



36. Puddle Ducks

Puddle ducks, also called dabbling ducks, are the largest and most widespread group of waterfowl in the world. They include the wild ducks most familiar to people. This note covers seven species commonly found in Pennsylvania (American black duck, gadwall, northern pintail, green – and blue-winged teal, wigeon, and northern shoveler); the mallard and wood duck are also puddle ducks, but they are featured individually in other Wildlife Notes because they are by far the Commonwealth’s most abundant breeding ducks, and together typically comprise about 70 percent of Pennsylvania’s duck harvest. The two major duck groups, puddle and diving ducks, differ in several ways. Divers inhabit deeper (usually greater than 3 feet deep) ponds, lakes, rivers, bays and inlets; while puddle ducks tend to stick to the shallows (less than 1 foot deep) of freshwater lakes, rivers and marshes, although they will use saltwater, especially for migration and wintering habitat. Diving ducks are, as their name implies, adept at diving and obtain most of their food this way. Puddle ducks prefer to feed on the surface or close to it. Often, they stretch their heads underwater, feeding upended with their tails in the air. As a group, they are not accomplished divers, but adults dive occasionally and ducklings do so frequently.

Puddle ducks feed in the water along the fringes of islands and shorelines, and on dry land. Their diet is a mixture of vegetable matter—seeds, grasses, leaves and stems of underwater plants, agricultural crops, nuts—along with mollusks, insects and fish.

These shallow-water ducks ride higher in the water than their diving cousins, and launch themselves directly upward when taking off; they do not need to run across the water to build up speed for takeoff as diving ducks do. Puddle ducks are excellent swimmers, sure-footed on land, and swift agile fliers. On the wing, they often display a speculum, or wing patch, which is a bright, iridescent panel of feathering close to the body on the trailing edge of each wing. Speculum color varies from species to species and may function as a flashing signal to help keep a flock together. To the human observer, the speculum is often a telltale field mark.

American black duck



Within the species, males (called drakes) have bright, colorful plumage, while the females (hens) are drab. In fall, winter and spring, drakes are feathered in their normal bright coloration; in summer to early fall, after breeding season, they molt into a drab “eclipse” plumage and resemble the hens for several months.

North American puddle ducks breed across the northern part of the continent; some species—mallards, black duck, blue-winged teal and wood ducks—nesting in Pennsylvania. They generally mate for the first time when a year old. During courtship, drakes chase the hens and engage in fighting, ritualized movements, posturing and calling. After mating, the drake leaves immediately, or he stays with the hen while she is laying and then departs soon afterward. Pair bonds are weak, and a different mate will be courted each year. The hen lays a large clutch of eggs (7 to 13, depending on the species) in a nest built of grasses, leaves and reeds, hidden among vegetation. She incubates and cares for the brood by herself.

Ducklings are covered with down. They are a pale brownish color, streaked with darker lines to disguise their body outlines. Minutes after hatching, they can swim and feed themselves. They first fly at about two months of age.

In autumn, puddle ducks fly south, along with other waterfowl (diving ducks, geese and swans). Waterfowl start migrating through Pennsylvania in late August. Migration peaks from late October through Thanksgiving and typically ends in late December or early January. Puddle ducks occasionally winter in Pennsylvania, but most spend the cold months across the southern United States and in Central America.

Raccoons, foxes, minks, hawks and owls prey upon ducks. Raccoons, skunks and crows eat the eggs; snapping turtles and fish take the young.

Taxonomists group puddle ducks in family Anatidae, subfamily Anatinae. The Anatinae form the largest and most diverse of the commonly recognized waterfowl subfamilies, with more than 40 species worldwide. Pennsylvania puddle ducks all belong to genus *Anas*.

American Black Duck

Length, 21 to 26 inches; average weight, 2.4 to 2.8 pounds. Also called “black mallard” or “red leg.” Plumage is a dark, mottled brown with white underwings and a violet-blue speculum. When visibility is good, the contrast between the light-brown head and the brown-black body is noticeable. This is Pennsylvania’s only puddle duck in which the plumages of both sexes are almost identical. The drake in nuptial plumage has a bright yellow bill, contrasting with the female’s olive-green bill. The voice of the hen is a loud *quack*; of the drake, a lower-pitched *kwek-kwek*.

Black ducks eat a variety of vegetable foods, including eelgrass, widgeon grass, and the seeds of sedges, bulrushes, wild rice, pondweeds, smartweeds and millets. On land they feed on acorns and waste corn, willingly flying up to 25 miles to a reliable source of the latter. Animal foods, more important in late winter and spring, include periwinkles, mussels and snails.

