Waterfowl Facts and Identification

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North American Flyway Map

Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – Migratory Bird Program
Prairie Pothole Region

Credit: Prairie Pothole Joint Venture website
Canada’s Boreal Forest

Credit: Boreal Songbird Initiative
Relative Sizes of Waterfowl

All birds on this page are drawn to the same scale.

Pintail
Mallard
Black Duck
Gadwall
Wigeon
Shoveler
Wood Duck
Cinnamon Teal
Blue-Winged Teal
Green-Winged Teal
Buffehead
Ruddy Duck
Ringneck
Lesser Scaup
Greater Scaup
Greater Snow Goose
White-Fronted Goose
Lesser Canada Goose
Lesser Snow Goose
Emperor Goose
Black Brant
Brant
Cackling Goose
Ross' Goose
Trumpeter Swan
Whistling Swan
Canada Goose

Credit: USFWS
New Mexico Waterfowl

• A total of 26 species of waterfowl are found in New Mexico.
  – 10 Dabbling Ducks
  – 9 Diving Ducks
  – 1 Stiff-tailed Duck
  – 4 Geese
  – 2 Swans
Body Parts for Identification

Pay attention to the shape and colors of the:

- Bill, head, wings (specifically speculum) and chest, on waterfowl.
- Drab versus bright colors to identify gender.
- Can you see vermiculation (pattern of dense, irregular gray lines) or the speculum (colorful portion of drake or hen’s wing)?
Waterfowl Life Cycle

Once mature, waterfowl go through a yearly cycle:

- Fall Migration => Winter => Spring Migration =>
- Pre-Nesting => Nesting => Hatching => Brood
- Rearing => Post Breeding => Molt

Females have shorter lifespans than males due to stress of breeding, nesting and raising young.

Wild swans live longest, averaging 20-30 years, geese average 10-24 years and ducks 5-10 years.
Ducks

• Divided into 2 broad categories.
• Size difference between drakes (males) and hens (females).
• Drakes are more colorful than hens, which tend to be drab, mottled colors.
Dabbling Ducks

- Also called puddle ducks.
- Feed by bobbing their head underwater.
- Prefer smaller, shallow bodies of water with nearby cover.
- Legs exit from the middle of their belly.
- Swim with tail high above water’s surface.
- Spring into the air on take off.
- More likely than divers to feed in agricultural fields because they walk and run well on land.
Mallard

Credit: Mark Watson
Mallard

Eclipse Drake

Hen

Drake

Credit: USFWS
Mexican Mallard

Credit: Jim Stuart
Northern Pintail

Credit: Jim Stuart
Northern Pintail

Length - 26"
Weight - 1 3/4 lbs.

Credit: USFWS
Gadwall

Credit: Jim Stuart
Gadwall

Credit: USFWS
American Wigeon

Credit: Jim Stuart
American Wigeon

Credit: USFWS
Northern Shoveler

Credit: Jim Stuart
Northern Shoveler

Length - 19 1/2"
Weight - 1 1/2 lbs.

Drake

Eclipse Drake

Hen

Credit: USFWS
Wood Duck

Length - 18 1/2 in.
Weight - 1 1/2 lbs.

Drake

Eclipse Drake

Hen

Credit: USFWS

Information & Education Division
Green-Winged Teal

Credit: Jim Stuart
Green-Winged Teal

Length - 15 in.
Weight - 14 oz.

Drake

Eclipse Drake

Hen

Credit: USFWS
Blue-Winged Teal

Credit: Jim Stuart
Blue-Winged Teal

Eclipse Drake

Hen

Blue-Winged Drake

Credit: USFWS
Cinnamon Teal

Credit: Mark Watson
Cinnamon Teal

Eclipse Drake

Drake

Credit: USFWS
Diving Ducks

• Feed by diving completely underwater.
• Prefer larger, open, deep bodies of water and typically swim towards the middle.
• Legs exit towards the rear of the body.
• Swim with tail close to the water.
• “Walk” along water’s surface on take off.
Common Goldeneye

Credit: Jim Stuart
Barrow’s Goldeneye

Credit: USFWS
Goldeneyes

Credit: USFWS
Canvasback

Credit: Jim Stuart
Canvasback

Length - 22 in.
Weight - 3 lbs.

Drake

Eclipse Drake

Hen

Credit: USFWS
Redhead

Credit: Mark Watson
Redhead

Length - 20 in.
Weight - 2 1/2 lbs.

Drake

Eclipse Drake

Hen

Credit: USFWS
Ring-necked Duck
Ring-necked Duck

Length - 17 in.
Weight - 2 1/2 lbs.

Drake

Eclipse Drake

Hen

Credit: USFWS
Lesser Scaup

Credit: Jim Stuart
Lesser Scaup

Greater - Length - 18 1/2 in.
Weight - 2 lbs.

Lesser - Length - 17 in.
Weight - 1 7/8 lbs.

Lesser Scaup Drake
Greater Scaup Drake
Eclipse Drake
Hen

Credit: USFWS
Bufflehead

Credit: Jim Stuart

Credit: Mark Watson
Bufflehead

Credit: USFWS
Common Merganser

Credit: Mark Watson
Common Merganser

Length - 25 1/2 in.
Weight - 2 1/2 lbs.

Eclipse Drake
Drake
Hen

Credit: USFWS
Hooded Merganser

Credit: Mark Watson
Hooded Merganser

Length - 18 in.
Weight - 1 1/2 lbs.

Eclipse Drake

Drake

Hen

Credit: USFWS
Stiff-tailed Duck

- Long, stiff-tail feathers, which are raised when the bird is resting.
- Long, puffy bill.
- Legs are set far back on body, making walking on land difficult.
- This duck rarely leaves the water.
Ruddy Duck

Credit: USFWS

Credit: Jim Stuart
Ruddy Duck

Length - 15 1/2 in.
Weight - 1 1/3 lbs.

Summer Drake
Winter Drake
Hen

Credit: USFWS
Geese

- Geese are larger waterfowl than ducks, averaging about 6.5 pounds and 30” in length.
- Except for a slight size difference, males and females appear identical.
- Geese are quite vocal.
- Generally stick to larger flocks than ducks.
- Flocks are typically family groups.
Ross’ Goose

Credit: USFWS
Snow Goose
White-fronted Goose

Credit: USFWS
White-fronted Goose

Credit: USFWS
Canada Goose
Canada Goose

Credit: USFWS
Swans

• Swans are the largest waterfowl, averaging a weight of 22 pounds and 56” in length.
• Males and females appear identical except for a slight size difference.
• Tundra and trumpeter both have black bills with white bodies, but mature tundra has a yellow spot on bill in front of eye.
• Trumpeter is much heavier and longer.
Tundra Swan

Credit: Mark Watson
Tundra Swan

Credit: USFWS
Trumpeter Swan

Credit: Jim Stuart
Trumpeter Swan

Credit: USFWS
Conclusion

• Find a location with resident waterfowl year round.
• Use waterfowl identification booklet or cell phone application.
• Practice identifying ducks, geese and swans.
• Identify species.
• Identify gender.