

Montana Outdoors PORTRAIT

Common Goldeneye

(*Bucephala clangula*)

By Tom Dickson

Ever notice those white-marked buzz-bombs flying in tight formation up and down the Missouri, Yellowstone, and other major rivers all winter? They're common goldeneyes, hardy mid-sized diving ducks that comprise the end of the annual fall waterfowl migration.

Goldeneyes are sure harbingers of winter. As old-time duck hunters say, "When you see dem goldeneyes, iss time to break out da ice skates, dats fer sure."

Appearance

The common goldeneye's scientific name derives from the Greek word *boukephalos*, which means ox- or buffalo-headed, in reference to the bird's oversized head, and *clangula*, which is Latin for "small noise," a reference to the whistling sound made by the goldeneye's wings in flight.

The bird's common name comes from its bright amber-colored iris (though it's hardly unique among ducks, being also found on ringnecks, redheads, and scaup).

In the air, the drake and hen goldeneye both look much whiter than most ducks, with a white breast and a large white patch on the wing. When on the water, look for the male's dark green-glossed head and white round cheek patch.

The common goldeneye is easily confused with its cousin the Barrow's goldeneye. Usually only biologists can tell the hens apart, but the male Barrow's has a crescent-shaped cheek patch rather than the common's round one. Both species of goldeneyes are strong fliers, and in flight their medium-sized bodies appear stout with short necks and large heads.

Sound

Whistling wings are a trademark of these little rockets, which fly in compact clusters

and are known as "whistlers" by some hunters. When courting, the male makes a distinctively nasal *pee-ik* sound similar to that of the nighthawk.

Food

This duck likes seafood: Fish, aquatic insects, and crustaceans such as snails and crayfish make up most (about 75 percent) of its diet. The rest is seeds, roots, tubers, and other plant material. Strong swimmers, goldeneyes submerge for as long as 40 seconds and dive to depths of 20 feet for food.

Courtship behavior

Male goldeneyes have the most spectacular spring courtship display of any waterfowl, with much head pumping, neck stretching, splashing, and short jumps or flights off the water.

Reproduction

Like wood ducks, goldeneyes nest in the cavities of old or dead trees, often near ponds or lakes. They often return to the same tree year after year to make their nest. The female lines the cavity with down and wood chips before laying an average of nine pale blue-green eggs. Just a few days after hatching, the goldeneye duckling jumps down from the nest cavity to reach the ground or water.

Habitat

Common goldeneyes breed from Alaska, across the forested parts of northern

Canada to Newfoundland, and south to northern Washington, northern North Dakota, northern New York State, and Maine. The birds winter from the southern limits of their breeding range to the Gulf states. In Montana, they are commonly seen this time of year along major rivers.

Migration

These are birds content to stay around cold and ice. They'll stay on a lake literally until the day it freezes up, and then move only as far as a nearby river and stay there until it freezes. Often they'll remain in Montana throughout the winter.

Appeal

They aren't a big part of Montana's overall duck harvest, but they are hunted, especially in late season, says Jim Hansen, FWP Central Flyway biologist. Though some hunters say the birds don't taste good, Hansen says otherwise: "I just had a breast the other day." He says to get rid of any gamey smell, cooks should "cut off the skin and fat."

Status in Montana

The common goldeneye doesn't breed in Montana but rather migrates through. Its cousin, the Barrow's goldeneye, does nest here along rivers and lakes throughout much of southwestern Montana, especially in the Beaverhead Drainage, the Three Forks area, and along the Yellowstone River. ■

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