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WATERFOWL OF NORTH DAKOTA

Paul A. Johnsgard

NORTH DAKOTA INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL STUDIES
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Introduction

North Dakota is a great waterfowl state. Within its borders more ducks nest every summer than in any other state. Each fall thousands of hunters share in the excellent duck and goose hunting, and every school child is aware of the immense flocks of migrating waterfowl that are such a common sight. This booklet was written not only to serve as a guide in identifying these birds, but also to point out something of their habits and importance.

How to Use the Picture Key

To identify ducks and geese, look for certain characteristics which are distinctive. Waterfowl may be divided into three groups: geese, surface-feeding ducks, and diving ducks. These can be separated as follows:

GESE — Large size, long necks, slow wing-beat.

SURFACE-FEEDING DUCKS — Found on shallow sloughs; do not ordinarily dive for food; take off by springing out of water. Most have brightly colored wing-patches.

DIVING DUCKS — Found on deep sloughs; dive for food; take off by running along the water. None have brightly colored wing patches.

After determining to which of the three groups the unknown bird belongs, use the key to find the exact species. Read the statements marked "1a" and "1b". Choose the one which is correct for the bird; follow the directions and again decide which statement gives the best description of the bird in question. Continue this process until the name of the species is determined. Then read the description of the species, and compare the field marks shown by the drawings.

[1]
Picture Key to Waterfowl

**GEESE**

All have long necks, are larger than ducks, and fly with a slower wing-beat.

1a. Head and neck black with white cheek—**Canada Goose** (p. 5).

1b. Head and neck not black—Go to 2.

2a. Plumage mostly white or grayish, with black wing-tips—**Snow Goose** (p. 5).

2b. Plumage mostly brown—Go to 3.

3a. Head brown with white forehead, feet yellow, adults with black spots on breast—**White-fronted Goose** (p. 5).

3b. Head brown or white, feet dark, without black spots on breast—**Blue Goose** (p. 5).

**DUCKS**

All are smaller than geese, have shorter necks, and fly with a rapid wing-beat.

**SURFACE-FEEDING DUCKS**

Found mostly on rivers and shallow sloughs; feed by tipping up rather than diving, and spring from the water when taking off. If examined in the hand, one can see the hind toe has only a small lobe. Most of them have brightly colored wing patches.

1a. Front of extended wing light blue or white—Go to 2.

1b. Front of wing not light blue or white—Go to 5.

2a. Front of wing white, or gray bordered with white—**Bald-pate** (p. 6).

2b. Front of wing light blue—Go to 3.

3a. Bill greatly widened at end—**Shoveller** (p. 11).

3b. Bill not widened at end—Go to 4.

4a. Body cinnamon-red—**Cinnamon Teal** (male) (p. 11).

4b. Body not cinnamon-red—**Blue-winged Teal** (or Cinnamon Teal female) (p. 11).

[2]
5a. Wing patch white and black, feet yellow—Gadwall (p. 6).

5b. Wing patch not white and black, usually metallic—Go to 6.

6a. Size small (considerably smaller than Mallard)—Go to 7.

6b. Size large (about size of Mallard)—Go to 8.

7a. Wing patch green and black, feet gray—Green-winged Teal (p. 11).

7b. Wing patch metallic blue, extending into front part of wing, feet yellow—Wood Duck (p. 11).

8a. Two white borders on each side of purplish-blue wing patch—Mallard (p. 5).

8b. White border, if noticeable, only on rear side of wing patch—Go to 9.

9a. Body dark colored, underwing feathers white—Black Duck (p. 6).

9b. Body light colored, underwing feathers dark gray, long neck and pointed tail—Pintail (p. 6).

DIVING DUCKS

Found on deep sloughs and lakes; feed by diving and run along the water when taking off. If examined in the hand, one can see the hind toe has a large lobe. None of them have metallic wing patches, but instead have gray or white areas on the wings.

1a. Bill narrow, toothed and with prominent hook at tip; birds fly with head and neck at level of body—Mergansers—Go to 8.

1b. Bill broad and not toothed or with prominent hook; birds fly with head and neck higher than level of body—Go to 2.

2a. Wing showing white area—Go to 6.

2b. Wing not showing white, only gray or brown—Go to 3.

3a. Size small (much smaller than Mallard), white cheeks and short wings—Ruddy Duck (p. 13).

3b. Size medium to large (about size of Mallard)—Go to 4.
4a. Forehead sloping, bill long—**Canvas-back** (p. 12).

4b. Forehead rounded, bill short—Go to 5.

