

Len's Lens - Volume 1:

# The Duck Family

by Len Blumin



# Dedications

To my wife Patti -  
Partner in life and birding

To Rich Stallcup (1944-2012)  
Friend and teacher

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I've been fortunate to bird on trips led by many expert birders, to whom I am greatly indebted. Rich Stallcup most of all, but a host of others, including Josiah Clark, Rich Cimino, Terry Colborn, Jules Evens, Harry Fuller, Keith Hansen, David Herlocker, Lisa Hug, John Kelly, John Klobas, Bob Power, Mark Pretti, Dave Shuford, John Sterling, Bob Stewart, and David Wimpfheimer.

Special thanks to the many birding friends who have taught me so much, and so patiently. To mention just a few: Bob Battagin, Gordon Bennett, Kate Carolan, Peter Colasanti, Rigdon Currie, Maryanne Flett, Leslie Flint, Susan Kelly, Dan Murphy, Don Reinberg, Jim White, and Will Wilson.

## Len's Lens - The Ducks

**Order:** *Anseriformes* – Ducks, Geese, Swans, and Screamers

**Family:** *Anatidae* – Ducks, Geese and Swans.

This volume features some of my favorite shots of waterfowl, taken with a small camera aimed through the eyepiece of a spotting scope, which is called “digiscoping”. Most of the photos were taken in the San Francisco Bay Area at locations frequented by the public. Other photos are from Florida, Connecticut, Texas, and Arizona. The focus here is on the “true ducks” plus some geese and swans.

The True Ducks are grouped into subfamilies, roughly according to evolutionary relationships (see inside back cover). Current taxonomy sorts them into Dabbling Ducks, Bay (Diving) Ducks, Sea Ducks, Stiff-tails and Whistling Ducks, a schema that will be observed in this book. Swans and Geese are grouped into their own subfamilies and tribes.

The emphasis is on the commonly seen ducks of California, but some Eastern U. S. species, hybrids and vagrant species have been included for better coverage the subject.

Photos from 2003-2018.

Photos and text: Len Blumin

## Brief Duck Taxonomy (adapted from Sibley Guide and AOU Checklist)

The **Order Anseriformes**, (Ducks, Geese, Swans and Screamers), is now placed early in the evolutionary sequence of the birds, **Class Aves**, so you'll find them near the front in newer guidebooks.

Here we'll deal only with the **Family Anatidae**, which excludes the Screamers, and we've arbitrarily moved the Ducks in front of the Geese and Swans. It's convenient to organize the Duck family into **Sub-families (-ini)** and **Tribes (-idae)**, as follows:

**Dabbling Ducks – *Anatini* pp. 6-29**

**Bay Ducks (“Pochards”) – *Aythini* pp. 30-43**

**Sea Ducks – *Mergini* pp. 44-63**

**Stiff-tailed Ducks – *Oxyurini* pp. 64-65**

**Whistling Ducks – *Dendrocygnidae* p. 66**

**Geese – *Anserini* pp. 67-74**

**Swans – *Cygnini* pp. 75-76**

(See inside back cover for graphical representation of the duck taxonomy)

## **Dabbling Ducks – *Anatini***

The Dabblers are a sub-family of ducks that feed mostly near the water's surface, sometimes tipping to reach food just below, or forging along the shore and in nearby uplands. The genus *Anas* was split into new and smaller genera. Wood Duck also considered a dabbler.

Dabblers are found on lakes and ponds throughout the U.S., and some Species are seen along our coasts.

- Wood Duck – *Aix sponsa* p. 6-7**
- Mallard – *Anas platyrhynchos* (two types) p. 8-10**
- Mottled Duck – *Anas fulvigula* p. 11**
- Gadwall – *Mareca strepera* p. 12-13**
- American Black Duck – *Anas rubripes* p.14**
- Falcated Duck – *Mareca falcata* p. 15**
- Northern Pintail – *Anas acuta* p. 16-17**
- American Wigeon – *Mareca americana* p. 18-19**
- Eurasian Wigeon – *Mareca penelope* p. 20-21**
- Northern Shoveler – *Spatula clypeata* p. 22-23**
- Garganey – *Spatula querquedula* (not shown)**
- Cinnamon Teal – *Spatula cyanoptera* p. 24-25**
- Blue-winged Teal – *Spatula discors* p. 26-27**
- Green-winged Teal – *Anas crecca* (two types) p. 28-29**

## Wood Duck – *Aix sponsa*



This shy cavity-nesting duck is seen on small ponds or along quiet streams, always with good cover nearby. They are easily flushed, so best to let them approach as you wait silently and motionless.



(Above) - 2 males and a female float along Putah Creek at Lake Solano Park.

(Right) - The female with her broad white eye ring is striking in her own way.



(Left) - Juvenile Wood Duck perched on a log almost too close for a photo. White eye ring might suggest a female, but juveniles of both sexes resemble the adult female.

## Mallard – *Anas platyrhynchos*



A pair of mallards swims along in relaxed fashion. Mallards are a species that have adapted well to human presence and are often seen in urban and suburban settings. Note the colors of their bills, and the strong line crossing the eye of the female (“trans-ocular”). The black in the central portion of the upper mandible is typical for the mallard female.



(Right) – The male mallard in eclipse plumage resembles the female, but the dull yellow color of his bill gives up his proper identity. August, Marin County.



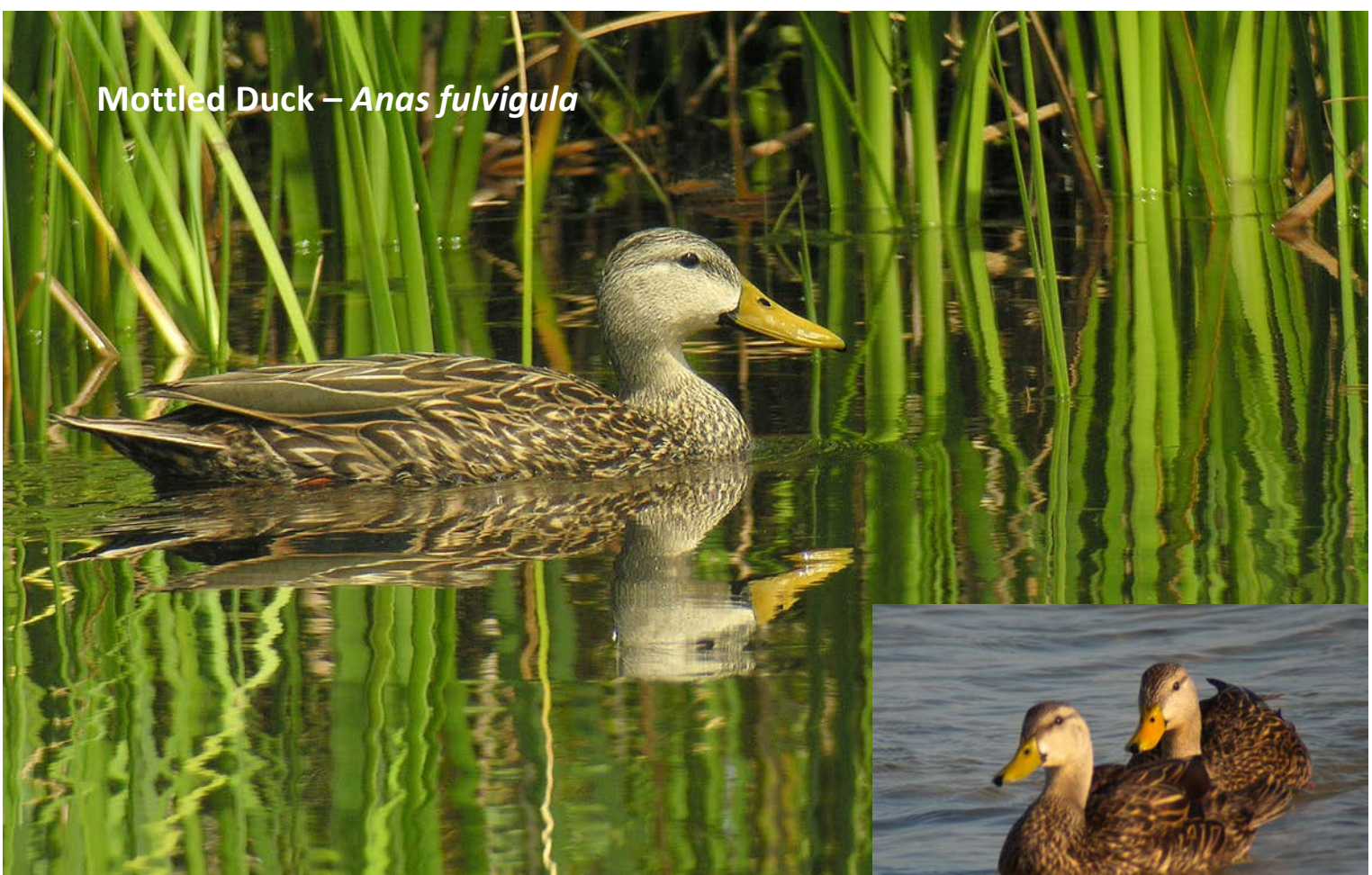
(Left) – A female mallard preens, partially opening her wing to reveal the deep blue speculum with bands of white.

