



# Puddle Ducks

by Chuck Fergus

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 Wildlife 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 Notes.

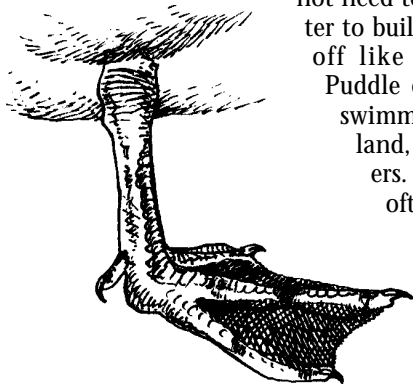
The two major duck groups, puddle and diving ducks, differ in several ways. Divers inhabit large deep lakes and rivers, and coastal bays and inlets; puddle ducks tend to stick to the shallows of lakes, rivers and freshwater marshes, although they frequent saltwater, especially during migration. Diving 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 up-ended 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 consists mainly of vegetable matter — seeds, grasses, leaves and stems of underwater plants, agricultural crops and 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 take-off like 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 — 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.

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 early summer, after breeding season, they molt into a drab “eclipse” plumage and resemble the hens for several months.

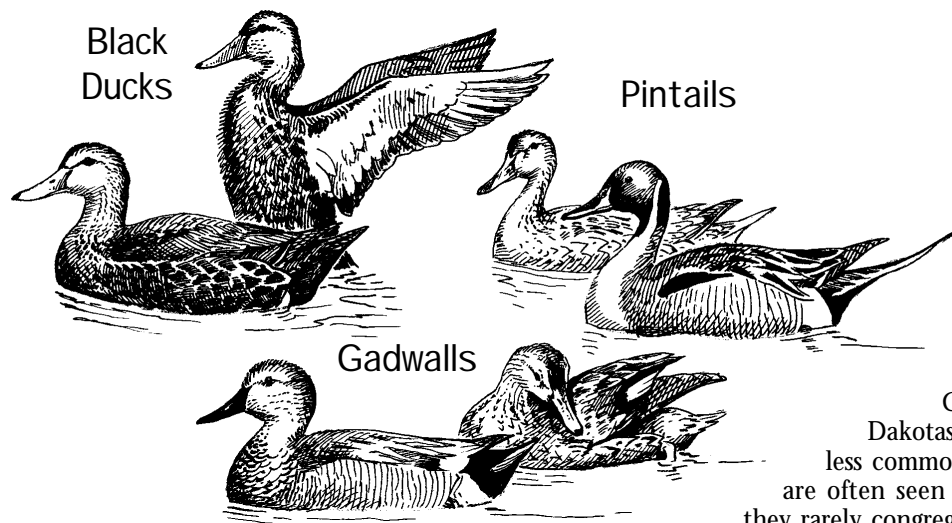
North American puddle ducks breed across the northern part of the continent; some species — mallards, black and wood ducks — nest in Pennsylvania. They generally mate for the first time when a year old. During courtship, drakes chase the hens and engage in fighting, ritualized movements, posturing and 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 diving ducks and geese. Waterfowl start migrating through Pennsylvania in late August; the movement peaks in October and ends in December. Some 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 our 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 winter, 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; eggs, 8 to 10, hatch in about 4 weeks.

Once the most popular duck in the waterfowl hunter’s bag, the black duck has dropped to third place, behind the mallard and wood duck. The black duck population declined steadily in the 1960s and ’70s. In 1982, harvest restrictions were implemented and the population appears to have stabilized, but is well below its historic numbers.

**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,

muskrass and pondweeds. In Pennsylvania, gadwalls are uncommon. 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 more often than any other puddle duck.

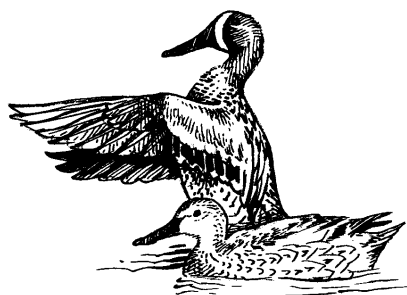
**Northern Pintail** — Length, 20 to 29 inches; average weight, 1.9 to 2.3 pounds; slender and trim. Also called “sprig.” Among the most beautifully marked of our ducks, a pintail male in breeding plumage has a brown head, white neck and breast, and a gray back and sides. Females are grayish brown. The 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 corn. They breed mainly across Canada, the northwestern United States and in Alaska, also in the Eastern Hemisphere; in Pennsylvania, nests have been reported in Crawford County and the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum near Philadelphia. Pintails often nest in dead herbaceous cover of the past year’s growth, which may offer little concealment; the 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 of 21 days. A few pintails winter in Pennsylvania, but most fly to the southern United States and Central America.