5a. Bill with distinct white ring, and with white at base of bill; male with dark purple head—**Ring-necked Duck** (p. 12).

5b. Bill with indistinct white ring, and no white at base of bill. Male with reddish-colored head—**Redhead** (p. 12).

6a. Size small (much smaller than Mallard), white patch behind eye—**Buffle-head** (p. 13).

6b. Size larger (slightly smaller than Mallard), white patch in front of eye, or with no white on head—Go to 7.

7a. Gray or white breast, white wing patch extending into front part of wing—**American Golden-eye** (p. 13).

7b. Brown or black breast, white wing patch not extending into front part of wing—**Scaup Duck (Bluebill)** (p. 13).

8a. Size small (much smaller than Mallard), head with crest (rounded when erect), gray underwing surface—**Hooded Merganser** (p. 14).

8b. Size larger, white underwing surface—Go to 9.

9a. Green, uncrested head and white breast, or brown head sharply separated from light breast—**American Merganser** (p. 14).

9b. Green, crested head with reddish-brown breast, or brown head blending into light breast—**Red-breasted Merganser** (p. 14).
**GEESE**

**CANADA GOOSE**—(includes Common Canada, Lesser Canada and Richardson’s Goose).

**FIELD MARKS**—The black neck and head with white cheeks identifies the Canada Goose in the air or on the water.

The “Canadian Honker”, as it is often called, is the best known of our geese, and is the most popular target of North Dakota hunters. It is a common migrant throughout the state. It nests only in and around refuges, principally the Lower Souris. Fall migration is later than that of the Blue and Snow Goose.

Actually three forms are found among the migrants: Common Canada, averaging 8 to 9 pounds, Lesser Canada Goose and Richardson’s Goose (both commonly called Hutchin’s Goose) which range 3 to 7 pounds.

**WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE**

**FIELD MARKS**—Adult birds have black barring on the breast, and white faces. Immature birds have yellow feet and a light colored bill.

The “Specklebelly”, as hunters commonly call this species, is a fairly common migrant. They usually fly by themselves in small flocks, but sometimes a few may mingle with Blue and Snow Geese. They quickly pass through the state on their way to and from their breedings grounds in Alaska and the Yukon. About the size of Blue and Snow Geese (5 to 6 pounds), they are favorites of the hunters for their excellent table qualities.

**SNOW GOOSE**

**FIELD MARKS**—White with black wing-tips. Young birds more grayish.

This beautiful bird is probably the most common species of goose passing through the eastern half of the state. It nests in the far north.

**BLUE GOOSE**

**FIELD MARKS**—Adults are dark-bodied with white heads. Young birds are quite similar to immature White-fronted Geese but have dark feet and bill. A few dark-colored birds in a flock of Snow Geese are almost certain to be Blue Geese, for the two species mingle during migration, and sometimes interbreed. Hybrids usually resemble Blue Geese, but have white bellies.

The Blue Goose is a common migrant in the eastern half of the state.

**SURFACE-FEEDING DUCKS**

**MALLARD**

**FIELD MARKS**—Seen in flight, Mallards are large ducks with two narrow white wing stripes. On the water, the female may be told by its orange bill and whitish tail. The drake’s green head and neck ring are very conspicuous.
The “Greenhead” Mallard is a common migrant and summer resident, nesting throughout the state. In spring they can be seen swimming about in potholes formed from the melting snow. Nesting almost anywhere, sometimes long distances from any water, the Mallard ranks third among the breeding ducks of the state.

**BLACK DUCK**

**FIELD MARKS**—A Mallard-sized, dark bodied duck with prominent white underwing linings, and only one indistinct white wing border behind the violet wing-patch.

An occasional migrant and summer resident in the eastern part of the state, less common in the west. It is a wary bird, and is often called the “Black Mallard” because of the resemblance in size and shape, but it is actually a different species and deserves to be called by its correct name.

**GADWALL**

**FIELD MARKS**—In flight, the white wing patch can be seen from above and below. In the water, the male has a uniformly gray body, and a black rump. The female is hard to identify, but has a yellow bill.

Although it is a common migrant and summer resident throughout the state, the Gadwall is not generally recognized. Its rather nondescript gray-colored plumage has earned it the name of “Gray Duck.” It is a common nester, ranking about fifth in abundance. Nests are built on dry ground in meadows and prairies.

**BALDPATE**

**FIELD MARKS**—In flight, the white fore-wing, white breast and gray underwing surface are outstanding. On the water the male’s white crown, and the reddish tone on the body of both sexes are distinctive.

