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Waterfowl Portraits

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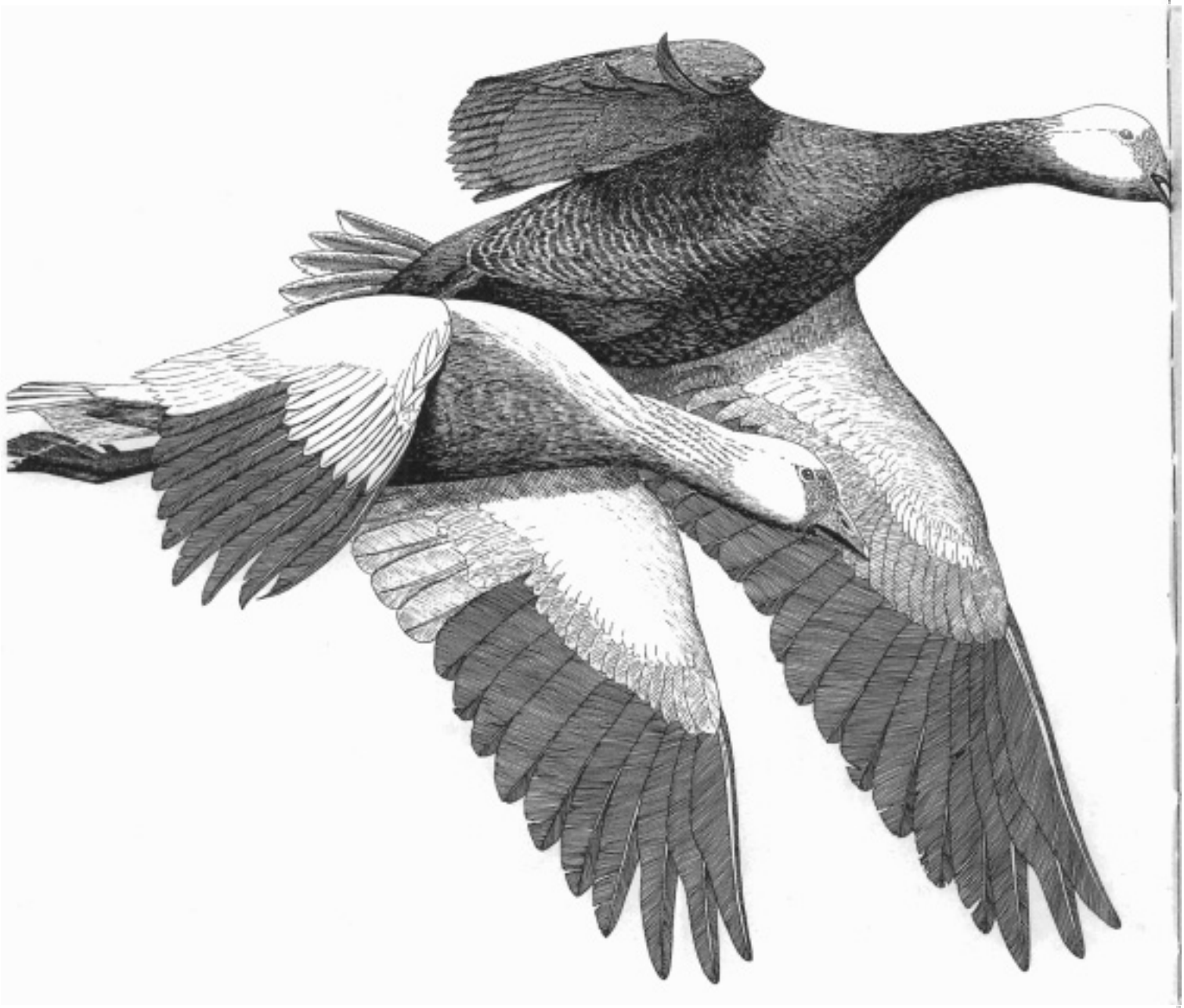


Of all the geese that migrate through Nebraska, the most abundant is the lesser snow goose and its plumage variant, the "blue" goose. At times, up to a half-million of these geese concentrate in a few areas in the Missouri River Valley, providing one of Nebraska's most remarkable wildlife spectacles. Most of these birds breed on the larger islands or along the coastline of Hudson Bay, usually in enormous colonies. Confusion as to the relationship of the blue goose to the snow goose has in the past caused them to be regarded as separate species, and only recently has it been proven that the birds are simplegenetic variants of the same species, with intermediate-appearing birds also fairly common. First-year birds of both the color phases are darker in color than the respective adult plumages, and goose flocks consist of congregations of individual family units. In fall flocks, the proportion of juvenile geese provides an accurate index to the success of the previous summer's breeding activity; after a very favorable breeding season, up to half of the fall migrant flocks may consist of young birds, whereas following a bad breeding season, the young may comprise only 5 or 70 percent. By the time the birds are two years old they have attained their adult plumage, but snow geese usually do not breed until they are three years of age. The drawing shows a typical blue-phase male and snow-phase female in flight