The Mexican Mallard is a subspecies of Mallard, where the male looks much like the female, differing mainly in the bill color. Northern Mallards, with their green heads, interbreed freely with the plainer Mexican Mallard, so much so that it is said that there are no “pure” Mexican Mallards left in North America. The drake has the clean yellow-green bill, whereas the hen’s bill is more orange-green. Note the fine streaking on the necks. The female here exhibits some aberrant white feathers on her head.



The same male Mexican Mallard shown above takes a relaxed swim on this small pond in southeast Arizona. These ducks are seen only in southern Arizona and southwestern parts of Texas. They are very similar to the Mottled Duck of Florida and the Gulf Coast, but they lack the black spot on the bill at the gape.

Mottled Duck – *Anas fulvigula*



The Mottled Duck belongs to what might be called the “Mallard complex”, a group of closely related and similar-looking dabblers, which includes the American Black Duck and the Mexican Mallard. The males tend to have yellow bills, females orange. Similar to Mexican Mallard, but the bill has a black margin where it joins the face, as well as a black spot at the “gape”. Larger photo is from Ft. De Soto Park, Florida Gulf Coast. The pair at lower right was seen at Tarpon Springs, Florida.

Gadwall – *Mareca strepera*



The female Gadwall looks rather like a female Mallard, and in fact the two species sometimes interbreed. The orange on the bill is distributed mostly along the bill sides in the Gadwall hen, whereas the Mallard hen shows a more mottled bill pattern, often with black in the middle. Lastly, the Mallard female has a stronger dark line through the eye.

## Gadwall – *Mareca strepera*



The male Gadwall in breeding plumage is worth close study, as his understated colors create a subtle beauty seen on few other dabblers. Note the two-toned head with steep forehead, shingled breast, vermiculated flanks, black butt, and soft fawn-colored scapulars.

## American Black Duck – *Anas rubripes*

(Right) – Female Black Duck with olive bill. Mallard genes have been introduced in many Black Ducks, but this one seems to have escaped that fate. Taken on a pond near the entry of Hammonasset State Beach, CT.



(Left) – Group of Black Ducks at Hammonasset. Dark bill color suggests they are all females or juveniles, perhaps a family group.

## Falcated Duck – *Mareca falcata*



The male Falcated Duck shown here was only the third California sighting of this Asian species. It was seen by many for several weeks at the Colusa Refuge, in December 2011, and returned in Dec. 2012. Note the sickle-shaped tertial feathers toward the rear, and the “green flash” of the dark plumage of the side of the head. It was once called the Falcated Teal, and is related to the Gadwall.

## Northern Pintail – *Anas acuta*



The Northern Pintail male exudes elegance, from the finely trimmed bill to the tip of his long “pin” tail. The understated chocolate brown head and graceful white neck stripe are the perfect complement to the softly draped scapular feathers. The Pintail is an accomplished and speedy flyer, known for dramatic “courtship flights”. We’re lucky that many choose to winter in Northern California, especially on refuges in the Central Valley.

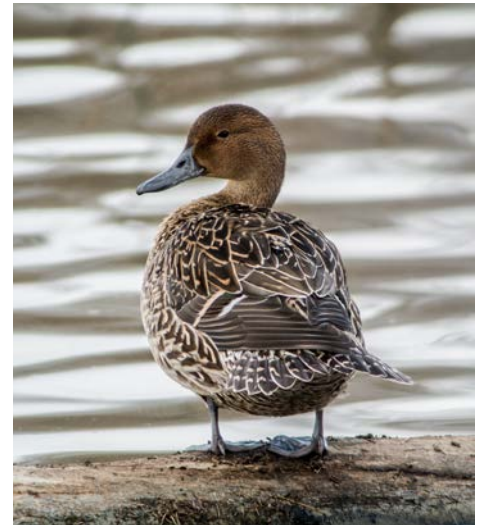


## Northern Pintail – *Anas acuta*



(Above) – Male Northern Pintail seen from the viewing platform of the Colusa NWR.

(Right) The pintail hen has a pale face with a subdued trans-ocular stripe.



**American Wigeon – *Mareca americana***



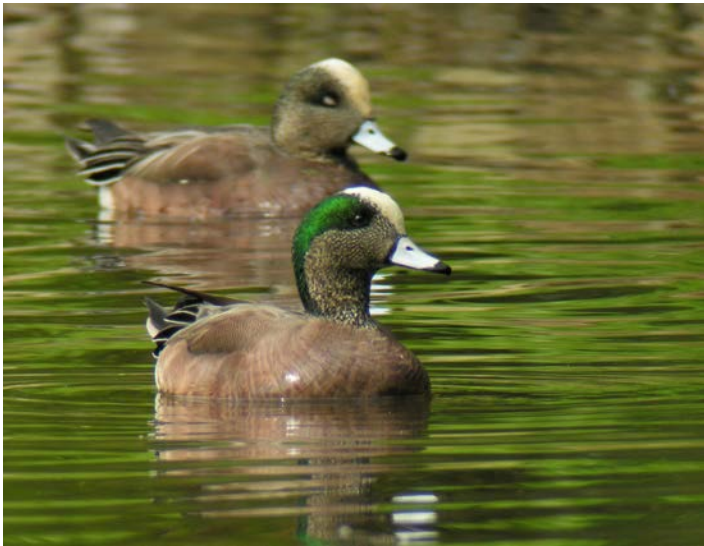
If you see a flock of ducks grazing *near* a pond there is a good chance that they are American Wigeons, as this species often forages out of the water, like geese. The dark feathers on the upper half of the male's head usually show a green iridescence, but if the light is just right you may be lucky enough to see a beautiful golden copper hue, as above.



**Left:** A pair of American Wigeons engages in tandem courtship swimming. Their neatly trimmed bills are similar, but the female is more cryptic, and shows less black at the rear.

**Below left:** Male wigeons, one with good iridescence.

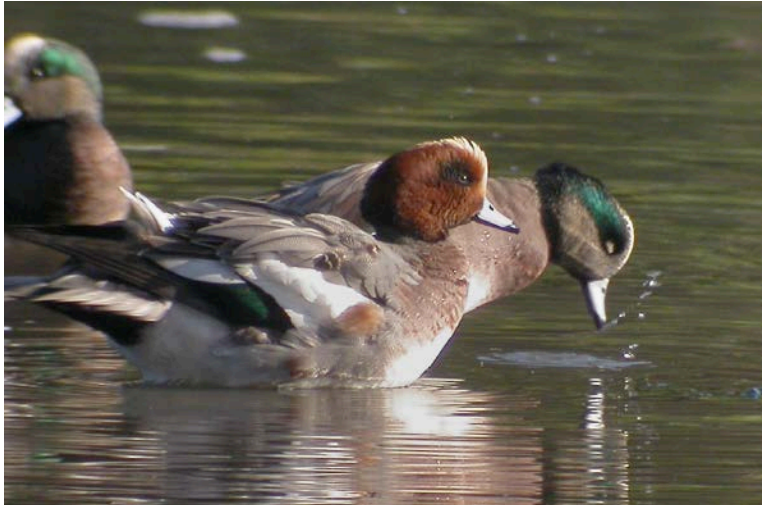
**Below right:** The male seen above does a display to impress the female. Note the white axillaries.



Eurasian Wigeon – *Mareca penelope*



Luckily for us on the west coast, the Eurasian Wigeon is now seen more regularly; some speculate that this sister species to the American Wigeon may already be breeding in Alaska. The handsome male is shown here. Not only is his cinnamon head very different from the American Wigeon's, but note also the gray color of the side, becoming reddish mainly forward near the breast. A blush of green near the eye is not unusual, and doesn't suggest a hybrid.