The Baldpate or “American Widgeon” is a common migrant and locally common summer resident throughout the state. An alert and nervous duck, it will fly at the first indication of danger. Its willingness to decoy, and swiftness of flight make it a good target for the sportsman, but it is not considered to be the best for food. Nests are built on dry land.

**PINTAIL**

**FIELD MARKS**—The long, slim, outline of the bird in flight, pointed tail, and dark underwing surfaces, make the Pintail easy to identify. On the water the male, with its long, white neck, and dark brown head, and the female’s slender body and gray bill are distinctive.

An abundant migrant and summer resident, the Pintail closely competes with the Blue-winged Teal as the most common nesting duck in the state; a pair of Pintails are familiar sights in every slough and pothole from early spring until late fall. Following the retreating ice, Pintails arrive in late March before the snow is all melted, and they waste little time before they start nesting. Nests are built on dry ground, often in stubble fields far from water.
SURFACE-FEEDING DUCKS

Pintail Mallard
Baldpate Gadwall
Green-winged Teal
Black Duck
Wood Duck

DIVING DUCKS

Redhead Canvas-back Scaup Duck
Ring-necked Duck American Golden-eye
Buffle-head Ruddy Duck
COMMON SURFACE-FEEDING DUCKS

- Pintail (F. M.)
- Baldpate (F. M.)
- Blue-winged Teal (F. M.)
- Green-winged Teal (F. M.)
- Mallard (F. M.)
- Gadwall (F. M.)
- Shoveller (F. M.)
- Grebe
- Coot

BIRDS CONFUSED WITH DUCKS

COMMON DIVING DUCKS

- Redhead (F. M.)
- Canvas-back (F. M.)
- Scaup Duck (F. M.)
GREEN-WINGED TEAL

**Field Marks**—A very small grayish duck, flying swiftly and erratically in small flocks, is almost certain to be this species. On the water the male shows a bright chestnut head with a green eye patch and a white mark in front of the wing, and the female is nondescript brown. Female teal are not easily identifiable to species on the water. Although it is the tiniest of our ducks, the Green-winged Teal is also one of the hardiest, and follows closely on the heels of the Mallard and Pintail during the spring migration. A common migrant and occasional summer resident, it is often overlooked by the sportsman, who is in search of larger game. However, its small size and swift flight make it an excellent target, and it is unsurpassed in food quality. Fall migration occurs in October, somewhat later than that of the Blue-winged Teal.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL

**Field Marks**—In flight, the small size and light blue wing-patches on the fore-wing are distinctive. On the water, the male has a white crescent on the side of the face, and a white patch in front of the tail.

This familiar teal is an abundant migrant and summer resident throughout the state; it and the Pintail make up about 60% of the total numbers of breeding ducks. It is seen in nearly every roadside pothole and slough that is large enough to support a pair of breeding birds. A late breeder, the nests are built close to the water in grasses. It is the earliest fall migrant, usually leaving in September.

CINNAMON TEAL

**Field Marks**—The cinnamon-red color of the body of the male. The female is similar to the female Blue-winged Teal.

A very rare migrant and summer resident in the western part of the state, this beautiful little teal is for the most part found west of the Rocky Mountains.

SHOVELLER

**Field Marks**—In flight, very wide, flat bill, and blue wing-patches identify both the male and female. On the water, the large bill is pointed downward, and the rear part of the body floats higher than the front part. The male in spring has a green head, a white breast and reddish-brown sides.

The “Spoonbill,” as it is commonly called, is a very common migrant and summer resident throughout North Dakota, probably the fourth most common nesting species of ducks in the state. Few Shovellers are shot by hunters in the fall, for their huge bill gives them a poor reputation, yet their meat is often as tender and flavorful as that of any Mallard.

WOOD DUCK

**Field Marks**—In flight, the Wood Duck has a long, square tail, dark underwing surface, and white belly. It flies with its bill pointed downward, and the white cheek and throat of the male are
sometimes noticeable. On the water, the head pattern of the male, with its crest and white cheeks, and the female’s slight crest and white eyering are easily seen.

Among the most beautiful of our American wild fowl, the Wood Duck is rare in North Dakota. It is restricted to the vicinity of wooded streams and secluded forest ponds, where it builds its nest in hollow trees. Especially fond of acorns, it is most often seen along the rivers in the northeastern part of the state. Because of its rareness, hunters should learn to recognize it and avoid shooting this beautiful and protected bird.