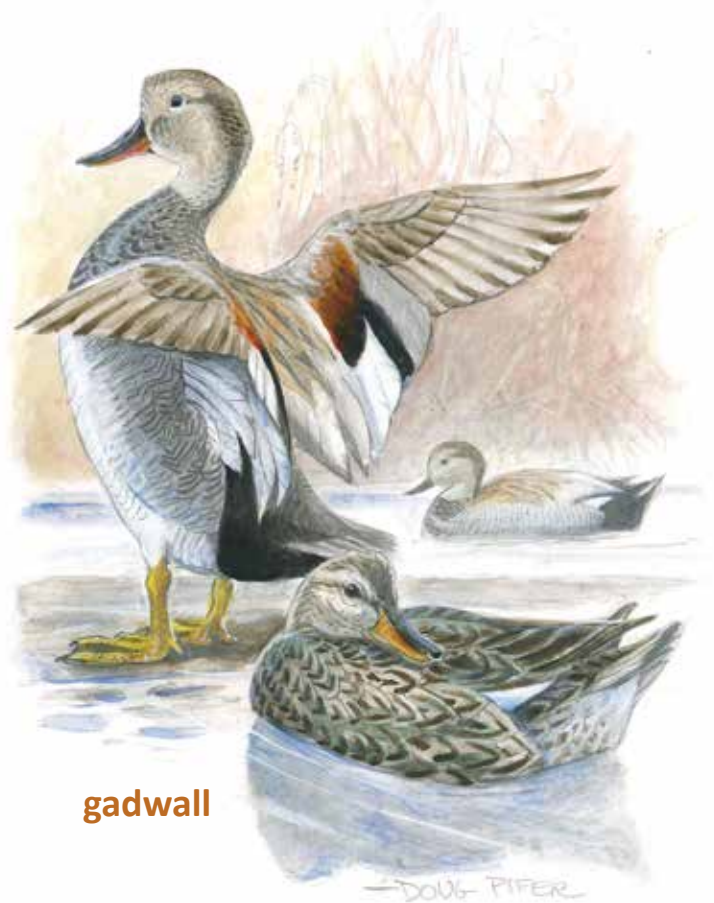
Black ducks breed in Pennsylvania, nesting in marshes, bogs, and lake and stream margins, and often in wooded uplands. They nest on the ground, on stumps and dead snags, and occasionally in tree cavities. They lay 8 to 10 eggs which hatch in about four weeks.

Once considered the number one duck in the waterfowl hunter’s bag, the black duck has dropped to third or fourth place, behind the mallard, wood duck and green-winged teal. Pennsylvania’s breeding black duck population declined steadily from the 1960s to present due to habitat loss/ degradation and competition and hybridization with mallards. Black ducks remain abundant in eastern Canada, and rangewide populations appear to have stabilized, albeit at well below historic numbers, since harvest restrictions were implemented in 1982.

Gadwall

Length, 19 to 23 inches; average weight, 1.8 to 2.2 pounds. Sometimes called “gray duck.” Males in breeding plumage have brown heads, gray bodies and black tails. The female is similar, but more brown in color. The legs are yellow. This is the only puddle duck with white in its speculum. The drake whistles and sounds a *kack-kock*; the hen quacks like a mallard, but more rapidly and higher pitched.

Food is basically aquatic plants. On brackish or freshwater estuaries where they often winter, gadwalls concentrate on vegetation such as widgeon grass, eelgrass, muskgrass and



gadwall

pondweeds. In Pennsylvania, gadwalls are most common in late October through mid-November, though usually not numerous. They are considered non-breeding residents, although they have nested in Crawford and Butler counties. They breed mainly in the western United States, Canada and Alaska. Hens seek dense, dry weed cover, hiding the nest from above and all sides. They lay about 10 eggs, which hatch in 26 days.

Gadwall are most plentiful in the Dakotas and Canada’s prairie provinces, less common on the Atlantic Flyway. They are often seen with pintails and wigeons, but they rarely congregate in large flocks. The gadwall dives for submerged vegetation more often than other puddle ducks.

Northern Pintail

Length, 20 to 29 inches; average weight, 1.9 to 2.3 pounds; slender and trim. Also called “sprig.” Among the most beautifully marked of Pennsylvania’s ducks, a pintail male in breeding plumage has a brown head, white neck and breast, and a gray back and sides. Females are grayish brown. The speculum is metallic greenish-brown with a white rear border, but far more noticeable in flight is the male’s long, slender, pointed tail. Pintails are extremely graceful and fast fliers, fond of zigzagging from great heights before leveling off to land. Voice: the drake has a flute-like whistle, the hen a soft *quack*.

In summer and fall, pintails feed largely on seeds and vegetative parts of pondweeds and widgeon grass, and on the seeds of bulrushes and smartweeds. Nesting females eat more aquatic insects. Sometimes pintails land in harvested

fields to glean waste grain. They breed mainly across Canada, northwestern United States and in Alaska, also in the Eastern Hemisphere in Asia; in Pennsylvania, nests have historically been reported in Crawford County and the Tinicum wildlife refuge near Philadelphia. Pintails often nest in dead herbaceous cover of the past year's growth, which may offer little concealment. The nest site is usually within 100 yards of water, but may be up to a mile away. Females lay about 9 eggs; they hatch following a fairly short incubation period, 21 days. A few pintails winter in Pennsylvania, but most fly to the southern United States, the Central Valley of California, and Central America.