Illustration and Text by Paul Johnsgard

Waterfowl Portraits

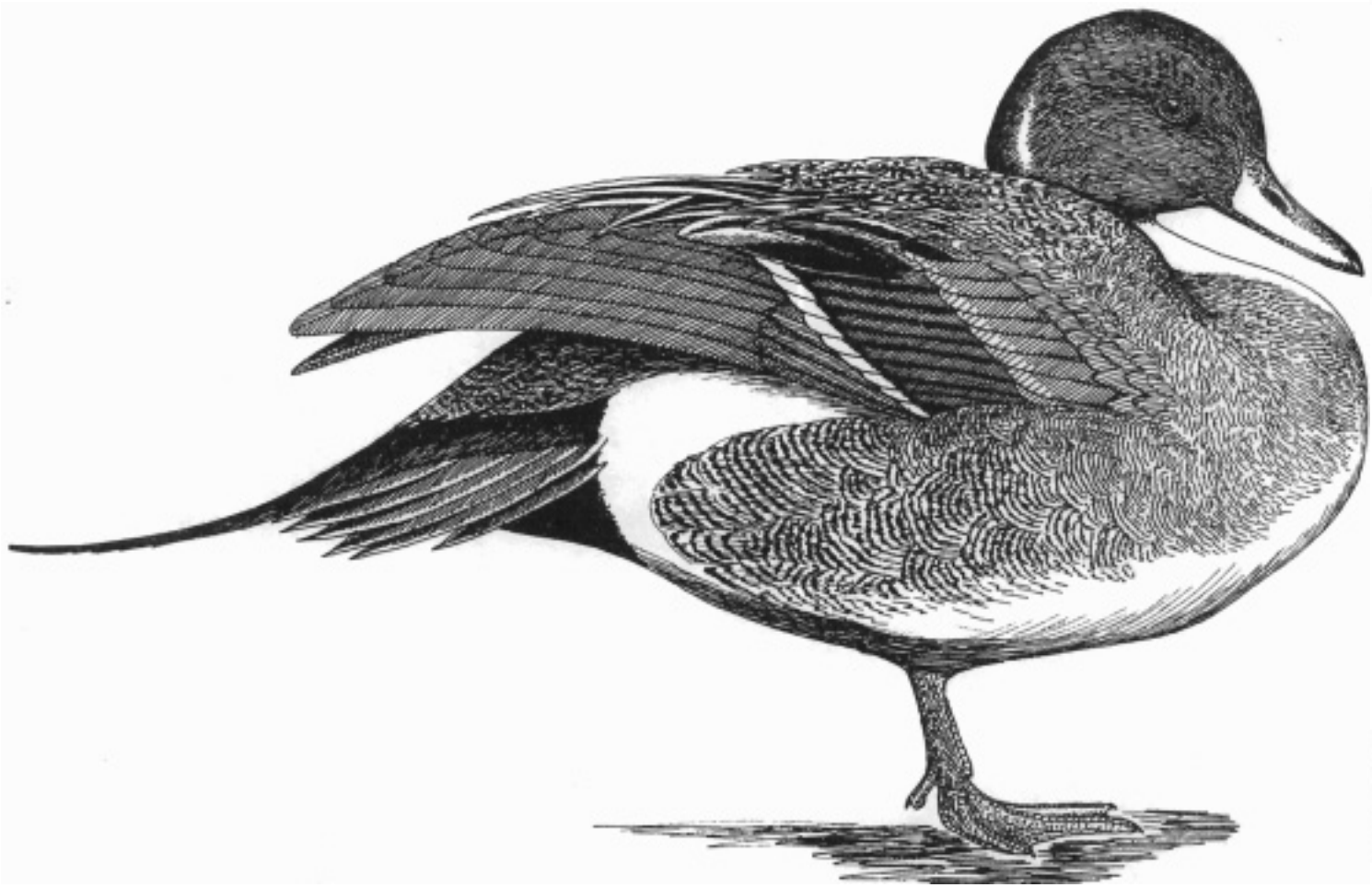
SINCE HIS days as a boy on the North Dakota prairies, Paul A. Johnsgard has "measured his winters, not by conventional time units, but in the days it took for the snow geese to return from their wintering grounds....'' The author of five books: Song of the North Wind—A Story of the Snow Goose; Grouse and Quails of North America; Waterfowl—Their Biology and Natural History; Animal Behavior; and Handbook of Waterfowl Behavior, and of numerous articles in national magazines and over 40 technical papers, he is eminently qualified to capture in pen and ink the very essence of Nebraska's wildfowl. The line art on the following pages are but a few of the illustrations to be found in his forthcoming book, Waterfowl of North America.

