

What Duck Is That?

Waterfowl hunters are legally required to identify the species and even gender of the birds they shoot. For everyone else, it's simply fun to know which duck is which. By Tom Dickson



MYSTERY FLOCK
Not sure what species these handsome “gray ducks” are? Read on.

A dark shape dropped from the gray-metal clouds, circled once over the decoys, then set its wings to land. I stood up in the blind and fired twice, dropping the bird into a shallow pond. After wading out, I lifted up the...well, to be honest, I had no idea *what* it was. The duck was brown gray and had a gray bill. Wigeon? Gadwall? Ringneck?

That was 35 years ago, when I first started duck hunting. Back then I was happy to bag a duck of any species, but I quickly realized that “just any duck” wouldn’t do.

For one thing, I needed to identify the birds I was shooting because federal and state regulations impose specific limits—and even periodic bans—on certain species and the gender of some species. For instance, in 2018, the daily limit in Montana allows only two hen mallards, one pintail, and two canvasbacks. A hunter had better know what those birds look like—in the air—before firing and possibly committing a federal crime.

With duck hunting, you don’t want to “shoot first and ask questions later.”

Another reason I wanted to identify ducks was for ethical reasons. It seemed wrong to kill a bird without even knowing what it was. That seemed disrespectful to the ducks and to the long tradition of waterfowlers learning to identify ducks.

Finally, I just wanted to know what was

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flying around—during hunting season and the rest of the year. Montana is home to a dozen or so waterfowl species. As someone who loves the outdoors, I was curious about what was sitting on the water or winging its way overhead.

Since that day in the pond blind, I’ve learned from many experienced birders and waterfowlers which duck is which.

PUDDLE DUCKS

Ducks come in two main categories: puddle ducks and divers. Puddle ducks (or dabblers) use shallow ponds, marshes, and rivers more than larger, deeper lakes and reservoirs. They “dabble” or “tip up,” submerging their heads with tails in the air as they feed on vegetation and bugs just below the surface.

From a distance, you can tell puddle ducks by the way they exit and return to the water. With big, broad wings, they rise straight up like a rocket. And those wide wings and slower wingbeats allow them to land on a dime. A puddle duck’s legs are positioned in the middle of its torso, allowing it to waddle across land fairly quickly.

All drake (male) puddle ducks have a brightly colored patch of secondary feathers on the inner, trailing edge of the wing, called a speculum.

Common puddle ducks are mallards, teal (cinnamon, blue-winged, and green-winged), northern pintails, gadwalls, northern shovelers, and American wigeons.

DIVERS

The other duck category is the divers, found on big, open water such as Freezeout, Bowdoin, and Flathead Lakes; Canyon Ferry, Fort Peck, Hebgen, and Ennis Reservoirs; and occasionally the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers.

Divers disappear beneath the surface to feed on wild celery and other underwater vegetation as well as mollusks, crustaceans, insects, and sometimes minnows. Divers have shorter wings and quicker wingbeats and move much faster in the air than puddle ducks. They skid to land and need a running start and furious flapping to get themselves up off the water. That’s one reason they stay more in open areas of big water. Their large feet are positioned farther back on the body, enabling strong swimming but making it much harder for them to walk on land.

Divers include scaup (greater and lesser), buffleheads, goldeneyes, canvasbacks, redheads, ringnecks, and mergansers.

As with any other birds, identifying ducks becomes easier with practice. Birders can use this article to identify the most recognizable characteristics of most duck species. Hunters can use it to identify each duck they shoot. Hunters should keep in mind that mallards make up roughly 75 percent of Montana’s duck harvest each year. When in doubt about a brown duck in the air, assume it’s a hen mallard. You do not want to shoot three of those in a day. 🦆

► Puddle Ducks (Drakes)

Note: During the first month or so of the hunting season, young-of-the-year drakes of all species sometimes haven't fully developed their classic breeding markings. Examples of these "eclipse" drakes include a young blue-winged teal drake yet to develop his trademark white face crescent or a young mallard showing hardly any green in his head.



Mallard

This large duck has a distinctive iridescent green head, a white neck ring, and a brown breast. Identified in flight by the dark head, neck ring, light belly, and light underwings.



Northern Pintail

This slender, midsize duck has narrow wings, a long neck, and long, dark central tail feathers. The head is chocolate brown, and a white stripe extends up from the light breast to either side of the neck. Identified in flight by the long neck and tail.

American Wigeon ("Baldpate")

This midsize duck has a distinctive white forehead (hence the nickname), a green stripe from the eye to the back of the head, and a russet neck. Identified in flight by its white belly and white forewing.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BRANDON KIESLING; DANNY J. BROWN; GARY KRAMER



