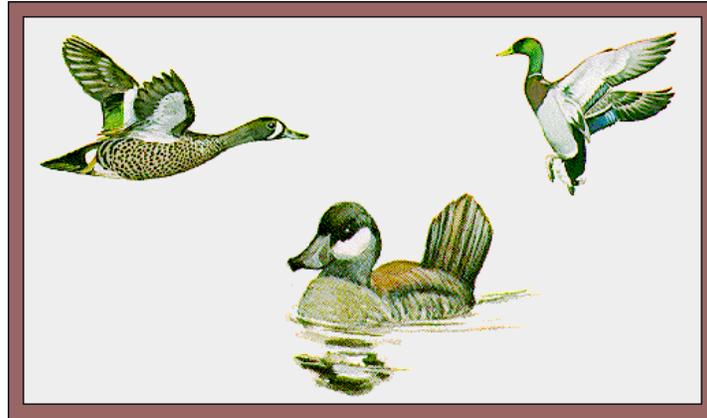


Excerpted from:

Hines, Robert W. No Date. Ducks at a distance: A waterfowl identification guide. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southwest Natural and Cultural Heritage Association, Albuquerque, NM. Jamestown, ND: Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center Online.
<http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/tools/duckdist/index.htm> (Version 04NOV97).

Ducks at a Distance: A Waterfowl Identification Guide



Identification is Important

Identifying waterfowl gives many hours of enjoyment to millions of people. This guide will help you recognize birds on the wing - it emphasizes their fall and winter plumage patterns as well as size, shape, and flight characteristics. It does not include local names. Recognizing the species of ducks and geese can be rewarding to birdwatchers and hunters - and the ducks.

Hunters can contribute to their own sport by not firing at those species that are either protected or scarce, and needed as breeders to restore the flocks. It can add to their daily limit; when extra birds of certain species can be taken legally, hunters who know their ducks on the wing come out ahead. Knowing a mallard from a merganser has another side: gourmets prefer a corn-fed mallard to the fish duck.

What to Look For

Differences in size, shape, plumage patterns and colors, wing beat, flocking behavior, voice, and habitat - all help to distinguish one species from another.

Flock maneuvers in the air are clues. Mallards, pintails, and wigeon form loose groups; teal and shovelers flash by in small, compact bunches; at a distance canvasbacks shift from waving lines to temporary V's.

Closer up, individual silhouettes are important. Variations of head shapes and sizes, lengths of wings and tails, and fat bodies or slim can be seen.

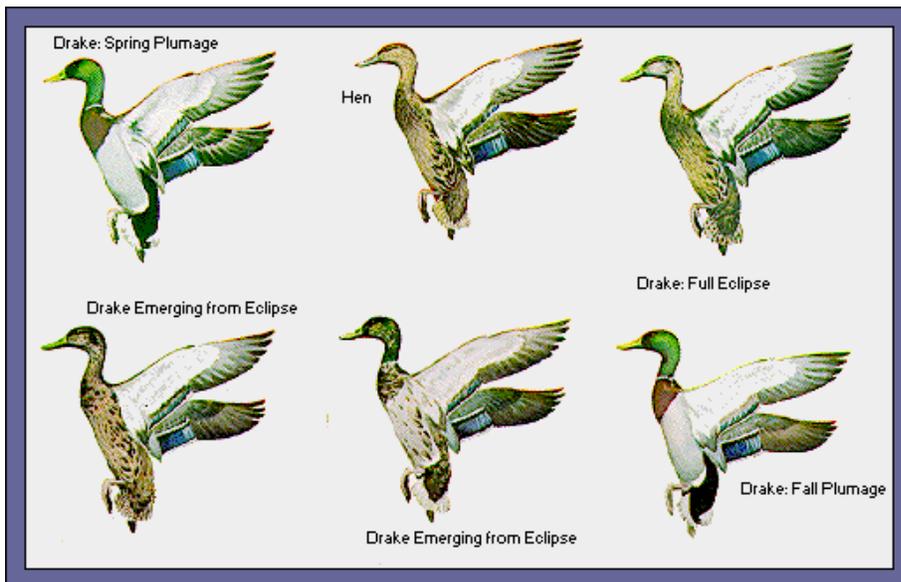
Within shotgun range, color areas can be important. Light conditions might make them look different, but their size and location are positive keys.

The sound of their wings can help as much as their calls. Flying goldeneyes make a whistling sound; wood ducks move with a swish; canvasbacks make a steady rushing sound. Not all ducks quack; many whistle, squeal, or grunt.

Although not a hard and fast rule, different species tend to use different types of habitat. Puddle ducks like shallow marshes and creeks while divers prefer larger, deeper, and more open waters.

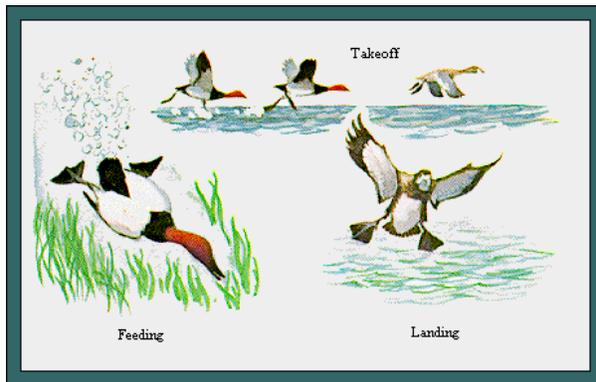
Eclipse Plumage

Most ducks shed their body feathers twice each year. Nearly all drakes lose their bright plumage after mating, and for a few weeks resemble females. This hen-like appearance is called the eclipse plumage. The return to breeding coloration varies in species and individuals of each species. Blue-winged teal and shovelers may retain the eclipse plumage until well into the winter. Wing feathers are shed only once a year; wing colors are always the same.



Diving Ducks versus Puddle Ducks

Diving Ducks



Diving ducks frequent the larger, deeper lakes and rivers, and coastal bays and inlets. The colored wing patches of these birds lack the brilliance of the speculums of puddle ducks. Since many of them have short tails, their huge, paddle feet may be used as rudders in flight, and are often visible on flying birds. When launching into flight, most of this group patter along the water before becoming airborne.

They feed by diving, often to considerable depths. To escape danger, they can travel great distances underwater, emerging only enough to show their head before submerging again. Their diets of fish, shellfish, mollusks, and aquatic plants make them second choice, as a group, for sportsmen. Canvasbacks and redheads fattened on eel grass or wild celery are notable exceptions.

Since their wings are smaller in proportion to the size and weight of their bodies, they have a more rapid wingbeat than puddle ducks.

Examples: [Canvasback](#), [Redhead](#), [Ring-necked Duck](#), [Lesser Scaup](#), [Goldeneye](#), [Bufflehead](#), [Ruddy Duck](#), [Mergansers](#)

Puddle Ducks



Puddle ducks are typically birds of fresh, shallow marshes and rivers rather than of large lakes and bays. They are good divers, but usually feed by dabbling or tipping rather than submerging.

The speculum, or colored wing patch, is generally iridescent and bright, and often a telltale field mark.

Any duck feeding in croplands will likely be a puddle duck, for most of this group are sure-footed and can walk and run well on land. Their diet is mostly vegetable, and grain-fed mallards or pintails or acorn-fattened wood ducks are highly regarded as food.

Examples: [Mallard](#), [Pintail](#), [Gadwall](#), [American Wigeon](#), [Shoveler](#), [Blue-winged Teal](#), [Cinnamon Teal](#), [Green-winged Teal](#), [Wood Duck](#), [Black Duck](#)