Dr. Johnsgard received his Ph.D from Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y., and a postdoctoral fellowship with Bristol University and the Wildfowl Trust, England. Currently he is Professor of Zoology in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, a position he has held since 1961. His teaching responsibilities include ecology, animal behavior and ornithology.

His life-long love for wildfowl is best described in his own words when speaking of his early years on the prairie-pothole country of North Dakota: "The annual spring ritual of meeting the geese on their return from the south was more important to me than the opening day of hunting season, the beginning of summer vacation or even the arrival of Christmas. The spring return of the geese represented my epiphany—a manifestation of gods I could see, hear, and nearly touch as they streamed into the marsh a few feet above the tips of the cattails and phragmites.. ..During the drive home my ears would resound with the cries of the wild geese and, when I closed my eyes that night, I saw them still, their strong wings flashing in the sunlight, their immaculate bodies projected against the azure sky."

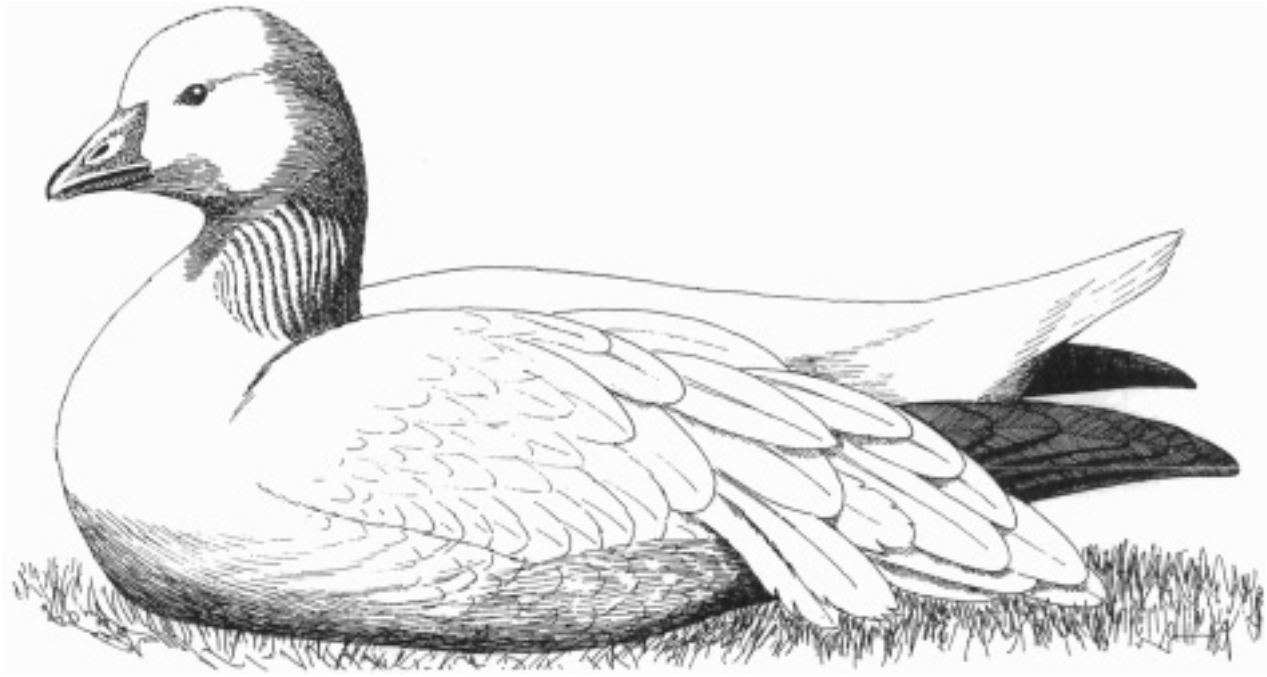
Currently, Dr. Johnsgard has two books in preparation: American Gamebirds of Uplands and Shores, to be published in the fall of 1975 by the University of Nebraska Press, and a book on the ecology and behavior of the sandhill crane and trumpeter swan.