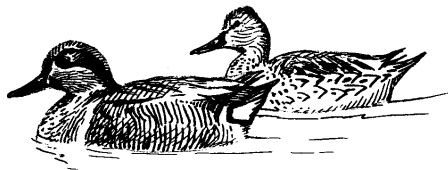
**Green-winged Teal** — Length, 13 to 16 inches; average weight, ½ to 1 pound; the smallest of our ducks, about the size of a pigeon. The male is beautifully colored with a dark, reddish-brown head, a green streak over the eye, and a vertical white stripe on the side. The female is primarily brown. The 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 small seeds of grasses, bulrushes and smartweeds, and on the stems and leaves of pondweeds. They also eat

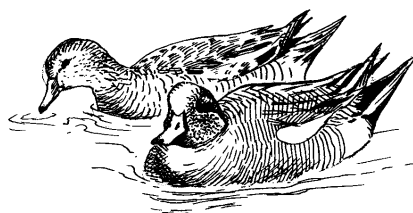
Blue-Winged  
Teals



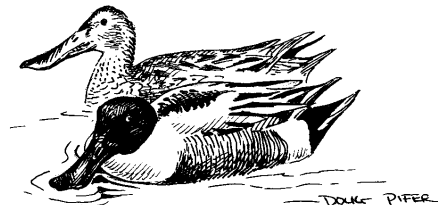
Green-  
Winged Teals



American  
Wigeons



Shovellers



tiny mollusks, snails and other crustaceans.

A few green-winged teal may be found nesting in 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 and weeds, or in tall grass at the edge of a lake or slough. They lay 8 to 10 eggs and incubate them 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,  $\frac{3}{4}$  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; the birds sound a twittering flight call. Additional calls: drakes have a whistling *tseet tseet tseet*, and hens a soft *quack*. Blue-wings are our earliest migrants; they head south in late August and September.

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 its numbers have been reduced through cultivation and habitat destruction in its primary breeding range, the prairie pothole region in mid North America.

**American Wigeon** — Length, 18 to 23 inches; average weight,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 pounds. Also called "baldpate." The

male has a cinnamon-red 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 3-syllable whistle with the middle note the loudest; hens utter a loud *koow* and a lower *qua-awk*.

Wigeons feed on 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 migrate through Pennsylvania in September and October. Some occasionally winter here, but most go to the southern states and farther south.

**Northern Shoveler** — Length, 17 to 22 inches; weight, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  pounds; size similar to 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 3 to 4 weeks. Shovelers pass through Pennsylvania in March and April, and again in September and October. They winter along the southern United States coast and in western states and Central America.

# Wildlife Notes

Allegheny Woodrat  
Bats  
Beaver  
Black Bear  
Blackbirds, Orioles, Cowbird and Starling  
Blue Jay  
Bobcat  
Bobwhite Quail  
Canada Goose  
Chickadees, Nuthatches, Titmouse and Brown Creeper  
Chimney Swift, Purple Martin and Swallows  
Chipmunk  
Common Nighthawk and Whip-Poor-Will  
Cottontail Rabbit  
Coyote  
Crows and Ravens  
Diving Ducks  
Doves  
Eagles and Ospreys  
Elk  
Finches and House Sparrow  
Fisher  
Flycatchers  
Foxes (Red & Gray)  
Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird and Brown Thrasher  
Hérons  
Kingfisher  
Mallard  
Mice and Voles  
Minks & Muskrats  
Northern Cardinal, Grosbeaks, Indigo Bunting and Dickcissel

Opossum  
Otter  
Owls  
Porcupine  
Puddle Ducks  
Raccoon  
Rails, Moorhen and Coot  
Raptors  
Ring-necked Pheasant  
Ruby-throated Hummingbird  
Ruffed Grouse  
Shrews  
Snowshoe Hare  
Sparrows and Towhee  
Squirrels  
Striped Skunk  
Tanagers  
Thrushes  
Vireos  
Vultures  
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Wild Turkey  
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Wood Duck  
Woodpecker  
Wood Warblers  
Wrens

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