

Wildlife Express!

Volume 24/Issue 6

Diving Ducks

February 2011



Discovering Diving Ducks

Photo courtesy Mike Morrison ©



Let's Talk About ... Diving Ducks

Diving ducks could be called “disappearing ducks.” Now you see them, now you don’t. Their habit of diving underwater can make them a challenge to observe. This is a very diverse group of ducks that prefer deeper bodies of water than their puddle duck cousins. Some diving ducks live in freshwater lakes and rivers. Others call the ocean home. They range in size from the small bufflehead to the large ocean-dwelling common eider.

As their name indicates, diving ducks are expert divers. Diving underwater helps them find the food they need to survive. Fish, aquatic insects, crayfish, crabs, shrimp, clams, mussels, frogs, and snails are just some of the things on a diving duck’s menu. Diving ducks dive 20 to 30 feet under the water while hunting for food. They can hold their breath for several minutes. They often use both their wings and feet when diving. This helps them dive more quickly than if they just used their feet.

All ducks float in the water just like corks. Getting under the water to hunt is a challenge for birds that weigh only a

few pounds, at most. A couple of neat adaptations help these ducks dive right in. If you compare diving ducks that are just swimming around with ones that are actively diving, you will notice that the divers look smaller. This is because the divers have compressed all their feathers together. This gets rid of air trapped between the feathers. Once that extra air is gone, the duck is not as buoyant. In addition, diving ducks are heavier because their skeletons do not have as many air spaces as other birds.

Another important adaptation for diving ducks is the placement of their legs and feet on their body. Unlike most ducks and geese, the legs and feet of diving ducks

are placed toward the back of their body. This gives their legs a lot of power for diving under the water. While this makes diving a breeze, it makes walking on land pretty tough. This is why diving ducks spend most of their lives on the water. Their rear-placed legs also cause diving ducks to need a “running” start across the top of the water to take off. If you see a duck running across the water, you know it is a diving duck.

Idaho is home to 11 different kinds of diving ducks. Some are found here all year while others are seen only during the winter months. If you live near a lake or river, take some time to discover diving ducks.



Waterfowl Watch

Waterfowl are fun to watch because of their interesting behaviors and colorful, boldly-marked feathers. One of the advantages of watching waterfowl is their size. Most of them are large enough that they are fairly easy to observe. You can also observe waterfowl all year-round. In the spring, watch for courtship behavior. Later in the season you can spot the young birds as they swim and feed with their parents. Fall brings the chance to observe waterfowl migration. In winter, you can enjoy some new species that spend the winter in Idaho.

Waterfowl make great subjects for photographers and artists. If you are a young artist, you might want to enter the Junior Duck Stamp Contest. It is sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Check out their website for details at www.fws.gov/juniorduck



BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Watching waterfowl is also very helpful if you are a waterfowl hunter. You will need to be able to identify waterfowl so you do not accidentally harvest the wrong kind of bird. Some waterfowl such as swans are protected. Unfortunately, they can be confused for snow geese----oops! If you spend time observing waterfowl before you go hunting, you will know how to properly identify the birds you see. Proper identification is also important when it comes to eating your harvest. Some ducks, like diving ducks, just don't taste very good! If you know what to look for, you will be able to bring home a duck that will make a tasty meal your whole family will enjoy.



Photo courtesy John White ©

Common Merganser

This large duck is common in Idaho. This merganser is two feet long and has a three-foot wingspan. Like many ducks, the male and female look different. Males are mostly white with a dark green head. Females are gray with brown heads. Both have a red bill. As with most ducks, the male looks more like the female during the late summer and fall.

During the winter, they migrate to large rivers and lakes. This makes Idaho a perfect home for this species.

Common mergansers breed along rivers and lakes that are bordered by forests. During the winter, they migrate to large rivers and lakes. This makes Idaho a perfect home for this species. They feed on a variety of food including fish, insects, snails, worms, and crayfish. Birds called gulls sometimes follow flocks of feeding common mergansers to try and steal their food!



Photo courtesy Mike Morrison ©

Ducks, Geese, and Swans Oh My!

Ducks, geese, and swans make up the waterfowl family. This large group of birds has 154 species



living in aquatic habitats all over the world. They range in size from small ducks with wingspans of just over a foot to large swans with nearly seven-foot wingspans. All species have webbed feet

and are expert swimmers. Male and female ducks can look quite different. This caused a lot of confusion for early naturalists who sometimes thought they were different species! The males and females of geese and swans tend to look alike.