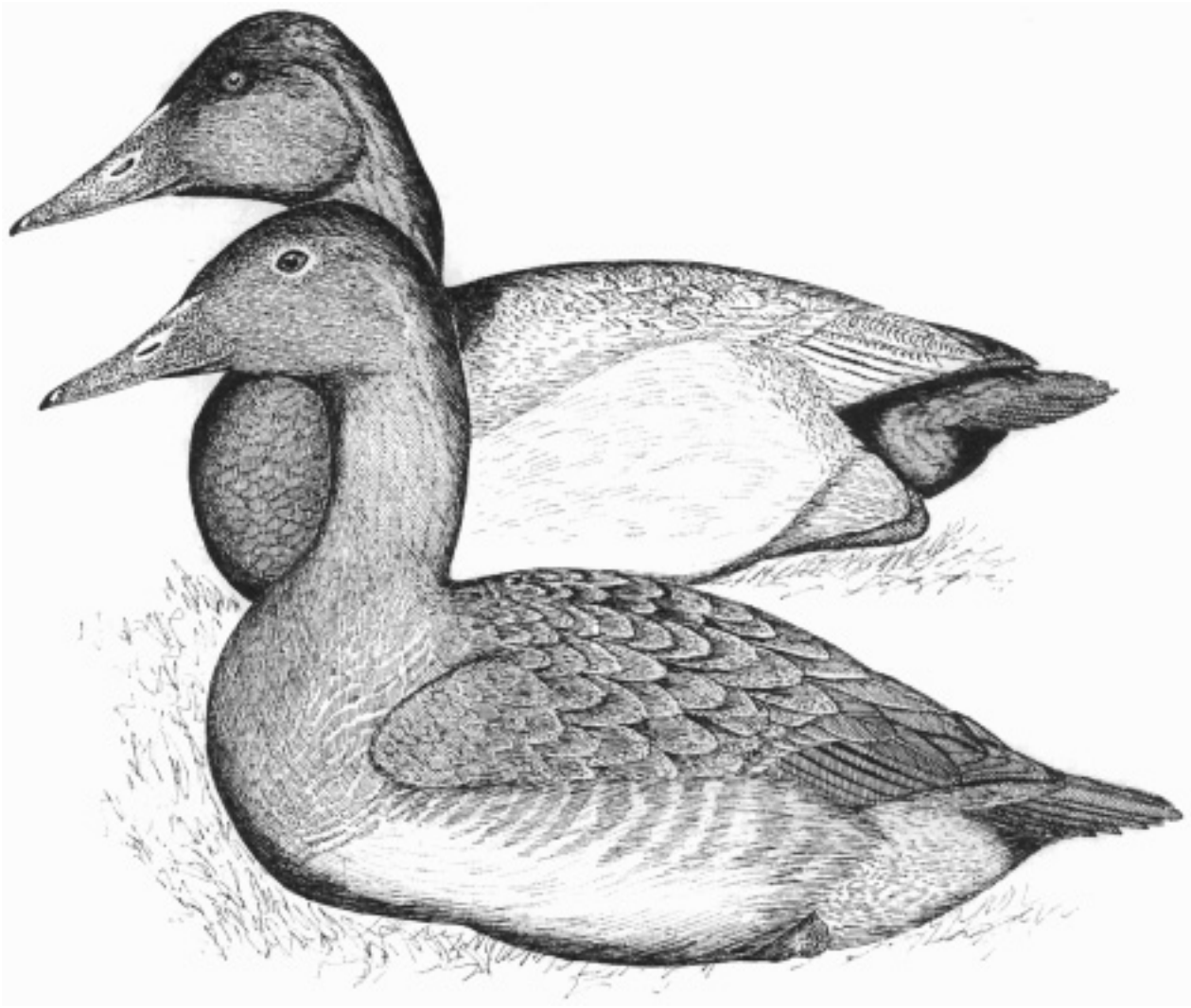
Looking very much like a miniature snow goose, the Ross' goose is often overlooked or mis-identified by hunters and bird-watchers. Close observation will reveal the bird's smaller size and its distinctively shorter bill, which has a warty, bluish surface near the base. In recent years, increasing numbers of Ross' goose have been seen in Nebraska, apparently as a result of an eastern extension of their arctic breeding range. I was lucky enough to see the first known breeding pair in Manitoba, which were nesting in a snow goose colony near Churchill in 1972. The bird shown at the right is an adult male, letting his long wings droop

