

## Geese and swans to look for this winter

BY REBECCA LEXA

Fall migration is now at a close, but it has brought us a wealth of winter waterfowl!

While some species, like the mallard and the Canada goose, are found in the Columbia-Pacific region year-round, others are only part-time residents. Now's the time to keep your eyes on the water, particularly in places like Willapa Bay, Youngs Bay, the Columbia River estuary and their tributaries.

The term waterfowl refers specifically to ducks, geese and swans. While there are other birds found in and around waterways, waterfowl have four specific adaptations that define them: a broad and flat bill, webbed feet, a long neck and oily feathers.

Sometimes these traits may be relative; the bill of a common merganser, for example, looks quite narrow compared to that of a northern shoveler. However, both ducks demonstrate the variety of the waterfowl who overwinter here.

These birds spent the summer nesting and raising their young further north, primarily in Canada and Alaska. Once the young fledged and days grew shorter, huge flocks of waterfowl began journeys that could take them thousands of miles south. While some only stop in our area to rest and feed before continuing on, others find our relatively mild winters to be more than balmy enough.

What's really amazing is the sheer variety of waterfowl we get! From tiny green-winged teal ducks to the magnificent trumpeter swan, winter waterfowl come in all sizes, colors and with quite an array of unique characteristics.

Willapa National Wildlife Refuge has an excellent checklist of area bird species, including waterfowl on their website at [tinyurl.com/3u7zda37](http://tinyurl.com/3u7zda37).

Here's a list of some of the species you may get to see this winter:

### Geese

Geese are large birds with long necks. Generally speaking, males and females have similar coloration, though juveniles may have different colors than the adults. Unlike ducks, they don't have non-breeding/eclipse plumage (more on that in my next column.)

Both Canada geese and their smaller lookalikes the cackling geese can be found



Lynette Rae McAdams

**Wild Canada geese.**



**Waterfowl at Black Lake on the Long Beach Peninsula.**

in the area year-round, but are much more common in winter, when they may be found in large flocks. Both have brown bodies, with black heads, necks and feet. They also have a prominent white patch on the face.

However, winter brings other species, too!

Brant geese look similar to Canada and cackling geese, but have a small patch of white on the neck rather than the face. They're usually just passing through the area.

However, if you see a group of greater

white-fronted geese with a white patch by their orange bills, you can count on them to stick around a while.

Two similar species of white goose commonly pass through the North Coast. Snow geese and Ross's geese are more compact than some of the other goose species on the North Coast, and both are white with orange beaks and legs and black wingtips.

However, the snow goose has a black "smile line" on the lower portion of its beak, whereas the Ross's goose does not. The Ross's is also a bit smaller overall, and the beak shorter. Both species have a blue



Roy Western

**A trumpeter swan on Black Lake.**

morph in which much of the body and neck may be covered in blueish-gray feathers, but the head usually remains white.

This blue morph is similar to the emperor goose, a very rare visitor to our area. Usually staying further north even in winter, it is almost entirely blue-gray other than the head, back of the neck and part of the tail. Its bill is pink rather than orange. Chances are if you see a blue-gray goose with a white head, it's more likely a Ross's or snow goose.

Geese can be found on lakes, wetlands and other waterways, but also enjoy grazing in pastures and other open areas.

### Swans

North America only has two native species of swan, and they look almost exactly alike.

Both the trumpeter swan and tundra swan are large white birds with black bills and legs; juveniles may be gray in color with a large pink spot on the bill. However, some subspecies of tundra swan may have a very small yellow patch on the beak near the eye. Tundra swans are slightly smaller, and when the birds' heads are viewed from the front, the line dividing the head and bill is V-shaped in trumpeter swans, U-shaped in tundra swans.

Lakes are excellent places to look for swans. Black Lake in Ilwaco, Washington, is especially well-known for its swan viewing location.

In my next column I'll continue exploring winter waterfowl with a feature on ducks!

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