Waterfowl eat plants and animals. Some species eat only plants or only animals while others eat both. This is possible because waterfowl bills have special structures called lamellae (lam-el-LEE).

The lamellae are toothed comb-like structures that help waterfowl gather food. For example, the bill of a Canada goose is perfect for clipping grasses and eating seeds. A trumpeter swan has a bill that works well for gathering underwater plants. Some dabbling ducks like mallards, strain food from the water. In diving ducks like mergansers, the lamellae are sharp serrations along the bill that help the duck catch and hold fish. An additional adaptation on the bill is the “nail” at the bill tip.

This structure is used for both holding prey and removing seeds from plants.

Waterfowl nest in many locations including holes in trees, cliffs, old eagle nests, or on the ground. Their nests are lined with down feathers that help keep the eggs warm. When hatching occurs, the eggs tend to all hatch at the same time. Baby waterfowl are called ducklings (ducks), cygnets (swans), or goslings (geese). As soon as they are dry, they leave the nest and follow their parents to nearby water. Unlike most baby birds, young waterfowl are able to walk, swim, and feed themselves only a few hours after hatching. These kinds of birds are called “precocial” (pre-CO-shall). They can take care of themselves shortly after they are born, but still rely on their parents for warmth and protection from predators. Young waterfowl stay with their parents for most of the summer. Some family groups of swans and geese even migrate together in the fall.

By mid to late summer, adult waterfowl lose their tail and flight feathers. This process is called molt. During this time, waterfowl cannot fly. It takes about a month for new feathers to grow. This happens just in time for fall migration. Waterfowl tend to migrate in large flocks. Some waterfowl migrate from northern Canada to spend the winter in Idaho. Other ducks that spend the summer in Idaho migrate to the southern United States and Mexico for the winter. No matter what the season, you are sure to see waterfowl in Idaho!

Bufflehead

The uncommon bufflehead is the smallest diving duck. It is about the size of a football and has a wingspan of 12 to 15 inches. Here in Idaho, they are mostly a winter resident except in northern Idaho where they can be seen all year.



Photo courtesy Mike Morrison ©

Bufflehead nest near small ponds and lakes that are surrounded by forests. They need trees because they are very picky about where they nest. Bufflehead will only nest in old nest cavities excavated by northern flickers. This woodpecker makes the perfect-sized nesting cavity for these small

ducks. Having flickers in the neighborhood is very important for bufflehead.

Bufflehead eat insects, shrimp, crabs, snails, clams, and other invertebrates. They often occur in small groups. The male is very striking and has a large white patch on the back of his head. Female bufflehead are dark grayish-brown and have a small white oval cheek patch.

Harlequin Duck

Harlequin ducks are found in Idaho during the summer months. They nest along small fast-moving streams in the northern part of the state. Once nesting is done, harlequin ducks migrate to the Pacific coast where they will spend the rest of the year. Sailors nicknamed these ducks “sea mice” because of the squeaking noises they make.

These ducks are about half the size of a mallard. Their beautiful feathers are an unusual pattern of blue-gray, reddish-orange, black, and white. The name “harlequin” comes from characters in Italian plays that wore masks and oddly painted costumes. Early explorers must have laughed when they saw these oddly-colored ducks.

Since harlequin ducks live in both fresh and salt water, they eat different things. Here in Idaho, the ducks feed on the aquatic larvae

of black flies, caddisflies, stoneflies, midges, and other aquatic insects. In the ocean, they eat small crabs, mussels, fish eggs, snails, and small shrimp-like creatures called “amphipods.” Harlequin ducks are not very common. If you see one, you are very lucky!



Common Goldeneye

This medium-sized diving duck gets its name from the yellow-gold color of its eyes. Males are black and white with a very dark green head. They also have a white patch right in front of their bill. Females are gray with brown heads. This duck makes a very loud whistling sound with its wings as it flies.

Goldeneye are often the last migratory duck to arrive in their wintering area. If they can find open water, they will stay as far north as they can in the winter. They are mostly a winter resident to Idaho found on large lakes and rivers. Goldeneye often form large flocks that often dive together to find food. They eat aquatic invertebrates and small fish.

Like other diving ducks, goldeneye nest in cavities in trees. This is why they nest near lakes and rivers with forests. Female goldeneye often lay their eggs in the nests of other goldeneye.