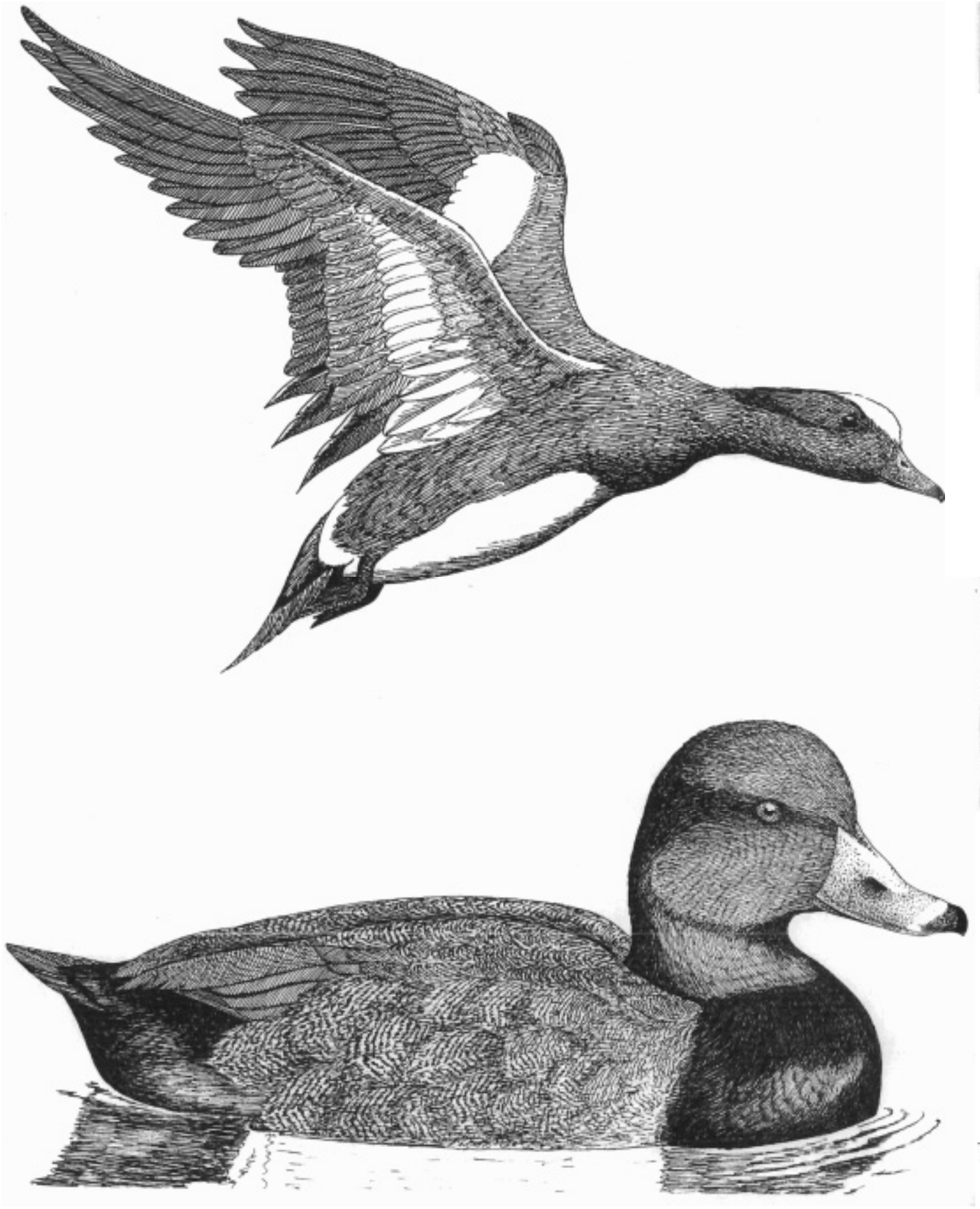


Few people would argue that the pintail is one of the most streamlined and sleekly beautiful of all North American ducks, and it is also one of the most widespread of all waterfowl species. It even breeds on a few sub-antarctic islands, although those birds are smaller and less brightly colored than the North American population. Tolerant of a wide range of climates, I have found pintail nests on the coastal tundra of Alaska, the arid semi-deserts of central Washington and amid the native grasslands of North Dakota. The mellow, fluty whistling of male pintails during the spring courtship period is one of the most pleasantly melodious of all waterfowl calls. The male shown above is resting in the sunshine, with his wings raised slightly to aid in cooling

