

BANDING TOGETHER—

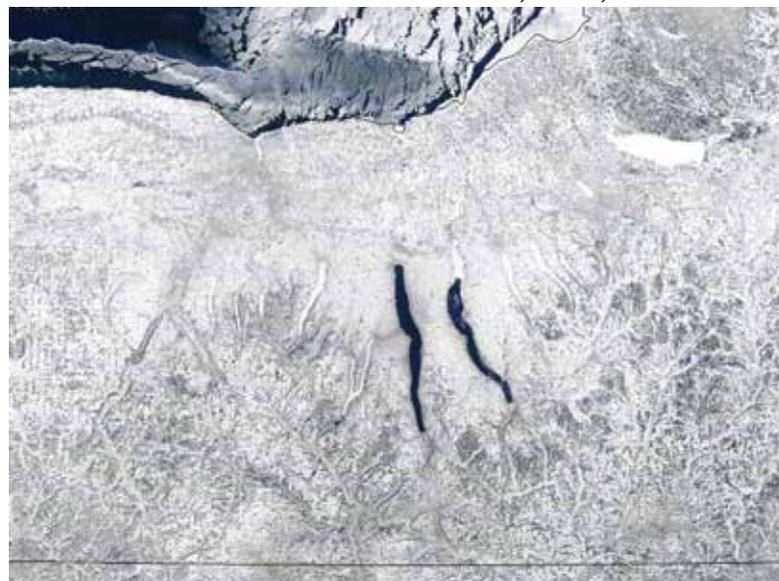


One-of-a-kind winter experience in the Finger Lakes Region

By Dr. Michael Schummer
photos by Tyler Breen

Courtesy of University of Wisconsin

Waterfowl enthusiasts from throughout central New York have the opportunity to view a truly unique event each winter at Cayuga, Seneca and Owasco Lakes. As autumn progresses towards winter, cool arctic air creeps into New York and migrant waterfowl come out of the Canadian boreal forest and tundra in search of food and open water. Not long after, winter sets in deeper: snow accumulates on farm fields, and ice forms on shallow wetlands, forcing most ducks, geese and swans from upstate New York to the Atlantic Coast. However, in central New York, the larger, deeper Finger Lakes tend to freeze very late in the winter, and sometimes not at all. On these windswept waters you will find vast rafts of canvasbacks, redheads, scaup (a.k.a. bluebills), enormous flocks of Canada geese, as well as smaller flocks of common goldeneyes, buffleheads and mergansers. And along the edges of the lake in the shallower waters, hardy mallards and American black ducks loaf and feed.



In this winter satellite photo, the open waters of Seneca and Cayuga Lakes stand out against the frozen landscape.



A biologist places a numbered leg band on a male mallard.

Here, along the icy shoreline, is where our story begins.

“We’re going to have a great day,” NYSDEC Wildlife Technician Frank Morlock expresses with a smile. Frank waves our two vans full of students from the ornithology and wildlife techniques courses at SUNY Oswego into the parking lot at Dean’s Cove Boat Launch on Cayuga Lake. The parking lot is nearly half full already. It’s cold. Young children are bundled in thick coats, hats and gloves, stumbling in their clunky boots towards the shoreline, dragging their parents by the hand. Two more vans

pull in. The ornithology class and Guy Baldassarre Birding Club from SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF) are also here. Students and faculty from Wells College, directly across the lake on its eastern shore, follow soon after. Old and young, students and teachers, biologists, hunters, birders and volunteers; the crowd is diverse. I also see many volunteers with the Friends of Montezuma, a group that supports habitat restoration and management, wildlife conservation and enhancement projects at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (USFWS) Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge and adjacent New York State Northern Montezuma Wildlife Management Area (NMWMA).

So what is the attraction? Chuck Gibson, president of the Friends of Montezuma Wetlands Complex, greets us with a firm handshake and smiles as he leads us to two trucks parked near the boat ramp. The trucks, one marked NYSDEC and the other USFWS, are loaded with wooden poultry crates. Kids gather around the tailgates to see the birds inside: black ducks and mallards captured that morning for the annual public duck-banding event. I ask Jim Eckler, wildlife biologist and manager of NMWMA, “How many birds did we capture this morning?” Jim replies, “Oh, nearly 100; the cold lately really has them coming to the bait at our traps.” This is a good thing for waterfowl conservation and for this public event.



Releasing a duck was a highlight for many. Here a volunteer releases a banded female mallard, while another holds a banded male.



The banding event allows people to personally interact with wildlife, like this female mallard.

coloration of a black duck on its body, the olive-colored bill of a black duck, but the wing has two white bars, one above and one below the speculum (the colorful part of the wing). This is a hybrid between a mallard and black duck. Pure black ducks only have the one white bar on the trailing edge of the wing.”