(Left) - A male Eurasian Wigeon hangs out with a male American Wigeon at Bolinas Lagoon, which is one of the best spots in California to find the Eurasian Wigeons in the winter. Several are often present, and once 15 were tallied (RS)!

(Right) - A close look at the flank of this male Eurasian Wigeon shows the fine wavy black lines that appear plain gray at a distance. Note the sharp change in color from the gray flank to the warm color of the breast.



## Northern Shoveler – *Spatula clypeata*



The green head sheen, huge black bill and chestnut flank make the male Shoveler unmistakable. The white breast will be a clue even at a great distance. Shovelers feed at the surface more than most dabblers, “chewing” on vegetation. They sometimes form a group carousel, swimming in a circle to create an eddy to bring food items up from below, the way a single Phalarope often does. The Shoveler is one of our three dabbler species that sports a powder blue wing patch, easily seen in flight. The others are the Cinnamon Teal and Blue-winged Teals. An Asian teal named Garganey also has the blue patch, but is rarely seen here.



### **Northern Shoveler**

The female Northern Shoveler. Note the lamellae at the edges of her massive bill. As she dabbles on the surface she'll fill her mouth with surface water and then use her tongue to squeeze out the water, trapping food material in the lamellae, kind of like a baleen whale.

## Cinnamon Teal - *Spatula cyanoptera*



(Left) - Rafts of duckweed provide an easy lunch for a pair of Cinnamon Teals at Ellis Creek, Petaluma, CA. The vegetation around the water treatment ponds provides ample cover.

We're fortunate to see many pairs of Cinnamon Teal on our ponds in Northern California, where some pairs will stay and breed locally. They bond early in the season and often stay close. Cinnamon Teal are seen mostly in the Western U.S. Note the spatulate bill shape. The female in the photo to the right is displaying for the male, who follows her closely.







### **Cinnamon Teal**

The male Cinnamon Teal is a striking creature, with his bold red eye and rich cinnamon plumage. Both male and female display a large powder blue wing patch, along with a green speculum seen near the trailing edge of the wing.

(Right) – Male Cinnamon teal preens, unfolding the wing to show the inner flight feathers, including the green speculum.



Blue-winged Teal – *Spatula discors*



The Blue-winged Teal is a treat to find in Northern California, although it is commonly seen in other parts of the country. The male with the white facial crescent stands out from other dabbling ducks. This species can be a bit shy, and often forages or rests near edges of ponds and marshes. The gray head feathers sometime shine with gold and mauve tints when the light strikes just right.



### **Blue-wing Teal – male and female**

A pair of Blue-winged Teal preens synchronously on a quiet pond in Texas. The blue wing patch can be seen on the male, as well as the bright “hip” patch near the rump. Many birds exhibit similar synchronous behavior. The female has a more defined trans-ocular stripe than that seen on the otherwise similar Cinnamon Teal female.



Three views of the male American Green-winged Teal. The broad green patch extending back from the eye can appear deep purple when the light changes. Note the prominent vertical white shoulder bar, which can be seen at a distance.

**Green-winged Teal - *Anas crecca***



The male Green-winged above appears to lack the white shoulder bar, which is less apparent when he is viewed from certain angles. Check in a variety of postures to look for the horizontal bar of the Common Teal (following).

The Eurasian Green-winged Teal, also known as the Common Teal, is a Green-winged subspecies found in small numbers along our coasts. Note the absence of a shoulder bar, and the presence of a white bar along the wing. In most birds the green stripe on the face is outlined by thin white stripes.



The Green-winged Teal is our smallest dabbling duck, and like the Shoveler feeds mostly on the water's surface. Note the rather dainty bill, which can help in identifying the female Green-winged (not shown).

Both American and Common Green-winged subspecies share the handsome rufous and green pattern on the head. A crest is sometimes seen at the back of the head in certain postures.

## **Bay Ducks / Pochards – Aythini**

The Bay Ducks are a group of diving ducks in the Genus *Aythya*, and are sometimes called Pochards. There are 15 species worldwide, of which 7 have been seen in the U.S., although the Common Pochard occurs only rarely on the West Coast. They can be seen wintering on coastal bays in large numbers, but many are also seen inland on marshes and lakes. At times the lucky birder can see 6 *Aythya* species at Lake Merritt in Oakland, including the rare Tufted Duck.

**Canvasback x Redhead – *Aythya* hybrid p. 31**

**Canvasback – *Aythya valisineria* pp. 32-33**

Common Pochard – *Aythya ferina* (only 3 California records)

**Redhead – *Aythya Americana* pp. 34-35**

**Tufted Duck – *Aythya fuligula* pp. 36-37**

**Ring-necked Duck – *Aythya collaris* pp. 38-39**

**Greater Scaup – *Aythya marila* pp. 40-41**

**Lesser Scaup – *Aythya affinis* pp. 42-43**

## Canvasback x Redhead hybrid – *Aythya sp.*

Interbreeding between *Aythya* species occurs regularly, although not as commonly as in the dabblers. At first glance this male looks like a Canvasback, with red eye and characteristic profile, but the black tip of the gray bill and the gray body color led the experts to conclude that Redhead genes are present. Taken in San Rafael, California.

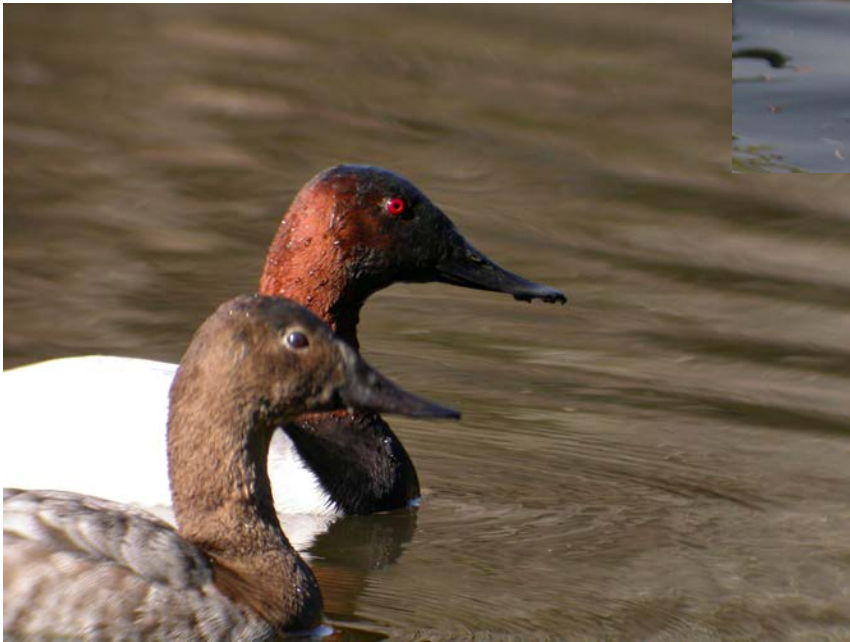


The closer view show that the gray bill becomes almost white just before the black at the tip, forming a blurred “ring” in the manner of the Redhead and Ring-necked Duck bills.



### **Canvasback – *Aythya valisineria***

The bodies of both the male and female Canvasbacks are lighter in color than the other Bay Ducks. The male's red eye and chestnut head, along with the bill shape, make this an easy species to identify.



The warm chestnut of the male's head and neck becomes gradually black on the forehead and near the bill. These ducks will often tilt down like a dabbler, and then use their feet to paddle furiously at the surface to keep their head down in order to gather plant material at the bottom of the pond.



## Canvasback – *Aythya valisineria*



The Canvasback female is perhaps the most attractive of the Pochard hens, with soft browns and grays that echo the colors of the male. Her white eye ring is prominent here, a feature seen also in the Ring-necked Duck female. The head profile here shows the beautiful continuous curve from the forehead to the tip of the bill.



### **Redhead – *Aythya americana***

The Redhead, a.k.a. “American Pochard”, was once seen regularly in small numbers in the Bay Area, but less so in recent years. Their overall numbers are healthy, with many wintering in the Gulf Coast and scattered lakes and ponds across the lower U.S. and into Mexico. Colors in this male are much like the Common Pochard, which differs mainly in having a bill and head profile more like the Canvasback.



The female Redhead has the look of a Greater Scaup female, with brown colors and rounded head, but the bill gives her away. Scaups have a white margin of feathers on the face where the bill joins, and lack a white ring near the end of the bill. The Ring-necked female has a similar ring on her bill, but the lower brown on the flank ends in an upward “spur”, and her head shape is more squared off in back.