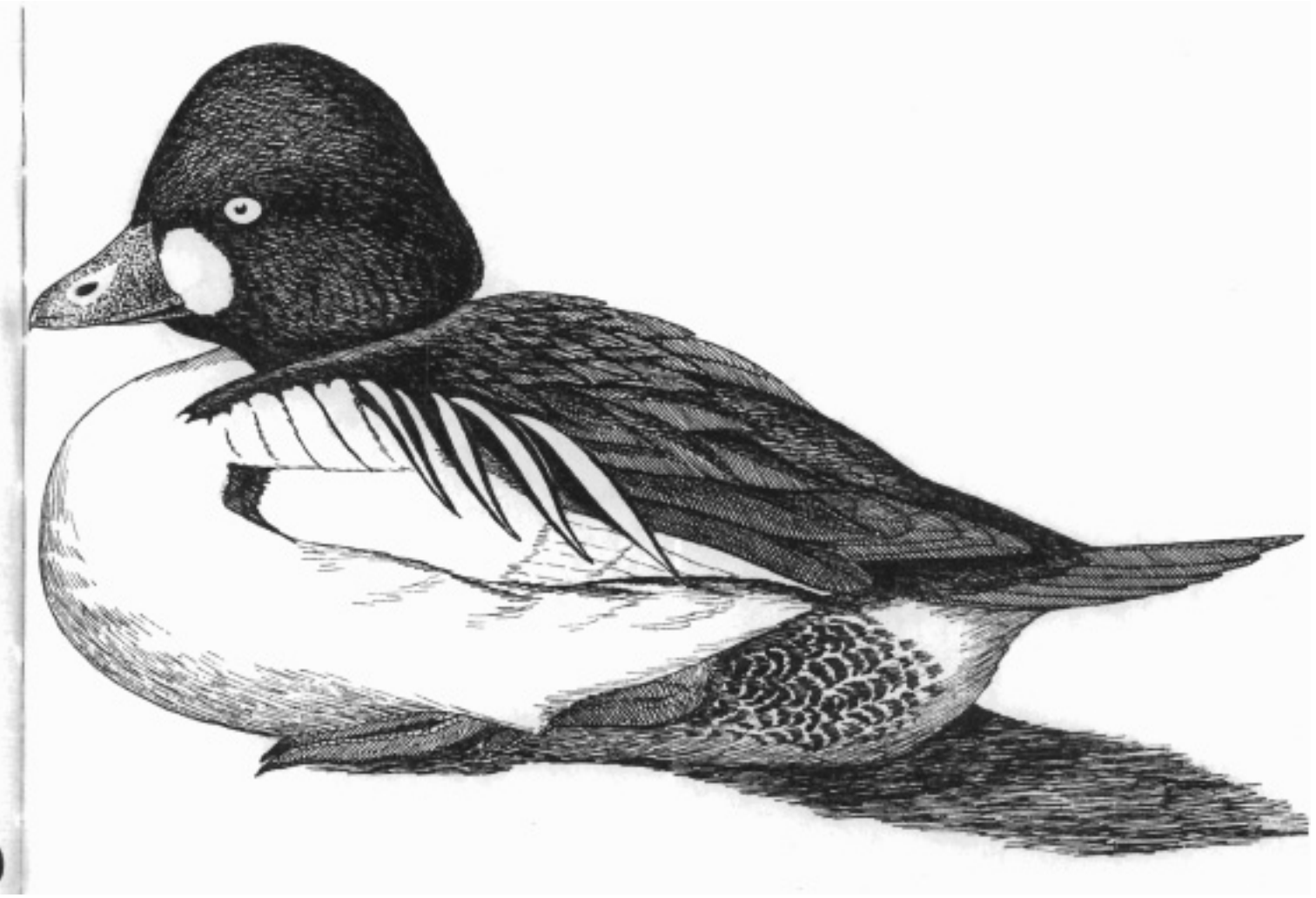
It would not be difficult to predict that the canvasback, right, would win any survey in which the most sporting, most delicious and most regal-appearing North American duck was to be chosen. The bird's large size and its diet of wild celery, pondweeds and other aquatic herbage have placed it at the top of the epicure's list of waterfowl table fare ever since the days of market hunting. Since then, the canvasback's traditional breedinggrouhds in the "potholes" of the northern plains states and the prairie provinces of Canada have suffered greatly from drainage, and its wintering areas along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts have deteriorated from pollution and industrialization. As a result, the canvasback population has seriously declined recently