DIVING DUCKS

REDHEAD

Field Marks — The uniformly gray upper surface of the wings, short bill, and rounded head that is reddish-brown on the male identify the bird in flight. On the water, the male’s reddish head, black chest, and gray back separate it from the other diving ducks. The female can be told from the hen Canvasback by its rounded head and shorter bill, from the Scaup by the lack of a white face, and from the Ring-necked by the lack of a conspicuous white eye-ring.

A common migrant and summer resident throughout the state, it is commonly found on the deeper sloughs, and builds its nests of reeds in clump of rushes or cattails over the water. The Redhead’s table qualities are as fine as those of the Canvasback, and the fall flight of Redheads and Scaup during the last part of October is likely to make most hunters forget about more important business.

RING-NECKED DUCK

Field Marks — The black coloration of the male, especially on the back, is distinctive. On the water, the white in front of the wing on the male is very noticeable, and the ring on the bill can sometimes be seen. The head of the Ring-necked Duck is somewhat triangular rather than rounded. The female has a darker back, and more conspicuous eye-ring than the Redhead.

An occasional migrant and summer resident in the state, the Ring-necked Duck is often confused with the Scaup. “Ring-billed” Duck, as it is commonly called, is probably a more logical name, for the brownish ring around the neck of the male is scarcely noticeable. The Ring-necked Ducks nest occasionally in the deeper sloughs of the state, building their nests slightly above the water.

CANVAS-BACK

Field Marks — In flight, the long head profile, dark chest, and large amounts of white on the belly and back of the males make identification easy. Their flight is strong and swift, with rapid wing beats, and showing flashes of white on the underwings. On the water, the glistening white back of the male, and the sloping forehead and long bill of both sexes are distinctive.

The speed and power of a flock of Canvas-backs is awe-inspiring; they have been clocked up to 72 miles an hour. The Canvas-back is also
the largest species of our native ducks. Its nest is built of rushes and reeds, usually just above the surface of the water. It is a common migrant and a locally common summer resident.

**SCAUP DUCK** (Bluebill)

**FIELD MARKS** — In flight the white wing patch, and dark head and chest separate the male from other diving ducks. The female's white face is distinctive. On the water the male's contrasting dark head, chest and rump and white sides and grayish back are conspicuous.

The Scaup is a common migrant, and uncommon summer resident in the state. The Scaup is one of our latest breeders, the olive-colored eggs seldom being found before the latter part of June. It nests on the ground. Fall migration occurs in late October, when large flocks of Scaup pass through North Dakota. The Greater and Lesser Scaup are so much alike that it is not practical to try to separate them. (Only the latter is common in North Dakota).

**AMERICAN GOLDEN-EYE**

**FIELD MARKS** — A black and white duck, with white wing patches, and dark underwing surfaces. The female is somewhat similar, but is more brownish colored, and has a dark brown, rounded head, and short neck. On the water, the male shows a white patch in front of the eye, and a white breast and sides. The female has a darker colored head than the rest of the body, and whitish neck-ring.

The Golden-eye nests in hollow trees, and is found in the same parts of the state as the Wood Duck. Also called "Whistler," from the sound which its wings make when it flies. It is an occasional migrant and possible summer resident in the eastern and central parts of the state. Eggs may be found from late May to early June, and after they hatch, the ducklings jump out of the hole in the tree, then waddle off toward water unhurt.

**BUFFLE-HEAD**

**FIELD MARKS** — In flight, the male is a teal-sized, black and white duck, with large, white wing and head patches. The female is similar but more dull colored. On the water, the male is mostly white, with a large white patch behind the eye. The female is dark-bodied, with a small white patch behind the eye.

The "Butterball," as it is known to many, is an uncommon migrant throughout the state, and possibly nests in the Turtle Mountains. Building its nest in hollow trees along rivers and streams, a Buffle-head's presence on a Dakota marsh presents a picture of beauty that must be seen to be appreciated. Few Buffle-heads are shot by hunters, for it is not considered to be a good table bird.

**RUDDY DUCK**

**FIELD MARKS** — The jerky and noisy flight of this brownish duck with white cheeks is unmistakable. On the water the reddish color of the body, white cheeks, and in the spring, the bright blue bill
of the male are distinctive. The female has the same build, but is duller in color, and the white cheek is streaked by a dark line. They usually swim with their tails cocked straight up.

On a fine warm day in the latter part of April, when the Pintails have already built their nests, the Ruddy Duck will finally drop in out of the sky, swim around the marsh a few times with tail erect and sky-blue bill glistening, and begin acting as though he had owned the place all his life. One of our most unusual and interesting waterfowl, the Ruddy Duck is a locally common migrant and summer resident throughout the state. It builds a basket-like nest in a clump of rushes about eight inches above the water, and lays the largest eggs of any duck which commonly nests in the state. Unlike most ducks, the male Ruddy occasionally helps raise the young. In mid-July one can sometimes see the male proudly leading a brood of tiny ducklings, with the female swimming behind. Although they are excellent eating, many hunters refrain from shooting them, for they are too trusting to be good game birds.