## Tufted Duck –

### *Aythya fuligula*

The Tufted Duck is a rare but regular vagrant to both the east and west coasts. It seems as though most we see are males, but that's probably because the female blends better with the other *Aythya* females. The tuft is the obvious hallmark, but another good feature is the very white flank, ending in an upward spur as on the Ring-necked Duck.



The black feathers on the head of the Tufted Duck often have a purple sheen, similar to that of the male Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Duck. Like many of the male *Aythya* ducks, the Tufted Duck has a pretty yellow-orange iris.



### **Tufted Duck – *Aythya fuligula***

The ponytail tuft varies in length, sometimes touching the back as on this handsome male. Females also have tufts, although not as showy. The Tufted Duck often associates with a flock of Scaups, so it's a good idea to scan such flocks for a duck with a black back, and then check further to see if you've spotted a Tufted Duck or a Ring-neck Duck, both of which have black backs, at least on the males.



### **Ring-necked Duck – *Aythya collaris***

Here we see the squared off head profile of the Ring-necked Duck. Additional field marks are the white rings at the base of the bill and near the tip, the gray flank ending in an upward white spur, and the rarely seen “ring neck”, as in the photo to the right. This is one very spiffy duck species.





### **Ring-necked Duck – *Aythya collaris***

The female Ring-necked Duck echoes some of the features of the male. We see a similar flat profile along the back of the head, as well as a white ring near the end of the bill. The light brown of the flank ends at the front in an upward pointing spur, which appears white on the male. Also note the white around the base of the bill where it joins the face, similar to that feature seen on the Scaups. The white ring around the eye was striking in this female from Golden Gate Park.



### **Greater Scaup – *Aythya marila***

The Greater Scaup is found near our coasts in winter, sometimes foraging on bays in flocks numbering in the thousands. The individual here shows some of the important features that distinguish the Greater from the Lesser Scaup. Greater often shows a green sheen on his rounded head, cleaner white on the flanks, and finer barring on the back. The bill on the Greater is also larger and thicker. There may be a slight “bump” on the head profile, but it is further back towards the occiput, and less pronounced than the prominent peak often seen on the Lesser Scaup. The black “nail” at the tip of the bill is usually wider, best judged on a frontal view.



### Greater Scaup - juvenile

The young Greater Scaup has a light brown iris, which becomes bright yellow over a 2-year period. It also lacks the well-defined white ring at the base of the bill. The tip of the bill here lacks the large black nail of the adult. The rounded head is typical for Greater Scaup. This is probably a female, taken on Nov. 5, 2012. By November a young male would likely show some adult male plumage.

The Greater Scaup female to the right is in alternate (breeding) plumage, showing a large clean white border where the bill joins the face. The bill appears more thick and spatulate than that of the Lesser Scaup, and the rounded head completes the picture.

## Lesser Scaup – *Aythya affinis*



The Lesser Scaup is often seen in bays, or near the shore on the ocean. The head profile usually shows a bump on the crown, in contrast to the more rounded profile usually seen on the Greater Scaup. Note also the purple sheen, small black “nail” at the tip of the bill, and vermiculated gray on the flank. The bill is not as thick or spatulate as that on the Greater Scaup.

## Lesser Scaup – *Aythya affinis*



Another shot of a Lesser Scaup male. Note the small black nail at the tip of the bill, the straight sides of the bill (rather than spatulate), and gray on the flanks. The cheeks of the Lesser are less prominent than the “chipmunk cheeks” of the Greater Scaup.

## **Sea Ducks and Mergansers – *Mergini***

The Sea Ducks are a diverse group of diving ducks that includes the Eiders, Scoters, and Mergansers, plus singular species such as the Long-tailed Duck and the Harlequin Duck. The Eiders (omitted here) prefer cold northern waters. On California's coast we see great numbers of scoters, often sharing our bays with Scaups and Mergansers.

**Harlequin Duck – *Histrionicus histrionicus* p. 45**

**Long-tailed Duck – *Clangula clangula* p. 46**

**Surf Scoter – *Melanitta perspicillata* pp. 47-49**

**Black Scoter – *Melanitta americana* p. 50-51**

**White-winged Scoter – *Melanitta fusca* p. 52**

**Common Goldeneye – *Bucephala clangula* p. 53**

**Barrow's Goldeneye – *Bucephala islandica* p. 54**

**Barrow's Goldeneye x Hood Merganser Hybrid p. 55**

**Bufflehead – *Bucephala* pp. 56-57**

**Hooded Merganser – *Lophodytes cucullatus* p. 58-59**

**Common Merganser – *Mergus merganser* p. 60**

**Red-breasted Merganser – *Mergus serrator* p. 61**

**Smew – *Mergellus albellus* p. 62-63**

**Ruddy Duck – *Oxyura jamaicensis* pp. 64-65**

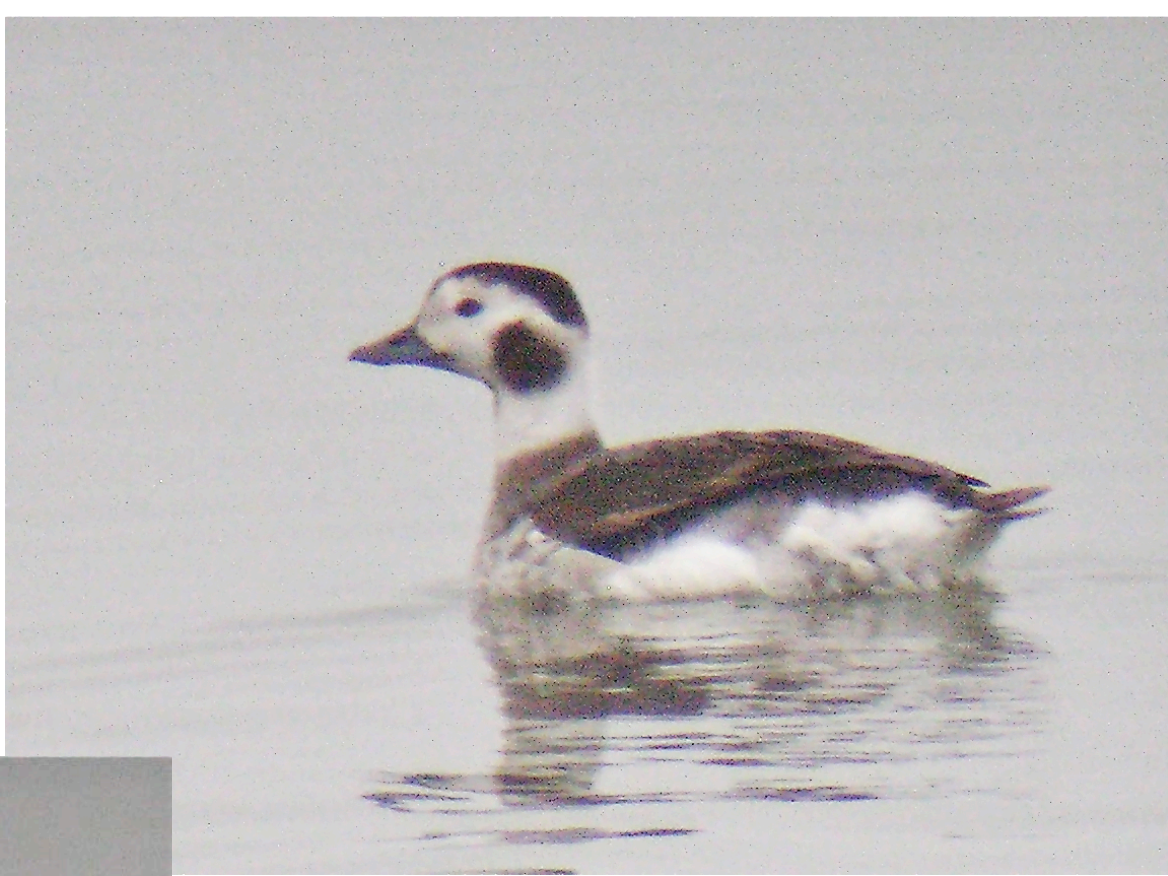
**Black-bellied Whistling Duck – *Dendrocygna autumnalis* p. 66**



### **Harlequin Duck – *Histrionicus histrionicus***

The showy Harlequin Duck prefers more northern waters, but is seen regularly as far south as San Francisco Bay in small numbers. A rich chestnut on the flank and crown complements the stark black and white markings. The female (not shown) has a prominent spot in the auriculars. They love rough water and often swim near rocky shorelines along the coast. Monotypic genus.





