually greater than that of middle toe (one exception), body generally adapted for diving (pochards, sea ducks, and stiff-tailed ducks)
1. Bill narrow, cylindrical, serrated at the edges and with a hooked tip (mergansers)
2. Smaller (folded wing under 200 mm.), bill short and gray to black, feet gray or yellowish
3. Upper forewing and tertials white, no definite crest . . . **Smew**
- 3'. Upper forewing brown or mottled grayish white, head crested . . . **Hooded Merganser**
- 2'. Larger (folded wing over 200 mm.), bill long and reddish, feet orange to red
3. Nostril nearer to base of bill than center, feathering at base of upper

mandible extending farther forward than that of lower mandible . . .

**Red-breasted Merganser**

- 3'. Nostril nearer to middle of bill than base, feathering at base of upper and lower mandible extending about equal distance forward . . .

**Common Merganser**

- 1'. Bill not as described above
2. Tail feathers unusually long and narrow, bill broad and flattened at tip, wings relatively short, and legs placed well to the rear of the body (stiff-tailed ducks)
3. White present on secondaries, nail of bill not recurved, outer toe not longer than middle toe . . . **Masked Duck**
- 3'. White lacking on wings, nail of bill recurved, outer toe longer than middle toe . . . **Ruddy Duck**
- 2'. Tail feathers not unusually long and narrow; bill variously shaped; wings not unusually short, and legs only moderately situated toward rear of body (pochards and typical sea ducks)
3. Secondaries with iridescent bluish speculum, tail somewhat pointed
4. Inner secondaries curved outwardly, underwing surface white . . . **Stellar Eider**
- 4'. Inner secondaries not curved, underwing surface dusky . . . **Harlequin Duck**
- 3'. No iridescence on wing, the secondaries brown, gray, or white, tail either rounded or pointed
4. Very small (folded wing under 190 mm.), white present behind eye . . . **Bufflehead**
- 4'. Larger (folded wing over 200 mm.), white present or absent on head
5. Feathering present along sides or top of bill almost to nostrils or sometimes beyond
6. Tertiaries straight and little or no longer than secondaries
7. Feathering on sides of bill, white present on secondaries . . . **White-winged Scoter**
- 7'. Feathering present on top of bill, no white present on secondaries . . . **Surf Scoter**
- 6'. Tertiaries elongated and curved outwardly
7. Feathering on bill extending farther on sides than on top, extending laterally to a point below the nostrils . . . **Common Eider**
- 7'. Feathering on top of bill extending farther than on sides, never with feathering below the nostrils
8. Top of nostrils almost hidden by feathers, pale buffy or white area around eyes . . . **Spectacled Eider**
- 8'. No feathering near nostrils, unfeathered basal enlarge-

ment of bill almost reaches the eyes . . . **King Eider**

5'. No feathering present on top or sides of bill

6. White markings present on upper wing surface

7. White largely limited to the secondaries (sometimes extending to inner primaries); upper wing coverts gray, brown, or black; feet gray

8. Back blackish or dusky brown, bill only slightly wider (up to 4 mm.) near tip than at base, with long or rudimentary crest present . . . **Tufted Duck**

8'. Back grayish white or dusky brown, bill definitely wider (at least 5 mm.) near tip than at base, never distinctly crested

9. White of wings extending to inner primaries, nail of bill at least 8 mm. wide . . . **Greater Scaup**

9'. White of wings limited to secondaries (inner primaries may be quite pale), nail of bill under 7 mm. wide . . . **Lesser Scaup**

7'. White or pale gray markings present on upper wing coverts, tertials, or both, feet yellow to orange

8. Bill gradually tapering in width from base, nail of bill raised and at least 12 mm. long . . . **Barrow Goldeneye**

8'. Bill about as wide at nostrils as at base, nail of bill relatively flattened and no more than 11 mm. long . . . **Common Goldeneye**

6'. No white markings on upper wing surface

7. Secondaries gray to grayish white, at least more grayish or paler than primaries, tail rounded and no more than 75 mm. long

8. Bill with one (females) or two (males) pale rings, folded wing under 210 mm., upper forewing and back dark brown or black . . . **Ring-necked Duck**

8'. Bill with only one pale ring or none, folded wing at least 210 mm., forewing and back gray or light brown

9. Bill long (exposed culmen over 50 mm.), and forehead sloping; upper wing coverts with vermiculations . . . **Canvas-back**

9'. Bill shorter (exposed culmen under 50 mm.), and with a high forehead; upper wing coverts not vermiculated . . . **Redhead**

7'. Secondaries brown or blackish, no lighter than rest of wing; tail slightly or greatly pointed and usually longer than 75 mm. centrally

8. White or pale gray feathers present on flanks, a variable amount of white (sometimes only a narrow ring) around eye . . . **Oldsquaw**



8'. Flanks brown, reddish brown, or black; white lacking around eye or limited to areas below and in front of eye

9. Outer (10th) primaries narrower and shorter than adjacent ones, bill fairly long (over 40 mm.) and somewhat enlarged basally . . . **Black Scoter**

9'. Outer primaries not narrow and shorter than adjacent ones, bill short (under 30 mm.) and not enlarged basally . . . **Harlequin Duck**