Green-winged Teal

Length, 13 to 16 inches; average weight, ½ to 1 pound; the smallest of North American ducks, about the size of a pigeon. The male is beautifully colored with a dark, reddish-brown head, a green streak over the eye, and a vertical white stripe on the side. The female is primarily brown. The speculum shows green in both sexes. Green-winged teal fly swiftly, often in small, tight flocks. Drakes whistle and have a tittering call; hens sound a faint *quack*.

Green-winged teal prefer small and shallow, but permanent, freshwater ponds, with thick cover nearby. They feed on mudflats or in shallow marshes on small seeds of grasses, bulrushes and smartweeds, and on the stems and leaves of pondweeds. They also eat tiny mollusks, snails and other crustaceans.

A few green-winged teal may be found nesting in northern Pennsylvania, although the duck's primary breeding range is farther north, across Canada, the northwestern United States, and Alaska. Courting birds engage in much whistling and posturing. Females hide their nests in dense patches of shrubs

green-winged teal



and weeds, or in tall grass at the edge of a lake or slough. They lay 8 to 10 eggs and incubate those 21 to 23 days; they vigorously defend their nest. Some green-winged teal occasionally winter in Pennsylvania, but most go farther south.

Blue-winged Teal

Length, 14 to 16 inches; average weight, ¾ to 1 pound. The drake has a brown body and a slate-gray head; in front of the eyes is a distinctive white crescent. The hen is primarily brown. Both sexes have a blue patch on the fore-wing and a green speculum, but patches are more prominent on the males. Blue-winged teal are shy, common waterfowl, found on ponds, marshes and protected bays, often with other puddle ducks. Their small, compact flocks fly swiftly, often low over the marsh, twisting and dodging around trees and bushes.

blue-winged teal



Northern pintail

The birds sound a twittering flight call. Additional calls: drakes have a whistling *tseet tseet tseet*, and hens a soft *quack*.

Blue-wings are among Pennsylvania's earliest migrants in the fall, and the latest in the spring. They head south in late August and September and usually do not arrive back on the breeding grounds in large numbers until late April or early May.

Food includes seeds and vegetation of aquatic plants, especially pondweeds, widgeon grass, duckweed and millet. They often feed near green-winged teal, the blue-wings consuming more animal matter.

Blue-winged teal occasionally nest in Pennsylvania, in borders of freshwater sloughs, swamps, ponds, and marshes. They lay 10 to 13 eggs in a basket-like nest built on dry ground. Surrounding vegetation usually arches over the nest, concealing it. Incubation is 23 to 24 days.

The blue-winged teal is a familiar, common duck of inland North America, although nesting populations near the Great Lakes have been reduced through grassland habitat loss and change. Populations in its primary breeding range, the prairie pothole region in mid North America, are strong.

American Wigeon

Length, 18 to 23 inches; average weight, 1½ to 2 pounds. Also called "baldpate." The male has a gray neck and head, with a white stripe from the forehead to the middle of the crown and an iridescent green patch coming back from the eye; the body is pinkish-brown, the speculum blackish with a hint of green. The female's coloration is similar, but duller. The species can best be identified in flight by the white belly and fore-wings. Wigeons are wary birds, quickly reacting to potential threats and disturbances; they fly swiftly in compact flocks, wheeling and turning in unison. Males have a three-syllable whistle with the middle note the loudest; hens utter a loud *koow* and a lower *qua-awk*.

Wigeons feed primarily on submerged aquatic plants, sometimes coming ashore for shoots of grains and grasses. They breed in the northwestern United States, Canada and Alaska, nesting in dry, sedge-lined meadows around lakes and sloughs. The 7 to 9 eggs are incubated about 23 days. Wigeons

northern shoveler



American wigeon



migrate through Pennsylvania in October and November. Some occasionally winter in Pennsylvania, but most go to the southern states and farther south.

Northern Shoveler

Length, 17 to 22 inches; weight, about 1½ pounds; size similar than the mallard, for which it is often mistaken. Also called "spoonbill" for its long, broad bill. The male has a green head, white breast and chestnut sides. The female is a mottled brown. The best field marks are the outsize bill, held downward as the bird rides in the water; and, in flight, blue upper-wing and white under-wing coloration. Females have a typical *quacking* call, males a *took-took*. Shovelers usually travel in small flocks of 5 to 10 birds.

Food: invertebrates (caddis fly larvae, dragonfly nymphs, beetles, bugs), duckweeds, and seeds of pondweeds and bulrushes. In deep water, shovelers apparently feed on surface plankton, taking in a steady stream of water at the tip of the bill and expelling it at the base, straining out microscopic plants.

Shovelers breed in the northwestern United States, Canada and Alaska. Females nest in grassy cover, sometimes well away from water. The 10 eggs hatch in three to four weeks. Shovelers pass through Pennsylvania in March and April, and again in September through November. They winter along the southern United States coast and in western states and Central America.