**Long-tailed Duck – *Clangula hyemalis*  
(Previously named Oldsquaw)**

Like the Harlequin, the Long-tailed Duck is in a monotypic genus, so it has no close relatives. Breeding range is Holarctic, and it winters along northern coastlines and the Great Lakes. The Long-tailed Duck dives for mollusks, and is said to be able to reach a depth of 200 feet! It has a complicated molt and plumage cycle. The brief male alternate plumage is present only in winter, then molted in spring. We rarely see males with a long tail in the Bay Area. Unfortunately, these photos of an adult female were taken at a significant distance, which limits clarity.



### **Surf Scoter – *Melanitta perspicillata***

Our Surf Scoters breed in Alaska and northern Canada and in winter are seen in large numbers along both U.S. coasts, flying together in long lines and rafting up on bays in large numbers. The unmistakable male has a white patch on the back of his head and a brightly patterned bill. Surf Scoters are rapid fliers, reaching 70 mph, and the males' wings produce a warbling whistle that can be heard at a great distance. They eat mostly mollusks, but will take other marine organisms and even some plant material. Numbers are plentiful, but their habit of forming a large flock in bays makes them vulnerable to oil spills.

## Surf Scoter - *Melanitta perspicillata*



(Above) - A pair of female Surf Scoters swims together. In winter they seem to segregate loosely by sex, not forming pairs until reaching their breeding grounds. Note the white patches on the face and the flat dark crown. Bill not as thick as the male's.

(Left) - A first winter male Surf Scoter is developing the male's alternate plumage features, with pale iris and multi-colored bill. Compare to photo on next page.





Surf Scoter – Male



### **Black Scoter – *Melanitta americana***

The yellow-orange knob on the base of the Black Scoter's bill can be seen from a great distance. The common name here was once "American Scoter", and it was lumped with the Black Scoter of Europe as the "Common Scoter". The 2 types have different bills, and don't interbreed, so they were split to separate species, resulting in a total of 4 Scoter species.

At right we see the female Black Scoter, with extensive white on the face like a Ruddy Duck.



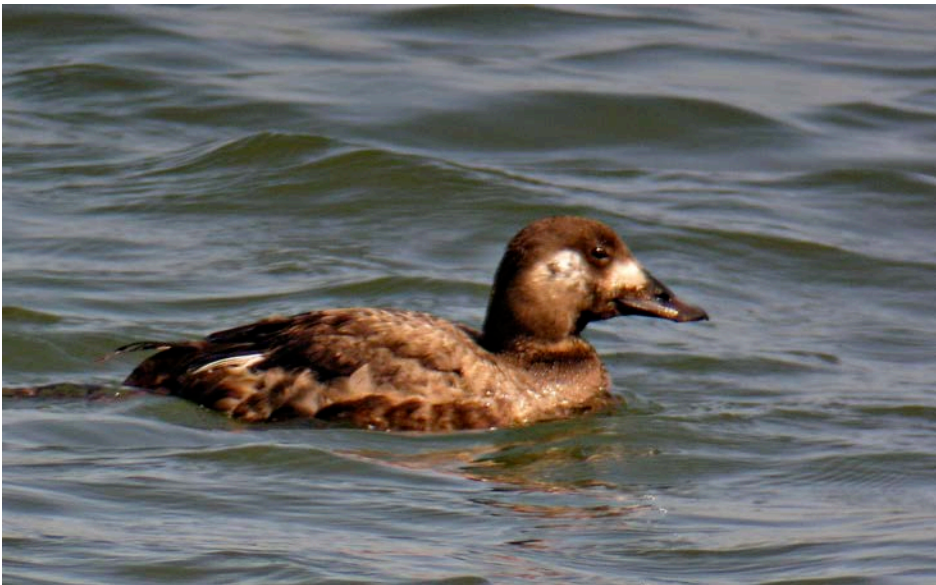


**Black Scoter – *Melanitta americana***

Note the nicely rounded head of this blackest of all our ducks, including black eyes and feet! The male shown here was swimming with other scoters at the Richmond Marina, Richmond, CA. Usually we see this species further off shore. Most of the western population winters further to the north, while the eastern population winters further south.

**White-winged Scoter -  
*Melanitta fusca***

The striking white iris seems to rest in a white cradle below the eye, a striking field mark of the male White-winged Scoter. Note how far the facial feathers extend onto the upper mandible.



The White-winged Scoter female is shown at left. We get a hint of the white secondaries on the wing, forming a clearly visible patch in flight. The white on the face is similar to that on the female Surf Scoter, but the lores are more white on the White-winged.



### **Common Goldeneye – *Bucephala Clangula***

This tree-cavity nesting duck is the last of our wintering ducks to arrive, just before Thanksgiving. The male is mostly white on the side, with a round white patch on his cheek. The female (right) has a brown head and orange at the tip of her bill. Both sexes have beautiful golden-yellow eyes, and are one of only 3 species in the genus *Bucephala*. They dive for food, and the precocial downy chicks quickly learn to dive and forage for themselves. The sheen on the male's head is usually green, but can show flash purple when the angle of the light changes.





**Barrow's Goldeneye –  
*Bucephala islandica***

The male Barrow's is easily identified by the white crescent on the face and a row of white spots on the back, allowing more black to show compared to the Common. The adult female usually shows a fully orange bill. Both sexes have a steeper forehead slope than their Common Goldeneye cousins. Barrow's seen more in the west, and not very commonly.



### **Barrow's Goldeneye x Hooded Merganser Hybrid**

It might seem strange that a Barrow's Goldeneye and a Hooded Merganser would choose to mate, but the experts think that was gene mix that produced this male, seen for several winters in the outflow channel from Lake Merritt, in Oakland, California.

The best theory I've seen to explain this strange pairing relates to the fact that both species nest in cavities. Suitable tree cavities are hard to find, and a recently fertilized female Barrow's Goldeneye might "dump" her eggs in the cavity nest of another duck, even a Hooded Merganser's. The hatchling Goldeneye would then be raised by the Hooded Merganser female, imprinting on her species as its "parent". Let's say the hatchling was a male Barrow's Goldeneye. He might well winter with Hooded Mergansers, his parent figure, and later choose a female Hooded Merganser as a mate, because that was the female image that was imprinted. Thus, the progeny of such a mating will be a hybrid between the male Barrow's and the female Hooded Merganser, and if it were a male then it might look like the strange and wonderful creature seen here. Note the black shoulder bars, fine bill, and long tail from the Hooded Merganser genes, and the big head with golden eye, plus white scapular spots, from the Barrow's Goldeneye side of the family!

