

Text by Peter Pyle



Editor's Note: We have asked bird identification expert Peter Pyle to take a crack at the ducks on the cover of the November 2009 *Birding*. As Peter explains to us, each photo is instructive in one way or another. Several photos are of birds that are hard to identify at the species level. Others are of "easy" birds...until you start to dig deeper, and ask questions about age, sex, plumage, and subspecies.

—Ted Floyd



Main Cover Image— Victoria, British Columbia; January 2007.

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There is really no issue with identification here;

I don't see even the slightest hint of introgression with Eurasian Wigeon. The thing I would like to point out is that this adult male **American Wigeon** is in *basic plumage*, not alternate plumage. For many years, it was assumed—even by Humphrey and Parkes (H-P) themselves—that a duck's colorful plumage had to be its alternate plumage because it is brighter than the ephemeral or "eclipsed" plumage that a male duck acquires in summer as camouflage to molt its wings. But note the even quality to the feathering, indicating that the last molt of body feathers was a complete one.

It is helpful to think about adult geese, which also have a complete body molt immediately following the wing molt, but which have no partial spring/summer molt, as do ducks. If you are studying the *homology* of molts (i.e., if you are looking for points of shared evolutionary ancestry)—and that is the conceptual basis for the H-P system—you do not want to call this body molt prebasic in geese but prealternate in ducks. But that is just what most ornithologists were doing for years, based on the faulty assumption that ensuing plumage color should be a factor in identifying homologous molts.



Flap 1— Coleman, Alberta; July 2006.

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I received this image labeled American Black Duck and

honestly had no arguments with this identification, as these two ducklings are dark and have caps resembling this species. But then it was pointed out to me that American Black Ducks should not be in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta, so I began to wonder. Not having much experience with ducklings (do any of us?), I would have turned to Colleen Nelson's *The Downy Waterfowl of North America* (1993), but I'm writing this in Honolulu and unfortunately there does not seem to be a copy on all of O'ahu. So next I turned to Google images, and by typing in "duckling" + "species X," I was able to get what I needed. American Black Duck ducklings, along with most or all other *Anas* ducklings, have lighter faces, more pronounced eye-lines, and more spatulate-shaped and orangish-edged bills than the subject birds.

Rather, the plumage and bill structure matches *Aythya* much better. The dark backs on these ducklings, along with the nice cabinet-brown sides visible on the left-hand duckling, resemble juvenile **Ring-necked Duck** most, and I was able to find a close match to these ducklings in an image of this species taken by Scott Elliot "in rice" on 6 August 2007. Duckling scaup and Redheads appear to have brown-

er backs and duller flanks, as do juveniles of these species, and duckling Canvasbacks are already showing an elongated bill. It was Jessie Barry who first suggested Ring-necked for these ducklings, and I agree with her. They are just beginning their *prejuvinal molt*, by the way, which we now consider synonymous with the *first-basic molt*. This molt will result in juvenal (=first basic) plumage, at which point ducklings become easier to identify!



Flap 2—*Toronto, Ontario; April 2006.*
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This is a straightforward identification, as no other water-

fowl species except **Long-tailed Duck** has so striking a plumage pattern combined with elongated central rectrices. The tendency would be to think this is an adult male in breeding plumage, but in fact it is an adult female, based on the extensive pink to the bill, the brown scapulars, and the extensively brown neck and breast. Unlike most ducks, male Long-tails have a prealternate molt that can begin in April, but even in transitional or alternate plumage, males would display more white in the neck and scapulars. Also, they would have an even longer tail than this bird shows. The scapulars in this species can show much variation in color and length, depending on the timing of molts, and this has led some to posit—falsely, I believe—the occurrence of a presupplemental molt of these feathers. Instead, the variation appears to result from complex interactions between the timing of this single (prealternate) molt and the ebb and flow of hormones, which dictate feather color, shape, and size.



Flap 3—*Victoria, British Columbia; November 2007.*
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Most birders will quickly identify this as a scoter

based on its size, shape, and black plumage, and a close-to-equal number will spot the white secondary peaking out from the scapulars and humerals, and notice the uniquely shaped bill (adapted for prying open bivalves) and identify this as a **White-winged Scoter**. But not so fast. In 2005 the British Ornithologists' Union split their version of White-winged Scoter into a different species, Velvet Scoter (*M. fusca*); meanwhile, in the British arrangement, our White-winged Scoter becomes *M. deglandi*, with subspecies *deglandi* of North America and *stejnegeri* of north-eastern Asia (recently observed in Alaska). The American Ornithologists' Union is currently considering this split, as well. British Columbia is a good place for Eurasian ducks, so can we identify this to species and subspecies for sure?