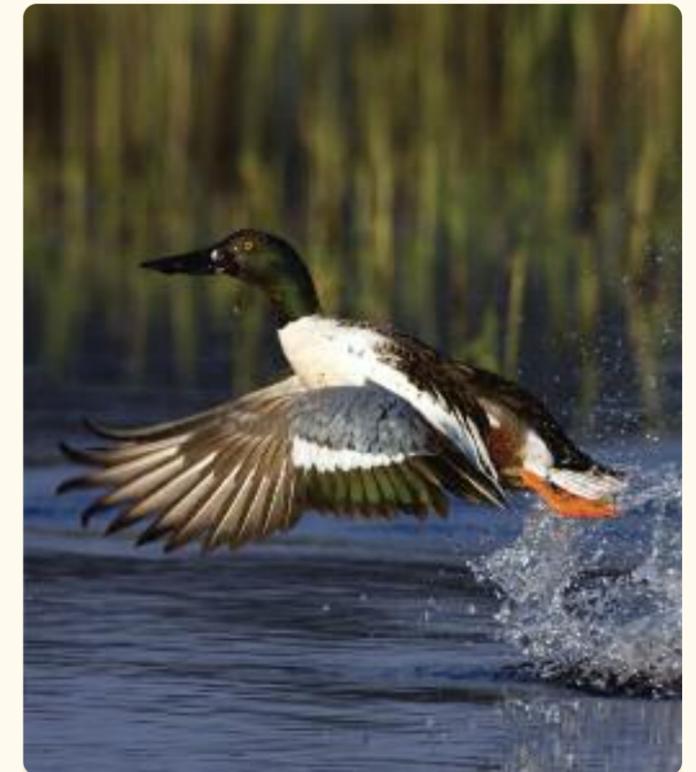
Teal

Three teal species live in Montana. All are small, fast-flying ducks. From left to right: The cinnamon teal is burnt amber colored; the blue-winged teal has a white crescent on either side of its face near the bill; and the green-wing has a dark reddish-brown head with green from the eye to the back of the head. All are identified in flight by small flocks moving low over marshes and rivers, twisting and turning as one unit.



Gadwall ("Gray Duck")

This midsize duck is brown-gray with a white belly and dark gray bill. Look for the distinctive patch of white, black, and russet on the upper wing. Identified in flight by a dark head and chest.



Northern Shoveler ("Spoonbill")

This midsize duck has a green head like a mallard's but a white breast, reddish-brown flanks, and distinctively large, spatulalike bill. Identified in flight by its dark head, light chest, and big bill.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; MICHAEL FURTYMAN; GARY KRAMER; KEN ARCHER; SHUTTERSTOCK

▶ Diving Ducks (Drakes)



Goldeneye (“Whistler”)

The two goldeneye species—common and Barrow’s—are stocky, midsize ducks with bright white bodies; tall, dark, peaked heads; amber eyes; stubby dark gray bills; and white cheek markings. They are often seen on large rivers in late season. Identified in flight by a bright white belly and chest and distinctive whistling sound made by their rapid wingbeats.



Redhead

This midsize duck has a bright, reddish-brown head, blue bill, gray body, and black chest. Difficult to identify in flight. Often confused with the canvasback.



Ringneck (“Ringbill”)

This small duck has a dark, peaked head and a white ring around the front of a blue-gray bill. Difficult to identify in flight.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHRIS MCGOWAN; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK



Scaup (“Bluebill”)

The two scaup species, lesser and greater, look similar. Both species are midsize ducks with a dark head, chest, and rump, with white flanks and undersides, and yellow eyes. Identified in flight by the white wing stripe on the upper wings, bright white belly, and white underwings.



Common Merganser (“Fish Duck”)

Of Montana’s three mergansers—common, hooded, and red-breasted—the most frequently seen is the common. This large, long, slender duck has a black back and white chest. The dark green head sports a distinctive pointed, bright red bill. Identified in flight by its straight body and neck and narrow beak.



Canvasback (“Can”)

This large duck has red eyes and a pale body, black chest, and distinctive flat forehead that slopes to a black bill. Identified in flight by extensive white on its wings, chest, and back and the large, dark reddish-brown head. Often confused with the redhead.

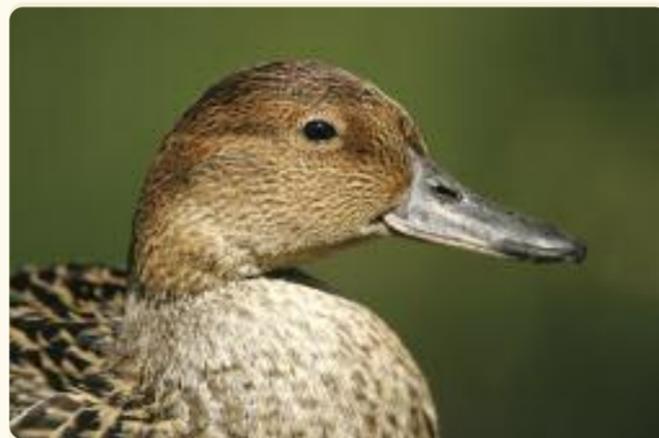
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK; KEN ARCHER

► What hen is that?

Hens can be especially tough to identify. Their head and bill offer helpful clues:



Mallard
Brown head, black eye stripe, and orange bill with dark center.



Pintail
Gray head and dark gray bill.



Gadwall
Brown-gray head with a slender orange bill, dark on top.



Wigeon
Brown head with a small, black-tipped gray bill.



Teal (Cinnamon teal shown)
All have gray bills, the cinnamon's being longer than those of the other teal species and similar in shape to a shoveler's.



Shoveler
Brown head with a large, orange, spatulalike bill.



Canvasback
Brown head with a flat forehead sloping to a long, dark gray beak.



Redhead
Round, brown head and a gray beak with a dark tip.



Scaup (Greater scaup shown)
Brown head with a white patch behind a gray bill.



Ringneck
Brown head with white ring around the front of a blue-gray bill.



Common Goldeneye
Brown head, amber eyes, and a short, dark gray beak.



Common Merganser
Crested, reddish-brown head and a red bill that is slender and pointed.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, MERLE ANN LOMAN, SHARON DEWARTHANSEN, SHUTTERSTOCK

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, DAVE MCCREE, SHUTTERSTOCK