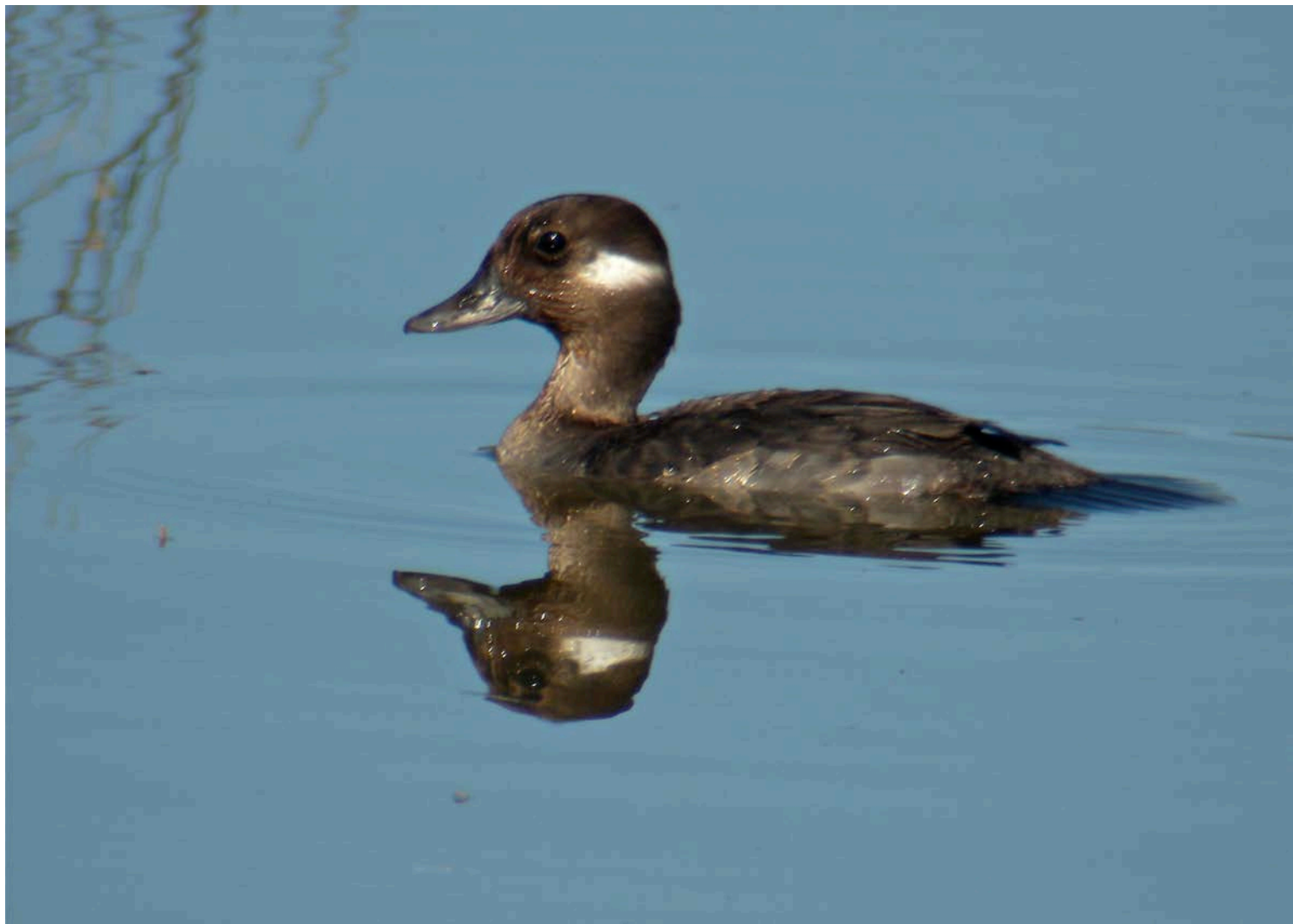


### **Bufflehead – *Bucephala albeola***

The male Bufflehead is a stark study in black and white, often enhanced by green and purple iridescence. These diving ducks arrive in early November and spend the winter in good numbers in our bays.

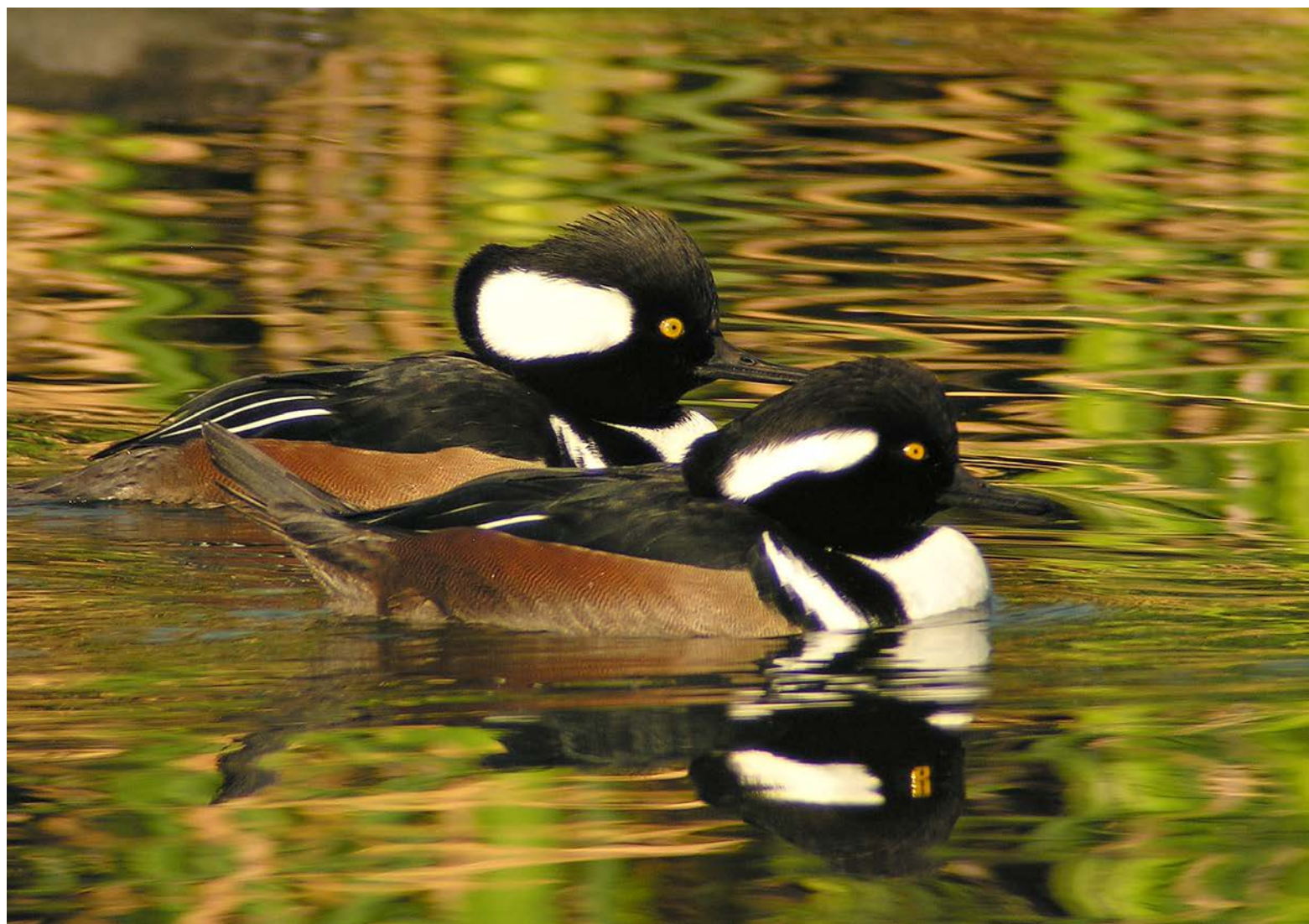






### **Bufflehead – *Bucephala albeola***

The female Bufflehead sports a white patch on her head as seen on some Scoters, but we are unlikely to mistake this big-headed/small-billed duck for any other species. They are seen on many of our bays and ponds in the winter. They are so small they can use the nest hole of a Flicker to brood their young. Juvenile birds of both sexes are similar to the above female in plumage.



### Hooded Merganser – *Lophodytes cucullatus*

The stunning Hooded Merganser ranks high among the most beautiful ducks in the world. The crest of the male can be erected during display, as in the male behind, creating a change in head profile. In winter they are usually seen on smaller ponds and waterways along the west coast, and throughout central and eastern United States. *Lophodytes* is a monotypic genus, and the Hooded Merganser is not closely related to the other mergansers. They nest in cavities, like the *Bucephala* ducks.



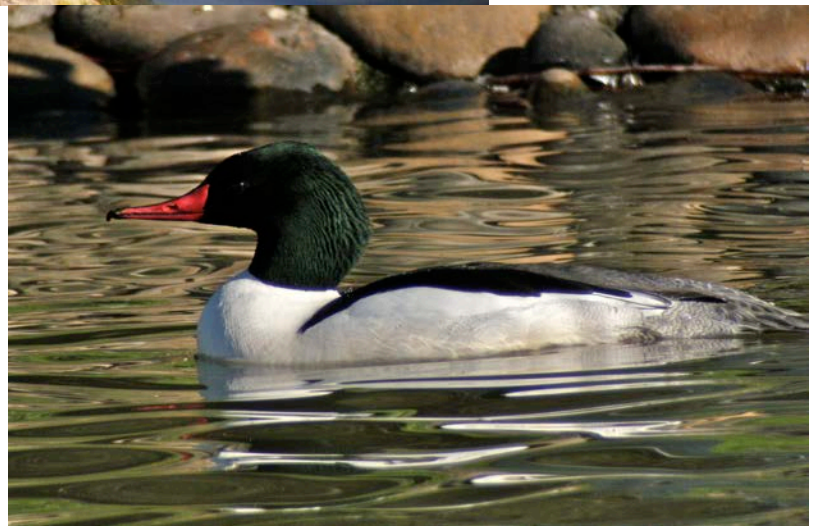
Hooded Merganser – *Lophodytes cucullatus*

The female Hooded Merganser possesses a crest too, different in shape but no less attractive than that of the male. The amber eye seems just perfect for her.



