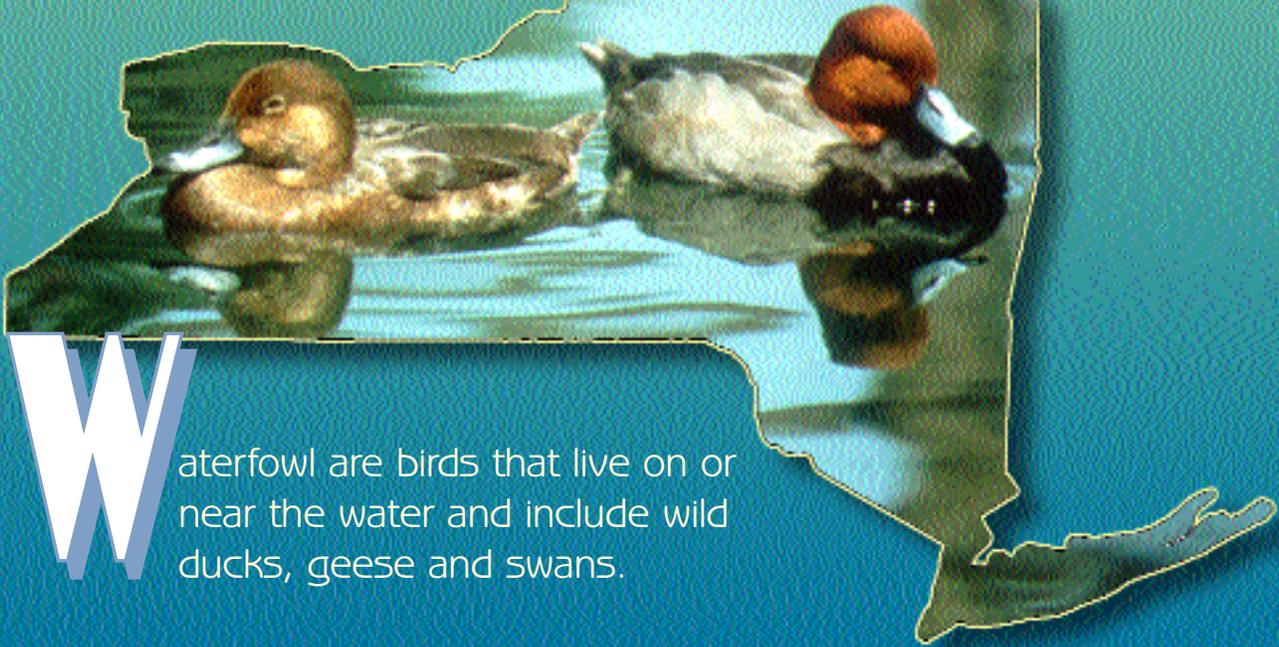


Identifying New York State Waterfowl



W

aterfowl are birds that live on or near the water and include wild ducks, geese and swans.

W

ell adapted to their lives on the water, these birds have broad, flattened bills that allow them to feed on plants and animals in the water. Their wide-set legs and webbed feet make them excellent swimmers, and their waterproof plumage and thick layers of down feathers keep them warm in cold weather.

Numerous species of waterfowl visit or make New York State their home, with more than 30 different waterfowl species commonly seen here. Watching and identifying the various species can be an entertaining and sometimes tricky task. While both sexes of swans and geese look alike, in most species of ducks, the males (drakes) and females

(hens) look different from each other. However, in the summer and early fall you may see ducks that are undergoing their annual molt when the males will lack their bright breeding plumage and resemble the more dull-colored females. With so much variation, it can be difficult to tell one species from another. Add to that the fact that often you see the birds as they are quickly flying by, making an accurate identification quite challenging. Fortunately, there are a number of clues to look for that make it easier to identify the waterfowl you see. The information provided in this guide will aid you in recognizing these birds.



Identifying NYS Waterfowl

The best way to become better at identifying waterfowl is to practice seeing them in their own environment. Knowing the habitat preferences, food habits, molting schedules, and flight habits for various species makes it easier to locate and identify them. Learn what waterfowl species are most common in your

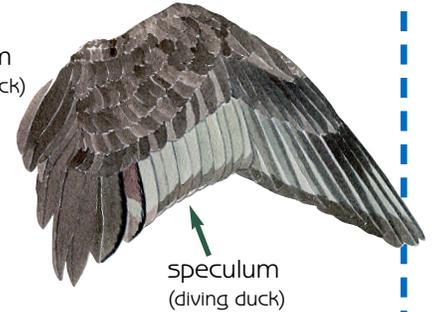
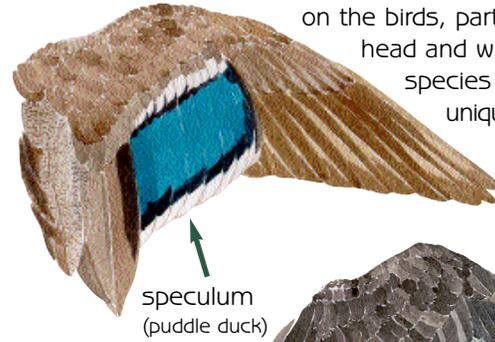
area and what time of year they are likely to occur. Of the more than 30 species regularly seen in NY, only seven are likely to be seen during the summer. So, grab your binoculars, field guide, and your family and head down to your local river, bay, or marsh and have fun getting to know your waterfowl.

What to look for:

Habitat — First, consider where you see the waterfowl. Are they in a large open body of water (like a river or lake), on a small pond or marsh, or feeding in crop fields?



Colors — Notice the colors you see on the birds, particularly the head and wings. Each species has its own unique markings.



Flight Pattern — Do the birds fly in a particular pattern? Are they in a single, straight line close to the water; in Vs; or in loose flock formations?

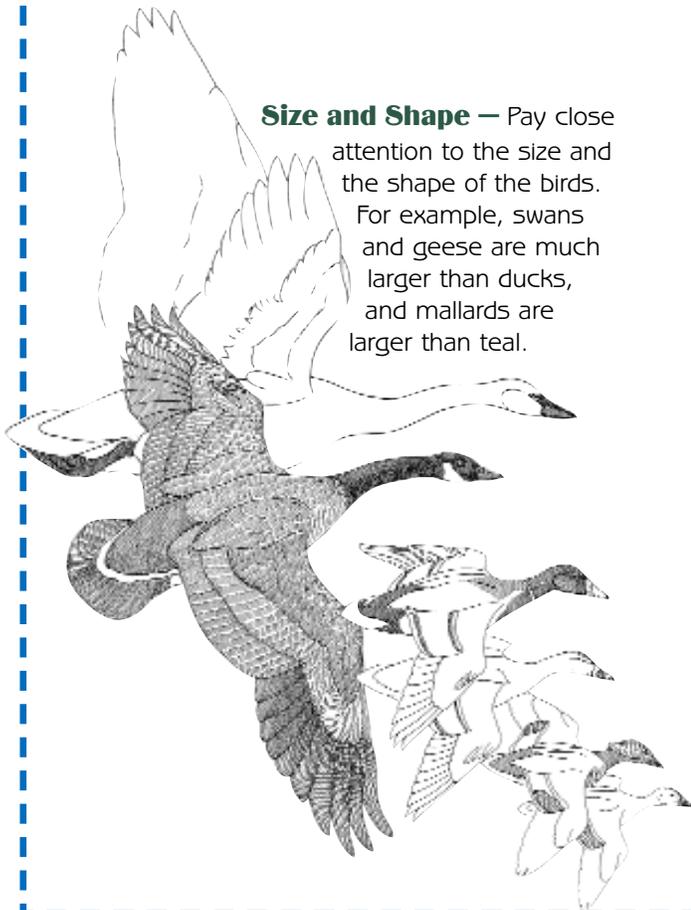
Pintails - loose flock formation

Mergansers - straight line, close to water

Canada Geese - V-formation



Size and Shape — Pay close attention to the size and the shape of the birds. For example, swans and geese are much larger than ducks, and mallards are larger than teal.



Sound — Do you hear them? Not all geese honk — some cackle, yelp or croak. And not all ducks quack — some whistle, growl or squeal.



Major Groups of Waterfowl

Ducks: There are two basic types of ducks — puddle (or dabbling) ducks and diving ducks.

Puddle Ducks — Puddle ducks are commonly found in shallow marshes or small rivers. They have colored wing patches (speculum) that are usually iridescent. They prefer to feed on or just below the surface of the water by dabbling or tipping up with their rump pointing up. They walk well on land and are often seen feeding in croplands. They sit high with their tail out of the water and can take off directly from the water to flight. Puddle ducks include mallards, black ducks, wood ducks, teal and pintails.

Diving Ducks — Diving ducks are usually found on larger bodies of water. Diving ducks are better at diving under the water than puddle ducks. Their wing patches are usually dull white or grey colored. Their legs are positioned far back on their body and their larger feet help make them better underwater swimmers. However, the position of their legs makes it more difficult for them to walk on land

so you will seldom see them feeding in farm fields or resting on shore. Most diving ducks need to run along the surface of the water to gain speed for flight. Diving ducks include scaup, canvasback, redhead, goldeneye, bufflehead, mergansers, and scoters.

Geese and Swans: Geese and swans are distinguished from other waterfowl by their large size. Males and females look alike.

Geese — Geese are larger, heavier, and have longer necks than ducks. During migration times, you may see large flocks (sometimes numbering in the thousands) flying in a line or in V-shaped formations in order to reduce wind resistance. Geese include Canada geese, snow geese, and brant.

Swans — Swans are the largest of all waterfowl and have much longer necks than geese. Adults of these three species are completely white. Swans you may see in NYS include mute swans, tundra swans, and trumpeter swans.



Edward Jakubowski

Viewing Waterfowl

If you know where, when and how to look for waterfowl you will see more birds. Here are a few guidelines for successfully viewing waterfowl:

- Look for waterfowl in ponds, lakes, streams, marshes and bays.
- Watch for waterfowl during their spring and fall migrations. Early morning or evenings are the best times of the day to view these birds as they fly off and land on the water.
- Move slowly and quietly. Waterfowl see colors very well, so wear a hat and clothing that blends in with your surroundings. Resist the urge to look up at the sky exposing your face and neck, instead move your eyes and head slowly.
- The use of man-made or natural blinds (vegetation) will help keep you concealed and improve your chances of seeing more birds.
- Watch and listen carefully for movement in the air, water and surrounding vegetation.
- Bring your field guide and binoculars to help you identify birds and their calls.

Finally, just relax and enjoy waterfowl watching. Soon you'll know how to identify many of New York's waterfowl.