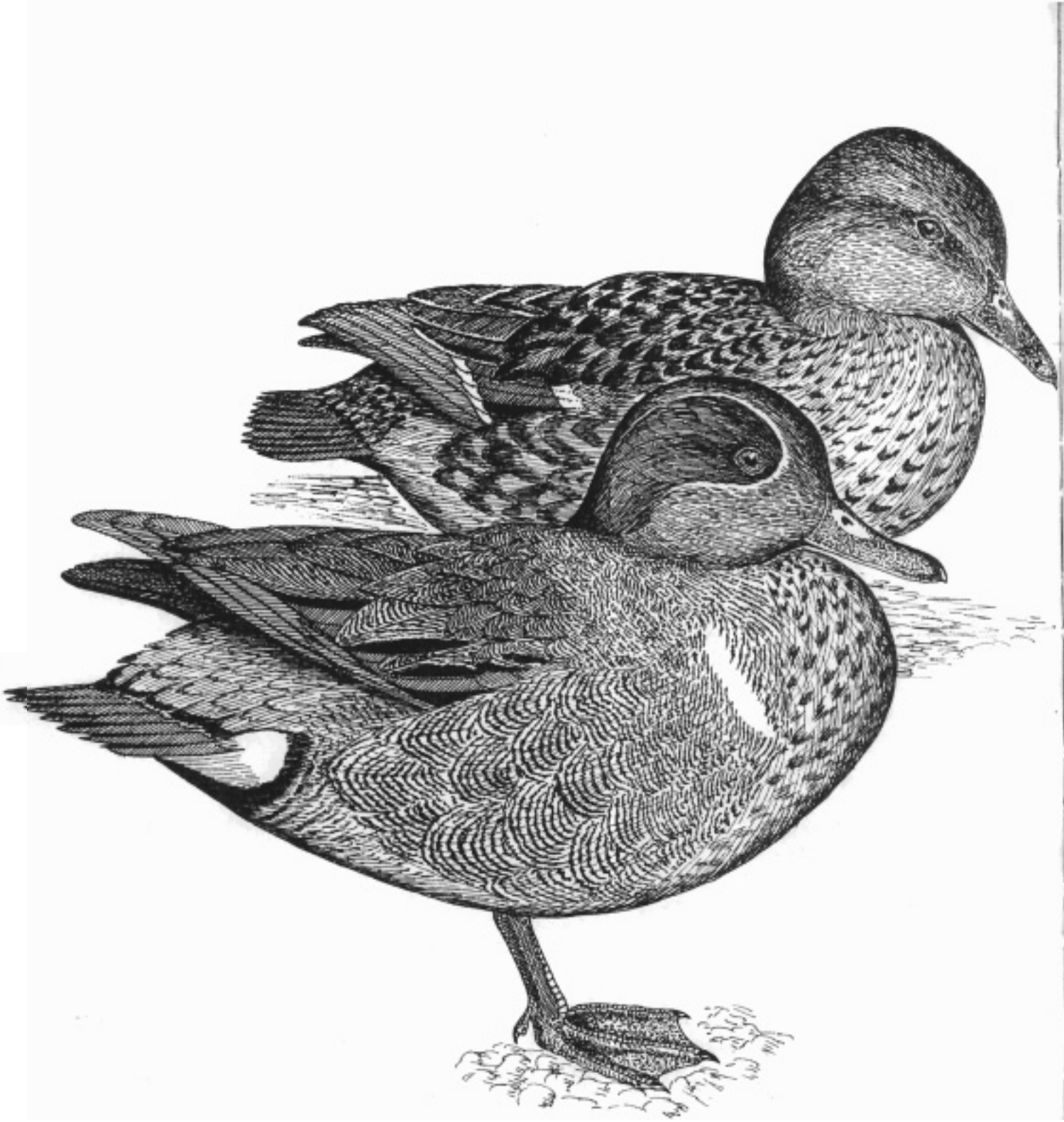


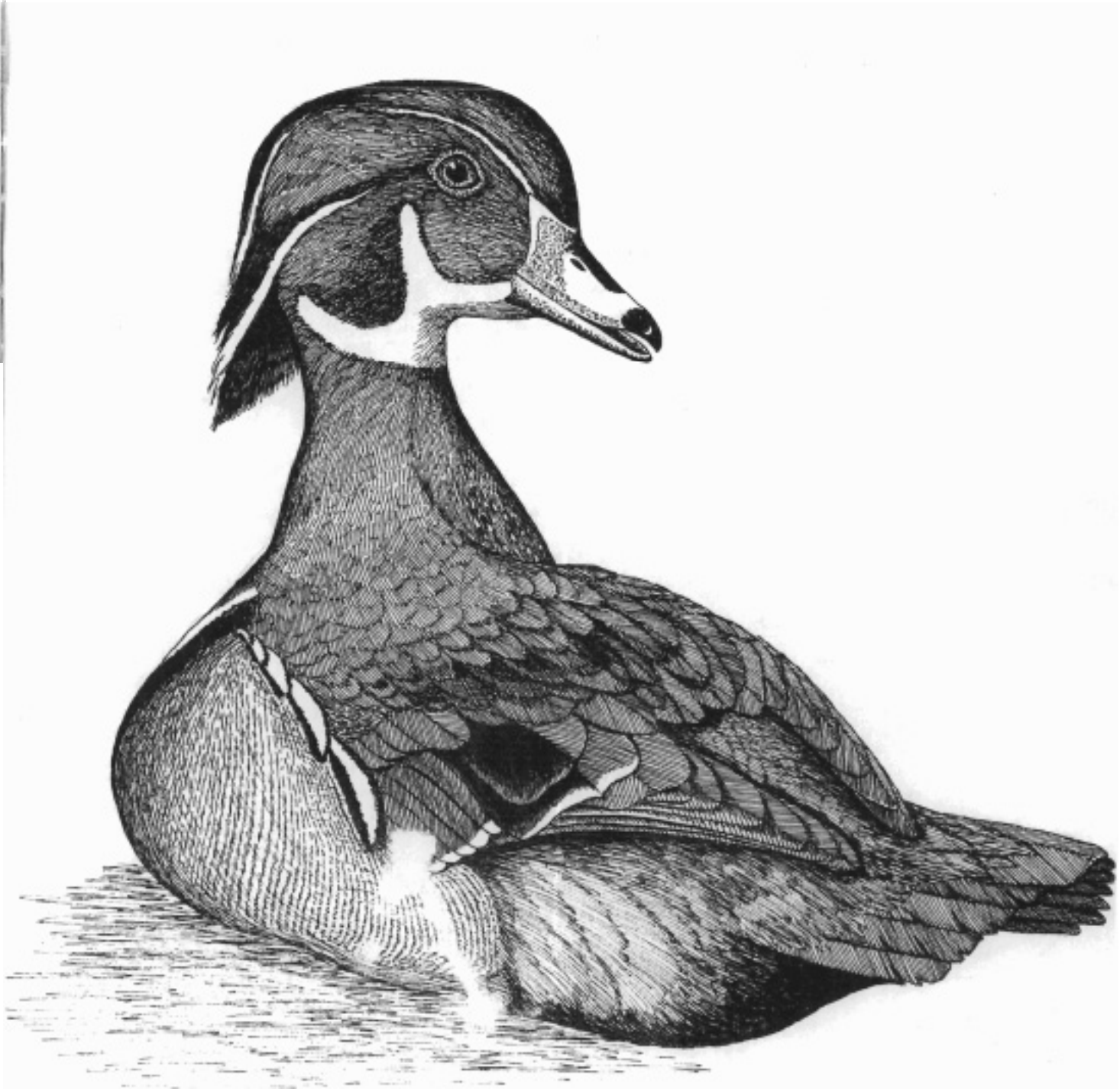
The American wigeon, commonly called the baldpate, is the only native surface-feeding duck having an immaculate white forewing patch. This conspicuous pattern provides an excellent field mark for identification when the birds are in flight; even females have the same although less conspicuous plumage feature. To a greater extent than most other ducks, the wigeon is a grazer, and flocks often move away from water to forage on succulent green plants. They are also extremely reluctant to dive, but instead will try to steal pondweeds from such diving ducks as canvasbacks and redheads. Related species also occur in Europe and South America, and in all wigeons the male has a fairly loud melodious whistle. The male shown at left is landing



like the canvasback, the redhead, left, is a diving duck that feeds primarily on pondweeds and other aquatic plants. It is only slightly smaller, and the two species often occur together. Under these conditions, the distinctly darker gray body coloration of the male redhead is evident, as is the higher and more rounded crown profile. Female redheads are more uniformly brownish than are female canvasbacks, and their bill has a distinctive pale band near the tip, as in the male. Redheads have not suffered from breeding habitat reduction quite to the extent that is true of the canvasback, and they breed on more alkaline marshes and in generally drier climates. Unlike canvasbacks, redheads still commonly nest in Nebraska Sand Hills lakes

Of the two species of goldeneyes in North America, only the common goldeneye, above, is regularly found in Nebraska, occurring on larger bodies of water such as lakes and deeper rivers. Like common mergansers, goldeneyes tolerate very cold weather, and they frequently can be seen resting on icy edges or diving in near-freezing waters for mollusks and other similar