**Common Merganser – *Mergus merganser***

It's our largest Merganser, and is widely distributed. The Common Merganser is seen more often inland, on lakes and rivers. Their bills are quite thick at the base, compared to the Red-breasted Merganser. The brown of the female's neck ends in a sharp line, and her throat patch is a clear white. The male (right) with his greenish head and white side is distinctive. These are big heavy ducks.





**Red-breasted Merganser**  
***Mergus serrator***

The Red-breasted is seen more often along the coast than the Common Merganser. The male is distinctive, with his shaggy black head and fine red bill. The female's crest is less full than that of the Common Merganser hen, but better marks are the shape of the bill and the color of the neck and throat. On the Red-breasted the brown of the neck blends gradually to the gray and white below, and the chin patch shows less white.





### **Smew – *Mergellus albellus***

The male Smew's dramatic visage earned it the name "White Merganser". This smallest of the mergansers is a Eurasian species, seen rarely as a vagrant on our West Coast. . It has been documented only 3 times in California. Lucky for some, this one stayed for 2 days on a pond at Soulsbyville, in the foothills of the California Sierra. A prime candidate for "the most beautiful duck in the world". *Mergellus* is a monotypic genus.



The Smew is a cavity-nesting duck like the Bucephala ducks and Wood Duck. One might wonder if this rare vagrant was hatched in a tree nest of a Goldeneye or Bufflehead, having been “dumped” there by a female Smew needing to lay her egg. The young Smew would then have stayed with non-Smew brood and eventually followed them down the west coast along their usual route to wintering grounds. Lucky for us!



**Stiff-tailed Ducks – *Oxyurini***  
**Ruddy Duck – *Oxyura jamaicensis***

The Ruddy Duck molts into alternate plumage later than most the other duck species, and does so in most dramatic fashion. The brilliant ruddy color of the body is complimented by the bright sky-blue bill and glaring white cheek. The tail is often held in a cocked-up position that gives us the name “stifftail”. The only other stiff-tailed duck in the U.S. is the rare Masked Duck, sometimes seen along the Gulf Coast.





### **Ruddy Duck – *Oxyura jamaicensis***

The basic plumage Ruddy Duck male that we see in winter is not easily confused with another species, given his white cheek and unusual profile. When actively diving they often hold their tail down, as here. Ruddy Ducks like to do their own thing, hanging out in large rafts separate from the other diving ducks. They seem more comfortable in the presence of Coots, of all things, and in fact may share the same marshy fresh-water ponds as breeding sites. The winter male is shown above right. The juveniles at lower left are similar to the adult female.

## Black-bellied Whistling Duck - *Dendrocygna*



“Dendro” in the name relates to the Latin word for “tree”, and “Cygnus” is a word for Swan. Indeed, the Whistling Ducks, with their long necks look more like swans or geese, but are in a subfamily of their own. Of the 8 Whistling Duck species seen worldwide, only 2 are seen in the U.S., restricted to the southern states.

(Left) - The Black-bellied Whistling Duck is a rare vagrant to the Salton Sea, with about 30 accepted records. Your best chance to see one in the wild would be along the Gulf Coast (FL, LA, TX).

## Fulvous Whistling Duck - *Dendrocygna bicolor*

(Right) - The other species of whistling duck seen on our Gulf Coast is the Fulvous Whistling Duck, which ranges widely (South America, Asia, and Africa). This one from Anahuac NWR, TX.



## **Geese – *Anserini***

The geese are a **Subfamily** of *Anatidae*. Along with the swans and whistling ducks the geese diverged from the true ducks in the distant past. Geese molt only once a year, mate for life, and both parents care for the young. Structurally, they are large waterfowl, with webbed feet like the ducks, but with longer legs and necks. Sexes are similar, but may differ in size and calls. They tend to graze in upland areas, except for the Brant.

**Snow Goose – *Anser caerulescens* p. 68**

**Ross's Goose – *Anser rossii* p. 69**

**Emperor Goose – *Anser canagicus* p. 70**

**Cackling Goose – *Branta hutchinsii* p. 71**

**Canada Goose – *Branta Canadensis* p. 72**

**Brant – *Branta bernicia* p. 73**

**Greater White-fronted Goose – *Anser albifrons* p. 74**

## **Swans – *Cygnini***

The Swans are closely related to the Geese, together forming the **Subfamily** *Anserinae*. Like Geese, Swans mate for life and molt only once a year. There are only 7 species of Swans in the world, of which 3 are found in the U.S. The Tundra Swan winters in California's Central Valley. The similar Trumpeter Swan is not seen nearly as often.

**Mute Swan – *Cygnus olor* p. 75**

Trumpeter Swan – *Cygnus buccinator* (not shown)

**Tundra Swan – *Cygnus columbianus* p. 76**

## **Snow Goose – *Anser caerulescens***

One of the most awesome sights in nature can be seen in refuges of Central California, where huge flocks of Snow Geese gather each winter.

The dark bird on the left is a “Blue Goose”, representing a dark form or “morph” of the more typical white adult. It’s always fun to spot a blue goose among a flock of whiter adults.

The juvenile Snow Goose can show extensive gray, although not as much as a dark morph. All Snow Geese show the “grin patch”, a dark area where the bill comes together. The bill itself is more robust than that on the Ross’s Goose.





### **Ross's Goose – *Anser rossii***

Ross's Goose is smaller by almost 25% than the Snow Goose, and 50% lighter. The difference can clearly be seen when they fly as a mixed flock. Ross's seem to be more populous in recent years in California, especially in some locales such as the Merced Refuge. At Gray Lodge we were lucky to see *two* dark phase Ross's Geese with a group of the usual white adults. Note the smaller bill on Ross's, with a vertical margin where the bill joins the face (vs. curved margin on the Snow Goose).

## Emperor Goose – *Anser canagicus*



Emperor Geese breed in the far north, and most of them winter in the Aleutians. They are rare but regular vagrants along the West Coast., usually in California's Central Valley.

The individual here stayed for a while at a golf course near Pacifica, CA. Adults like this have a white head and tail, whereas juveniles have a dark head and dark bill. As with the Snow Goose and Ross's Goose they have been moved from the genus *Chen* and are now in the genus *Anser* with the Greater White-fronted Goose.





### **Cackling Goose – *Branta hutchinsii***

The Cackling Goose can vary in size, with some races only half the size of a larger race Canada Goose, as shown on the left. The Cackling Goose has a stubbier bill than that on the Canada Goose. There are 4-5 subspecies recognized, and the diminutive goose here is likely ssp. *B. h. minima*.

Cackler's and Canada's often form mixed flocks, but within the flock the smaller Cackling Geese usually separate themselves, whether on water, while grazing, or in flight.

