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MOTTLED DUCK IN NEBRASKA

The two major U.S. populations of Mottled Duck occur in Florida and along the Gulf Coast in Louisiana and Texas, with local breeding inland to "southeast Colorado, western Kansas, Oklahoma (rarely), and northeast Texas" (A.O.U. *Checklist of North American Birds*, Sixth Edition, 1983). Palmer (*Handbook of North American Birds*, Vol. 2, 1976) notes that Mottled Duck bred in 1963 at Cheyenne Bottoms, Kansas, and that some individuals occur inland beyond the usual breeding range during the post-breeding period. Presumably these inland records pertain to birds from the Texas-Louisiana population, as the Florida birds are generally considered non-migratory. Thus the occurrence of Mottled Duck in Nebraska is a possibility, especially in the fall.

There is one Nebraska record, of a female which was winged by William Lemburg while he was hunting along the Loup River in Howard Co. 5 October 1968 (*NBR* 48:88). Mr. Lemburg kept this hen in captivity for some time, raising several broods by mating her with a drake Mottled Duck obtained from Texas.

Mr. Lemburg kindly sent us a color slide of the female, from which we had color prints made. These prints show the head, bill, and wing characters clearly enough for diagnostic identification of the bird as a female Mottled Duck in Definitive Alternate plumage (see Palmer, 1976). This plumage is generally worn from late summer through winter. The photograph was taken in winter.

Key features shown in the photograph are: the bill is "muted orange-yellow with dark olive spots or blotches on upper mandible, concentrated at the middle"; "innermost secondaries are blackish-brown, comparatively pointed, and very narrowly edged whitish buff to pale tan"; speculum essentially as in male, "cobalt-ultramarine or ultramarine-violet, the white band at trailing edge often reduced or absent" (descriptive phrases from Palmer, 1976).

Comment is in order regarding the amount of white bordering the speculum in this species. Bellrose (*Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America*, 1976) shows (plate 8) the speculum of Mottled Duck with a noticeable white bar at the rear of the speculum. Some authors have suggested (see Palmer, 1976) that the white bar is not as prominent in Mottled Duck populations in Florida, and this character has been used to separate the Florida birds and the Texas-Louisiana birds as different subspecies (see A.O.U. *Checklist of North American Birds*, 5th Edition, 1957). However, Phillips examined a very large series of Mottled Duck specimens and concluded that because individual variations within the two populations were greater than between them, the Florida and Texas-Louisiana populations should not be considered taxonomically distinct (J. C. Phillips, *Natural History of the Ducks*, Vol. 2, 1923). The Nebraska bird shows very little, if any, white on the trailing edge of the speculum, with just a pale edging visible on the tips of the secondaries. The possibility that the minimal amount of white in the speculum of the Nebraska bird might indicate it was from non-migratory Florida stock and therefore most likely an escaped bird can be ruled out, as individual variation in the Texas-Louisiana population would be sufficient to account for this feature.

The major identification concern with the Nebraska Mottled Duck (except for possible hybrids, see below) is conclusive separation from American Black Duck. The differences are largely in degree, although one difference which

is dependable is the amount of black bordering the speculum. American Black Duck has "greater secondary coverts bordering speculum (ie anterior edge of speculum,) with black ends, forming a bar or stripe; ... the secondaries of the speculum with broad black ends, ..." (Palmer, 1976) The color photograph of the Nebraska bird shows no observable black either anteriorly or posteriorly bordering the speculum. Of course, a Mottled Duck showing any black in the speculum borders would pose a more difficult identification problem (see plate 8 in Bellrose, 1976). The absence of black in the Nebraska bird's speculum also rules out the possibility that the Nebraska bird was a hybrid of Mottled Duck and American Black Duck. Such hybrids are rare (Palmer, 1976), as one would expect from a study of the ranges of the two species, seeming especially unlikely in the Great Plains.

Other possibilities to consider are hybridization between Mallard and American Black Duck and between Mallard and Mottled Duck. Johnsgard (*Waterfowl of North America*, 1975) states that "female hybrids between mallards and black ducks most resemble mottled ducks, but usually show some white on the greater secondary coverts, especially on the outer web ...". We believe that the absence of white in the greater secondary coverts and on the tail feathers, as well as the unmarkd throat and greenish, mottled bill of the Nebraska bird rules out the possibility of hybrids involving Mallard, while the absence of black in the speculum borders rules out American Black Duck hybrids.

We submitted the color photograph to Paul A. Johnsgard of the University of Nebraska - Lincoln Department of Life Sciences, who confirmed our identification (pers. comm.). Dr. Johnsgard also commented that he could "see no sign of hybrid origin" in the bird's plumage. We would like to thank Dr. Johnsgard for his contribution to this note.

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