As with many problems of this complexity, it is necessary to age and sex the bird first. This is an adult, based on the even and immaculate plumage and rectrices (indicating a recent complete prebasic molt), the dark head pattern and body plumage, and the well-developed bill. It lacks the jet-black plumage, white patch near the eye, and orange bill of an adult male, so that makes it an adult female. It's good that this is an adult, as a first-fall individual in November might not be identifiable among the three White-winged Scoter taxa. Adult female Velvet Scoters have smaller nostrils, along with feathering on the forehead that does not reach as far along the ridge of the culmen, so I think we can safely rule that one out. Unfortunately we may not be able to tell if this is *stejnegeri* from this angle, as the best way to separate females involves viewing the bill from above; it is more rounded in *deglandi* and narrower and more tapered in *stejnegeri*. So at this point we should let it go as for subspecies. It is always worth the consideration, though, for if we never try, we'll never find out if such subspecies as *stejnegeri* White-winged Scoters are regular in small numbers along the Pacific coast of North America.



Flap 4—Victoria, British Columbia; March 2008.
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This one is a bit of a challenge. It came to me labeled as a Ring-necked

Duck, but that is not correct. Female and first-year Ring-necked Ducks have more peaked heads, grayer face plumage with an eye-ring, a white loreal spot that is positioned higher up along the bill base, a darker back (darker than the sides), and a smaller bill with a more-defined white band near the tip. Female Redhead is similar, but it is not that, either; female Redheads lack white in the lores among other things. So this leaves us with one of the scaup, but which one? The first thing I consider with wintering scaup is what habitat the bird is in; if coastal or estuarine, it is more likely a Greater; if in a freshwater lake or reservoir, it is much more likely a Lesser. Victoria has both habitats, and the photo does not allow us to tell what kind of water the bird is in.

So that leaves us with head shape and bill and bill-nail size as the best clues. The head on this bird seems small and rounded and the bill and nail proportionally large to me, so my hunch is that it is a **Greater Scaup**, but I'll leave a small bit of room for doubt. (For what it's worth, Ted Floyd leans toward Lesser Scaup, mainly because of head shape; he says the crown is relatively pointy, with the "tallest" parts of the head being in a region above and behind the eye.)

Much more fun, for me anyway, is to attempt determining the bird's age and sex. Note the contrasting generations of feathers along the sides and, on the back, the newer back feathers being more vermiculated (slightly) than the older feathers. It has a mixture of juvenile and formative feathers. (Many but not all bird species have a *formative* plumage in their first year of life; this formative plumage, if it occurs, is the plumage right after juvenile plumage, and it results from the preformative molt.) Anyhow, this mixture of feather generations is unlike the even look dis-

played by the adult wigeon and scoter mentioned earlier, and the rather dull-yellow eye color makes me confident that it is a first-spring bird. I am equally confident that it is a female, as a male would be showing some blackish feathers in the head, plus brighter white and more strikingly vermiculated formative back feathers by March.



Flap 5—Victoria, British Columbia; February 2007.

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The ridiculous bill size and shape on

this bird alone are enough to get us confidently to **Northern Shoveler**, and the plumage, although a bit tattered looking, fits a male of this species. This is a first-cycle (or second calendar-year) bird, although caution is advised here, as some adults of this species (along with Cinnamon and Blue-winged teals) can remain in a partial, mottled alternate body plumage (or perhaps have a supplemental plumage) well into the winter, especially those individuals which migrate to the tropics. Besides the body plumage, a mixture of brown juvenile feathering (most evident on the sides of the breast and upper back) and dullish to semi-bright formative feathering (head and flanks), note the worn juvenile tail feathers with notched tips (a characteristic of juvenile rectrices in waterfowl) and the duller yellow eye color. Adults at this time of year, especially as far north as British Columbia, would have better-looking body plumage, stronger and darker rectrices without notched tips, and bright yellow eyes.