**Canada Goose – *Branta canadensis***

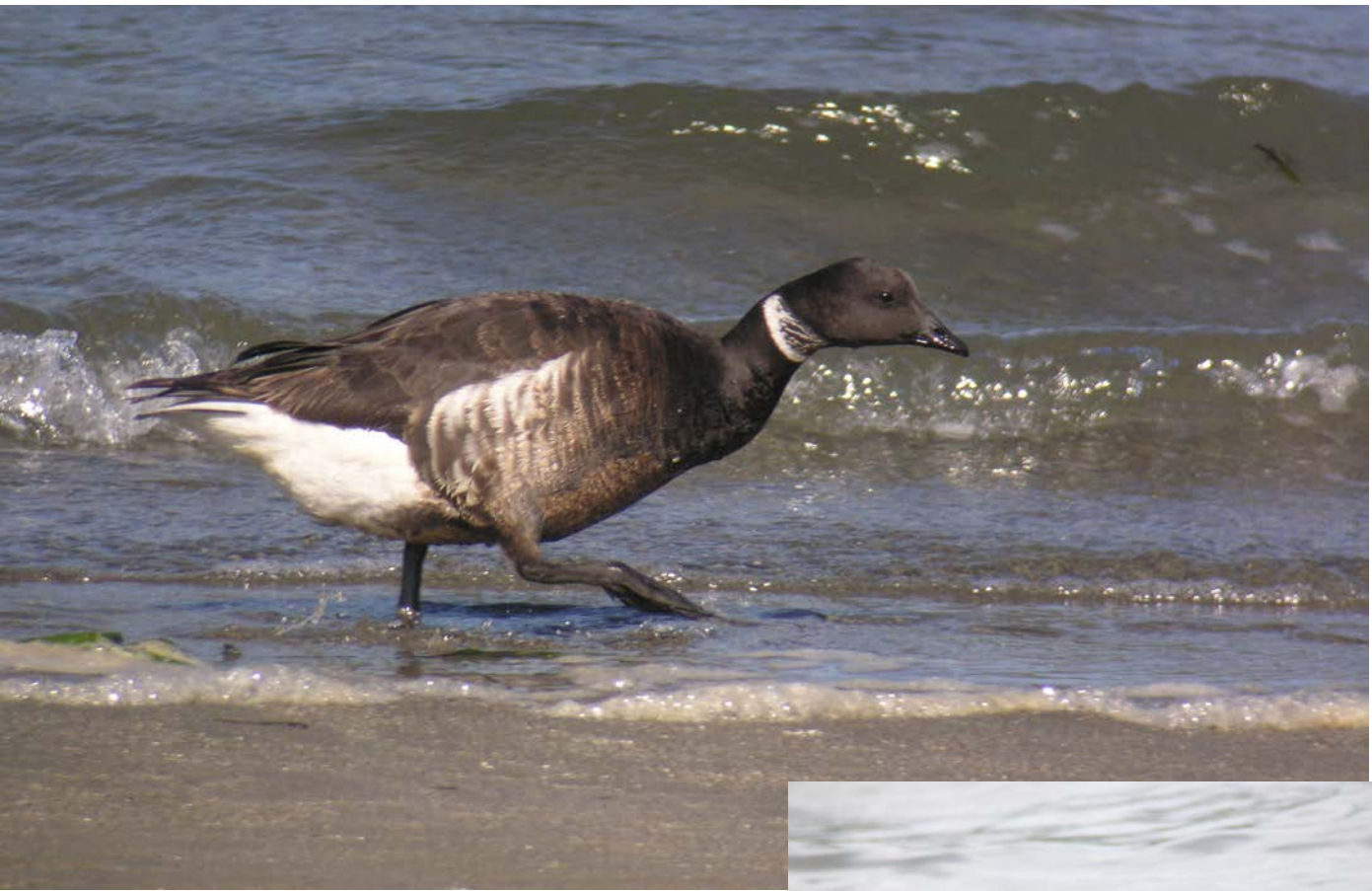


The Canada Goose is one of a number of species that have adapted well to human proximity. They find our parks and golf courses so hospitable that many have abandoned their annual northern migration routes and now breed locally.

Goslings like these are all too familiar in some locations.

Their bill is more robust than that on the Cackling Goose. About 7 subspecies are recognized, varying greatly in size.





### **Brant – *Branta bernicia***

Our western race of Brant has a black belly, and is called “Black Brant” by some. The more easterly race has a pale belly and is known as “American Brant”.

Brant are found only along coasts, where they feed almost entirely on Eelgrass, *Zostera marina*. Like most geese they are gregarious, and often gather in large numbers at sites like Bodega Bay and Drake’s Estero in California.





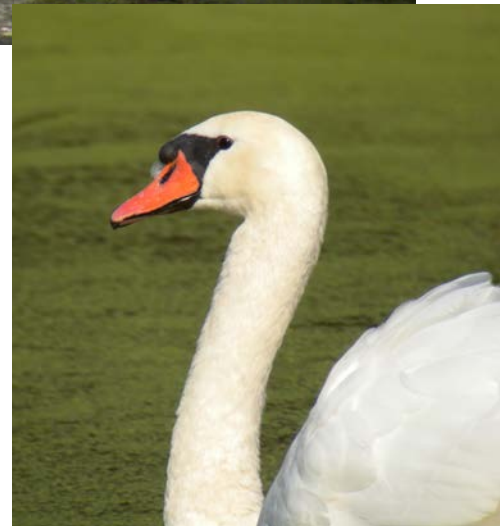
### **Greater White-fronted Goose – *Anser albifrons***

The Greater White-fronted Goose winters in large numbers in California's Central Valley, but is seen only sporadically in the Bay Area, usually grazing with Canada Geese. The bird above lacks white feathering around the base of the bill ("white front") and is probably a juvenile. The bright orange legs help to pick it out of a large flock of Canada Geese. Similar to the Lesser White-fronted Goose and Graylag Goose of Eurasia. They all breed in the tundra of the far north.



### **Mute Swan – *Cygnus olor***

The Mute Swan is one of “our” largest birds, weighing over 20 lbs. Having evolved displays and postures that we humans find endearing, and being tolerant of us, made it a “perfect” candidate for introduction to the city parks of the United States. It has since naturalized, sometimes to an alarming degree, and is being removed from some areas like the Great Lakes.



## Tundra Swan – *Cygnus columbianus*



(Left) – Tundra Swans on a rice field, foraging with Greater White-fronted Geese. Note the yellow at the base of the bill.

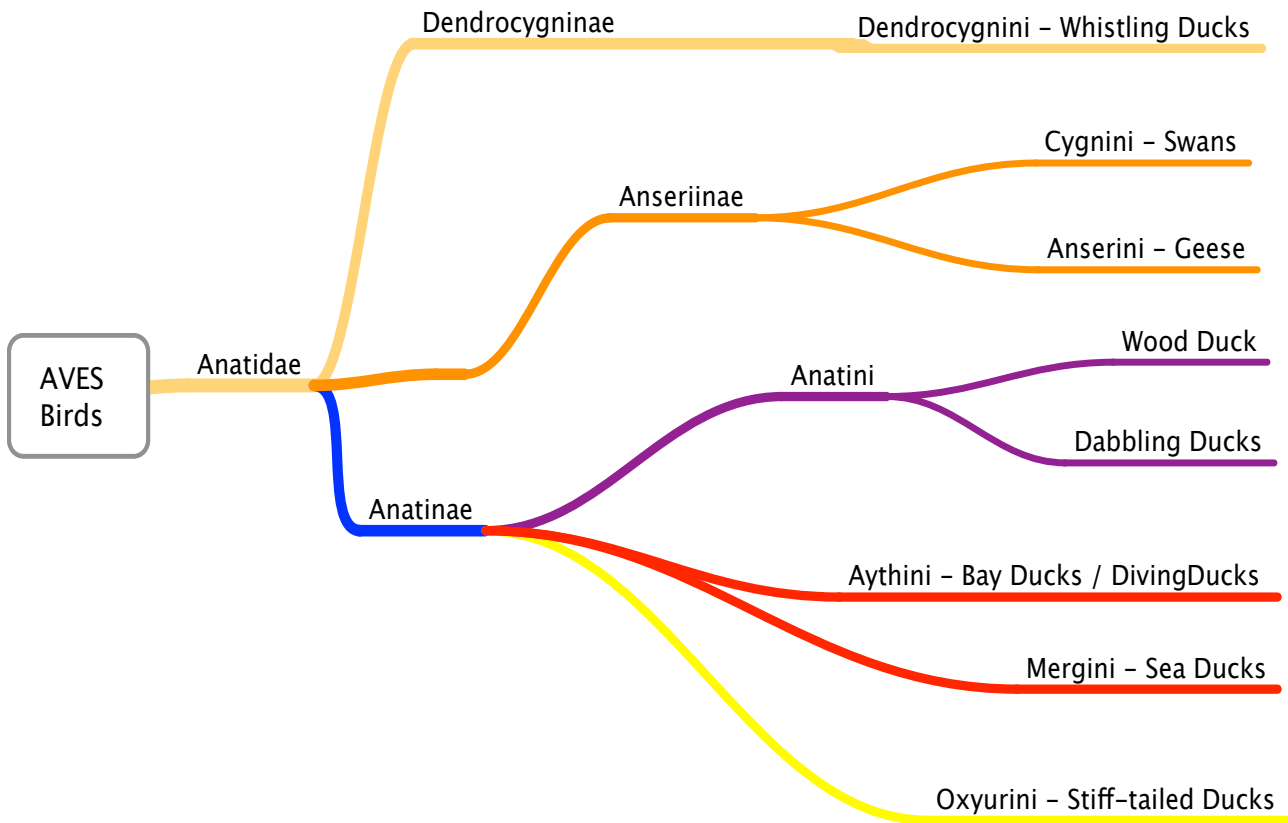
(Right) – Note the long straight neck and the large black feet.



(Left) – A juvenile Tundra Swan forages in a partially drained pond at the Ellis Creek water treatment facility, Petaluma, California. Shorebirds here include some Dowitchers and a Wilson's Snipe.

# The Duck Family Tree

Schematic of the subfamilies and tribes in Anatidae



***“The DUCKS”*** is intended as a guide for the beginning and intermediate birder wishing to learn more about the variety of Duck Family species encountered in the United States, with an emphasis on ducks seen in California. Future volumes of *Len’s Lens* will cover other bird families.



**Hooded Merganser - female**