foods. Their short and heavy. bills are well adapted for crushing hard-shelled foods, and they can dive to considerable depths to obtain them. In both species ofgoldeneyes, the females are gray to brownish and are very difficult to separate, but the rounded, rather than crescent-shaped white mark behind the bill, readily distinguishes common goldeneye males from the Barrow's



Of all North American ducks, the green-winged teal is among the smallest and yet is one of the hardiest. Following shortly after the mallards and pintails, greenwings typically arrive in southern Nebraska in late February or early March, nearly two months before blue-winged teal begin to become common. They gather on shallow marshes, where courtship occurs, and feed on a variety of small seeds from aquatic plants. The sharply whistled courtship call of the male is a frequent clue to the presence of green-winged teal on a pond. Otherwise, they are often overlooked because of their small size and inconspicuous nature, as they gather along grassy shorelines or rushy pond edges. In flight, green-winged teal are erratic and unpredictable, almost resembling shore birds in their sharply veering and compact flight patterns. They breed over a rather large portion of North America, but only rarely nest in Nebraska. A closely related population called the "common teal" also extends throughout Europe and Asia. The pair shown above is at rest

Partly because of an intensive nesting box erection program and the release of hand-reared breeding stock, the wood duck is now becoming more abundant and is extending its breeding range in eastern Nebraska. It is easily one of the most attractive and desirable of all North American waterfowl, but, unlike other surface-feeding ducks, it depends on hollow trees or tree substitutes for successful nesting. The bird shown below is a male in breeding plumage, raising his crest and uttering his distinctive courtship whistle