**Mergansers**

**Hooded Merganser**

**Field Marks**—In flight, the merganser shape, small size, small white wing patches and dark underwing linings are distinctive.

On the water, the rounded head crest of both sexes is noticeable, as well as the long, thin bill.

An occasional migrant and rare summer resident, mostly in the east-central part of the state, the Hooded Merganser is another tree-nesting species, and lacks none of the beauty that is characteristic of the ducks that commonly nest in trees. An excellent swimmer, its saw-toothed bill helps it catch and hold its food, which ranges from insect larvae to small fish. Because of their animal diet, none of the mergansers are considered good food.

**American Merganser**

**Field Marks**—A large merganser that shows white underwing surfaces in flight, a white chest, and large white wing patches is a drake American Merganser. On the water, the male shows a white chest and a dark, uncrested head. The female may be identified at close range by its brown head sharply contrasting with its white neck and throat.

This very large merganser is a locally common migrant on some of the larger lakes in the state, especially in the spring. They are seen on rivers and lakes where they feed on fish and other aquatic animal life.

**Red-breasted Merganser**

**Field Marks**—In flight, the dark chest of the male is easily seen.

Like the American Merganser, it has white underwing surfaces and large white wing patches. On the water, the male's reddish chest and dark doubly crested head are distinctive. The female has a brown head blending into a grayish-white throat and neck.

A regular migrant, it is less common than the American Merganser.
Birds Sometimes Mistaken for Ducks or Geese

**WHISTLING SWAN**
The only waterfowl that has *completely white plumage*. Their large size and long neck make the Whistling Swan easy to recognize at any distance. They are protected by law.

**DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT**
Sometimes called “Black Geese,” Cormorants might be mistaken for geese, since they often fly in wedge formation. They may be identified by the strongly hooked bill, *dark color*, *thin neck*, *long tail*, and rapid wing beat. They are silent when in flight, while geese are usually very noisy. Cormorants sit low in the water, with their bill often *pointed upwards*. They nest in colonies at several localities in the state.

**WHITE PELICAN**
A huge, white *water* bird, with *black wing tips*, *long bill*, and a prominent *yellow pouch* which is easily recognized. They fly with their heads held back on their shoulders instead of outstretched like a goose. Many Pelicans nest at Chase Lake Refuge, but non-nesters may be seen throughout the state in the summer.

**GREBES**
Five species of grebes nest in North Dakota. They may be told from ducks on the water by their *long neck*, *sharp bill*, and tailless appearance. One species, the Pied-billed, or “Helldiver,” is very common and has a blunt, rounded bill like a chicken. The grebe pictured is Holboell’s Grebe. They are seldom seen in flight, preferring to escape danger (and observation) by diving.

**COMMON LOON**
Loons are large water birds about the size of small geese, but easily told from them by the *shorter neck* and *pointed bill*. The species found in North Dakota has a *black head*, *white breast* and a *black and white back*. In flight the feet trail out behind the body, and the head is held lower than the level of the body.

**AMERICAN COOT**
Coots, or “Mudhens,” may be recognized by the dark *black-gray body*, *white bill and tail*. They pump their heads back and forth as they swim. When taking off, they run along the water and show a *white border* on the back of the wings. In flight the feet *trail out behind the body*. 
Where to look for ducks in North Dakota

(Map showing spring distribution of ducks in North Dakota, 1948-1951)

Redrawn from NORTH DAKOTA OUTDOORS, April, 1952, p. 11

When to look for waterfowl in North Dakota

(Chart diagramming the months when each species may be found in North Dakota)
Identification Service

The Zoology Department of the North Dakota Agricultural College will be glad to receive specimens for identification, especially those which do not seem to coincide with the species described in this booklet. Send description, or better still the wings, head, and feet Express Collect to:

Department of Zoology
State College Station
Fargo, North Dakota

Indicate when, where, and under what conditions the bird was observed. The sender will receive prompt notification of the identity of the birds sent in.

Suggestions for Further Reading


The author acknowledges suggestions and help he gained from the sketches in Peterson’s “A Field Guide to the Birds,” and from those who have examined the manuscript.

A true conservationist, G. B. Gunlogson, Racine, Wisconsin, made possible the preparation and publication of this booklet.