

## THE VILLAGE BIRDING LIFE

“Winter Ducks”

*by HSV Audubon*

Ducks, one of the most familiar bird families, consist of over 140 species world wide. These water loving birds are found on every continent except Antarctica. About 40 species of ducks are found in N. America, 31 of which have been observed in Arkansas. Our Village birding checklist numbers 18. The vast majority of these are only here in the colder months.

There are two broad categories of ducks- divers and dabblers. Divers dive under the water to feed. Dabblers, sometimes called puddle ducks, stick their heads underwater to feed but normally don't dive. However, neither of these common characteristics are for 100% certain, dabblers can dive and divers occasionally dabble when in shallow water. There are significant physical differences between the two. Dabblers have centrally located legs that allow them to walk easily on land. It's not unusual to see them feeding in grain fields or even under your bird feeder if you live close to water. The diver's legs are placed farther back on their bodies . This makes for more efficient swimming but poor land mobility. Dabblers take off by springing into the air, divers need a running start. While not a firm rule, divers are usually seen out in the middle of relatively larger lakes while dabblers stick closer to shore or to smaller ponds or marshes.

Because of Donald, Daffy and the ubiquitous green-headed Mallard, people are most familiar with dabbling ducks. However, in the Village the vast majority of our winter ducks are divers. The two most common ducks in the Village in the winter are the Bufflehead and the Common Goldeneye. Both are divers. Typical of many bird species, male and female ducks can look very different. The male Bufflehead and Goldeneye are both small ducks that show a lot of white as they swim or fly. They are easy to distinguish if you remember that the Bufflehead has a big white patch behind his eye; the Goldeneye has a white patch in front of the eye. The females of both species are drab colors. The female bufflehead's small white patch behind her eye makes her easy to ID. However in general, casual birders wanting to identify female ducks will need to resort to a bird guide. Two other common divers in the Village are Ring-necked ducks and Lesser Scaup. The males of these are easily confused because they both have bodies with a black at the ends and white in the middle pattern. The scaup, however, has a blue bill and is lighter colored on his back. The Ring-necked male has a ring on his bill (yes, there is a nearly invisible ring on the neck, too) and a noticeably brighter white patch or spur on the shoulder.

Mallards are the most widespread dabbler in the Village but not always the most numerous. The pond at Magellan Beaver Dam trail has become the winter home of a flock(s) of Gadwall that can number over 150. Gadwall are dabblers very similar in size and shape to Mallards. The male Mallard's green head makes for an easy ID. The male Gadwall's black rump is the key to identifying them. Identifying the female Mallard and Gadwall is not as easy.

Most of the Wood Ducks, dabblers that breed here in the summer, have moved farther south for the winter.

A few points of interest: Duck bills are designed to sift food from the mud and water. Duck food ranges from grain and aquatic plants to aquatic insects and small fish. A few female dabblers quack but most ducks communicate with a variety of whistles, yodels, coos or grunts. Historically, domestic ducks have been bred from either Mallard or Muscovy (native in the U.S. only to south Texas) ducks.

As always HSVBIRDS.ORG has a lot of information about everything you'd like to know about birds and some of Nature's other wonders. You will see on the website that HSV Audubon has available a Village birding checklist. It lists over 200 species of birds that might be seen in the Village, when they might be seen and how common they are. It's a great way to keep track of the birds at your feeder.

HSV Audubon meets the 2nd Friday of each month, except in the summer, at 10:00 at the Coronado Center. Guests are always welcome to join us in our love and pursuit of birds and all things Nature.

Photos by Vic Prislipsky