Linda slowly rolls the bird on its back, feet up. Sitting on a crate in her insulated duck banding coveralls, she receives an aluminum band from Chuck Gibson. She crimps the uniquely numbered band around the outside of the duck’s leg, like a ring around a finger. Ziembra identifies the bird as an adult male, and reads the number back to DEC Wildlife Technician Kent Kowalski. Kowalski records the information on the banding sheet which will be uploaded by computer to the federal Bird Banding Lab (BBL) in Laurel, Maryland. This uniquely numbered band will go into a database with the millions of other records compiled to conserve and manage bird populations. And if this bird is trapped at another banding station or shot by a duck hunter, its band number will be reported to the BBL as a recapture or recovery. Every banded bird is an important data point useful in waterfowl conservation.

A line of onlookers wait their turn to hold and release a bird. Linda hands the duck to a young girl with wide, expectant eyes. Guided by her mother and father, she walks the duck over to the

On average about 350,000 waterfowl are banded each year in North America, and around 85,000 of these are recovered and reported later. Band returns tell us the migration routes of these charismatic birds and give wildlife biologists vital information about their habits and life cycles, information upon which biologists rely for management decisions.

People realized the utility of banding birds long ago. In Europe, people have banded birds for centuries; here in North America, the first large-scale banding program was established in 1922. The numbered leg bands are made of aluminum and vary in size depending on the species for which they are intended.

Many bird banding programs take place in summer or early fall, immediately preceding the waterfowl hunting season. However, the focus species today, the black duck, is difficult to capture in those seasons. Most black ducks breed at low densities in the vast boreal forest of eastern Canada: Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and New Brunswick. Thus, NYSDEC and USFWS staff band black ducks in the winter, when cold stress makes them gather in larger groups and easier to capture.

Once a common breeding duck in NY, the black duck population has declined dramatically since the 1950s. A cooperative effort funded by USFWS known as the Black Duck Joint Venture aims to monitor black duck populations, conduct research, and provide information required to manage black ducks and restore their numbers throughout their range.

University students, bird watchers, waterfowl hunters, and school-age kids get the opportunity to learn a bit more about the waterfowl they are passionate about.

Several possible causes for black duck population declines have been suggested: habitat change, competition with mallards, hybridization with mallards, and over-harvest. Declines in black duck populations led managers to implement harvest restrictions in the 1980s which continue today. While overall black duck populations have stabilized, the number of mallards wintering in the Finger Lakes region has continued to increase.

It is hard to imagine New York without mallards, but they are a relatively recent addition, having moved into the state from west to east over the past century. They likely compete with black ducks for breeding grounds in summer and food supplies in winter. Today, there are about four mallards for every black duck wintering on Cayuga Lake. Mallards and black ducks are very close relatives and readily breed with each other, resulting in mallard/black duck hybrids. Because mallard genes are dominant, over time these hybrids look more and more like mallards.

Linda Ziembra, a wildlife biologist at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, shows a group of camouflage-clad onlookers the feathers on one of the ducks. “You see, this duck has the dark

boat launch, holding it mid-body with wings secure, and with a slight toss, releases the bird back onto Cayuga Lake. With binoculars, her dad watches the bird fade into the distance. I expect he is wondering where that duck's wanderings will take it, and if we will catch it again on Cayuga Lake next winter.

The line continues. University students, bird watchers, waterfowl hunters, and school-age kids get the opportunity to learn a bit more about the waterfowl they are passionate about, and how to determine the species, age and sex of these magnificent birds. They learn that black duck populations have declined and some possible explanations for the decline. They each get to hold a bird and personally interact with wildlife that to date, most have only seen from afar. They get to band together—literally, and figuratively.

As the last duck is released, the crowd is slow to leave; they talk amongst themselves, continue to ask questions of the biologists, take pictures, scan the water with their binoculars for rafts of ducks. A mature bald eagle swings past, riding the cold winter breeze. Everyone notices and looks up in silence.

Frank was right. It was a great day.

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Jeff Nadler



Black Duck



After one last look, a black duck is released onto Cayuga Lake.



Duck Study

Biologists have long been concerned about black duck populations in New York, which have declined significantly in the past 60 years. Because of this concern, DEC will initiate a detailed study of black duck and mallard wintering ecology in the Finger Lakes region this winter. Graduate students from SUNY ESF in Syracuse will monitor female black ducks and mallards with Global Positioning System (GPS) trackers to determine how these birds use the Finger Lakes region during winter and how these two species interact. The GPS trackers also allow students to follow the ducks back to their breeding grounds in the spring, simply by receiving data on their cell phones. Results of the study will help guide conservation and management decisions to help sustain black ducks that winter in New York. This project would not have been possible without years of dedicated efforts by staff from DEC, USFWS, and myriad volunteers. The study will be supported by excise taxes on firearms and ammunition, known as Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration, as well as funding from the Black Duck Joint Venture and Ducks Unlimited.