Photo courtesy John White ©

Hooded Merganser

This small duck is one of Idaho's most beautiful diving ducks. The male is black, white, and brown with a large black-and-white crest on its head. The female also has a crest, but hers is reddish-brown and not very neat. Think about yourself on a bad hair day and you will have the right idea.

Hooded mergansers nest in forested wetlands. They are cavity nesters and will sometimes lay their eggs in the nests of other cavity-nesting ducks. During the winter months, they can be seen in larger rivers and lakes.

The Hooded Merganser is one of Idaho's most beautiful diving ducks.

Hooded mergansers eat fish, aquatic insects, and crayfish. They hunt by sight, looking underwater for their food. Their third eyelid acts like swimming goggles, helping them see underwater. They are also able to change the shape of their eyes which also helps with underwater vision.



Photo courtesy Mike Morrison ©

Dabbling Ducks

Dabbling ducks are sometimes called puddle ducks. They are the ducks you usually see on small ponds and marshes. More than 50 species can be found around the world. Twelve are native to North America. The mallard is one of the most common species of dabbling ducks in the world.

Their name comes from their habit of nibbling food off the top of the water. This behavior is called “dabbling.” They also feed by up-ending their bodies so they can stretch their neck under water to get food. If you see a duck with its bum in the air, it is a dabbling duck. Geese and swans also feed this way.

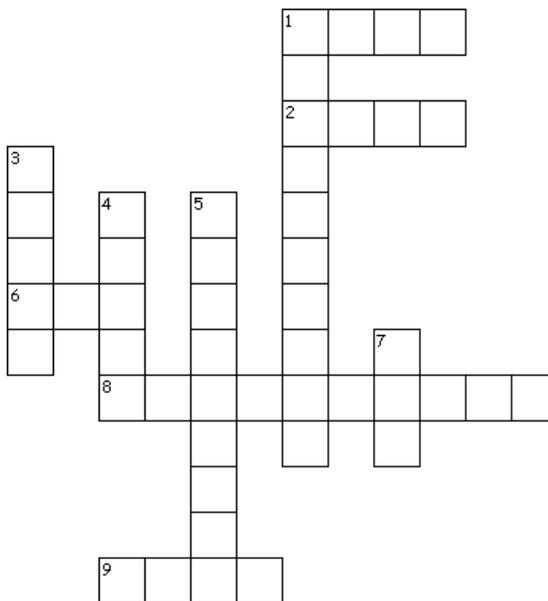
Dabbling ducks eat many different foods. Plants are an important food and include seeds, roots, tubers, sedges, and grasses. These ducks also eat small insect larvae, invertebrates such as snails and worms, and occasionally frogs and small fish. Dabbling ducks tend to eat animals during the spring and summer. They switch to plant food during the fall and winter months.

Idaho hosts nine species of dabbling duck. See how many you can see near your home.

A Ducky Puzzle

Across

- The feet and legs of diving ducks are placed toward the _____ of their bodies.
- Diving ducks may dive 20 to 30 _____ under water looking for food.
- Diving ducks need to _____ on top of the water to lift their bodies into the air to fly.
- Diving ducks have sharp _____ along their bills that help them catch and hold onto fish.
- This is the word used when ducks loose and replace their feathers.



WORDS

Air
Back
Bufflehead
Feet
Hours
Molt
Run
Serrations
Waterfowl
Wings

Down

- This is Idaho's smallest diving duck.
- Ducks are able to swim, walk, and feed themselves a few _____ after hatching.
- Diving ducks use both their _____ and feet to drive under water.
- Ducks, geese and swans make up the _____ family.
- To help them sink, diving ducks squeeze the _____ out of their feathers before diving.

WILDLIFE EXPRESS

Volume 24 • Issue 6 • Diving Ducks • February 2011

Wildlife Express is published nine times a year (September-May) by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

Classroom subscriptions and an Educator's Guide are available for \$35.00 per year and includes a classroom set of 30 copies mailed to your school each month. Subscriptions of 10 copies or less are available for \$20.00. This publication is made possible through the sale of wildlife license plates.

For more information, call or write: *Wildlife Express*, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, 600 South Walnut, PO Box 25, Boise, Idaho, 83707 (208) 287-2890.



Lead Writer: Vicky Runnoe
Layout: Sandy Gillette McBride
Contributors: Lori Adams • Adare Evans



WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for *Wildlife Express*, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to the address printed above!

Look for printable copies of *Wildlife Express* on the web at <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov>