

Ducks to look for this winter

BY REBECCA LEXA

Two weeks ago we began our exploration of winter waterfowl by looking at some of the species of geese and swans that spend the cold months in our area. This week we're going to wrap things up with some of the duck species found here.

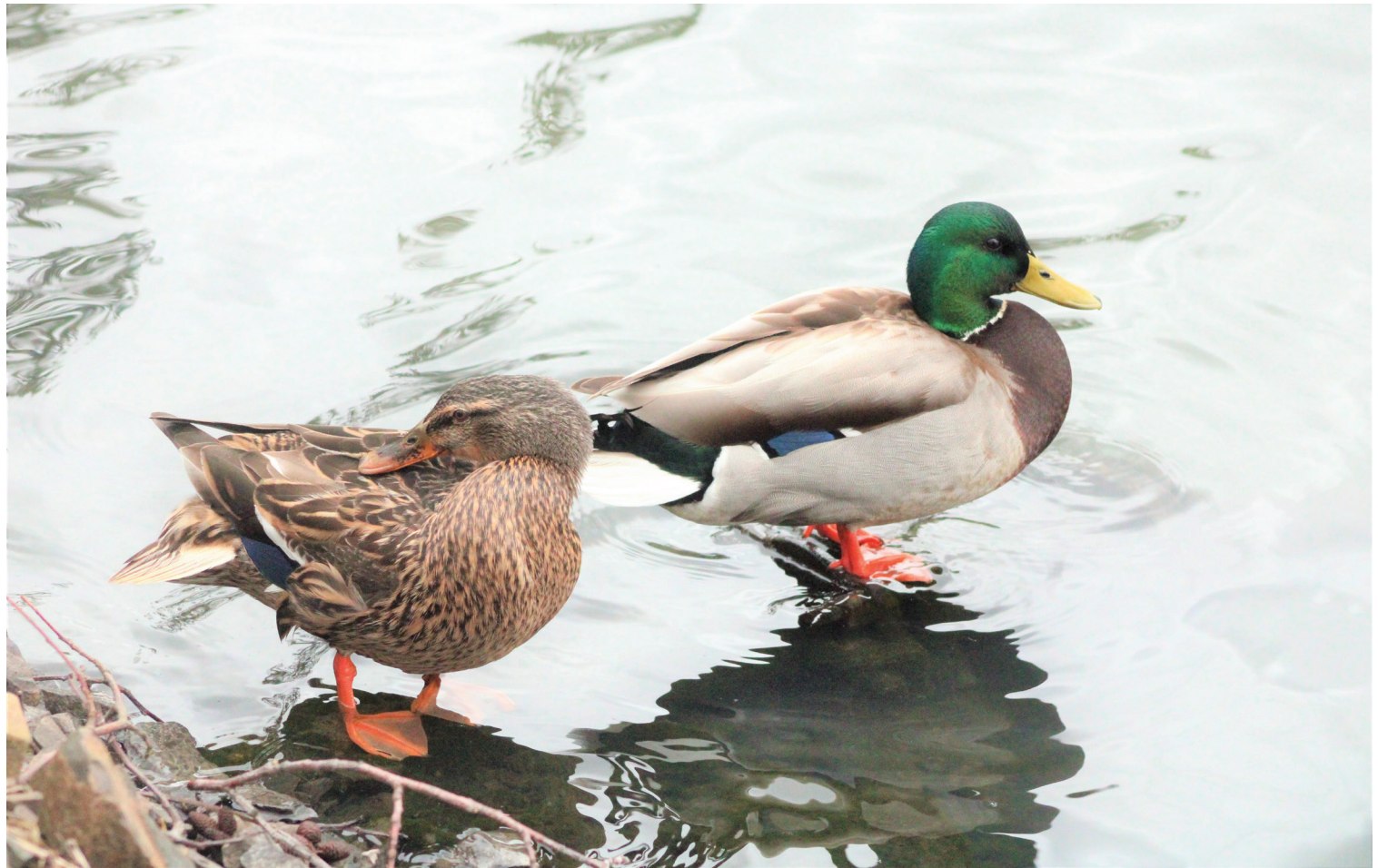
Ducks are the smallest of the waterfowl, some being no larger than your average chicken. The males of some species molt out their bright colored plumage for non-breeding colors, also known as eclipse plumage. Eclipse plumage is more common early in winter; most species will molt into breeding plumage toward spring. Some of the color patterns discussed in males here is breeding plumage, though other species maintain their bright colors year round.

The mallard is a good example of a species with eclipse plumage. You can still find them here this time of year, though don't look for males with green heads — they've replaced those bright feathers with drabber colors. If you see a duck with a green head it's more likely to be a male northern shoveler; look for a broad, wedge-shaped bill, darker in males than females.

Several species feature individuals with black heads with white markings during winter. The common goldeneye is a medium-sized duck that has a prominent white spot just in front of each eye. Don't confuse it for the smaller bufflehead; the female has a similar white spot behind her eye, while the male has an iridescent purple-green head with a broad band of white all around the side and back.

As spring approaches, you may see yet another lookalike, the male hooded merganser; his large crest may be flared open to reveal a large white patch, but his more slender bill sets him apart. Most of winter, though, he looks more like the female, both with gray bodies and cinnamon-colored crests (look for the yellow eyes that set males apart!)

One duck that has a notable feature at the other end is the northern pintail. While females are rather plain with a tan head and body feathers marked with brown and white, the male features a ruddy head, white throat and silvery-gray body. He is best known for his particularly long tail, which is significantly longer than that of other ducks. Ruddy ducks also have somewhat long tails, though not quite as long as the pintail's, and



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A couple of ducks sit by a side of a pond.

they are known for holding it with the tip pointed straight up. If the tail isn't indication enough, look for the dark head with white patch in both males and (in more subtle colors) females.

Teals are all small dabbling ducks, named for a patch of blue feathers seen on open wings. The females of all three species here look quite similar, and may only be told apart with subtle differences in markings and colors. The green-winged teal male has a bright rust head with a green streak, and a white vertical stripe against a gray chest. Male blue-winged teal ducks have a dark blue-gray head with a large vertical stripe in front of the eye. And the male cinnamon teal has a bright rusty-colored head. Not every duck with a red head is a cinnamon teal, though. You might be seeing an American wigeon in nonbreeding plumage. You can tell him apart from the occasional Eurasian wigeon that

finds its way over here by his redder body plumage and larger white patch on the wing. The canvasback also has a red head, but is larger than the wigeons, and both sexes have a distinctive sloped forehead. Male canvasbacks also have very pale bodies with black chests and tails, and whereas the wigeons are both dabbling ducks, the canvasback dives underwater.

Other diving ducks that winter here include the scaups and scoters. Lesser and greater scaups look very similar to each other, and often can only be told apart in close quarters. Both female scaups have white patches in front of their eyes that may confuse them with goldeneyes at a distance. However, scaups are usually found on salt water, whereas goldeneyes often head into bays, lakes, and ponds. The ring-necked duck male is also similar to scaups; however, his entire back is dark and his belly pale, and

again he is found inland rather than on the ocean.

Also on the ocean are the surf scoter, black scoter, and white-winged scoter, all of which are only uncommonly found further inland. All three species have large swellings at the base of the beak, particularly in males. Male surf scoters can be distinguished by their orange beaks and white patches on beak and head; females are brown and have much fainter white patches. The female white-winged scoter is very similar but with brighter white patches, while the male has one little patch behind the eye and a white streak on the wing. The male black scoter lacks white markings entirely, and the female has a pale grey cheek.

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