

# Muck Ducks and Slimepipers

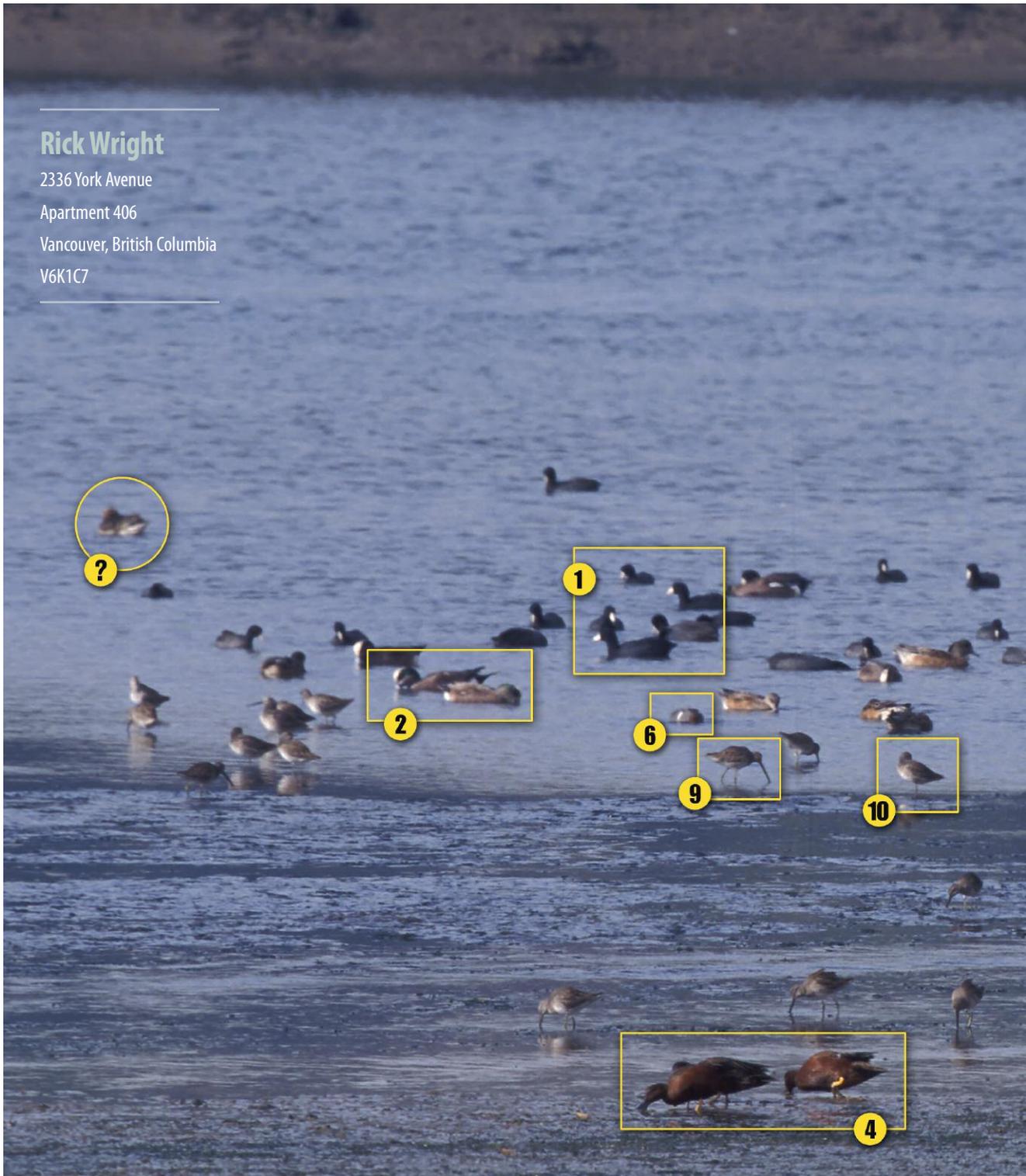
**Rick Wright**

2336 York Avenue

Apartment 406

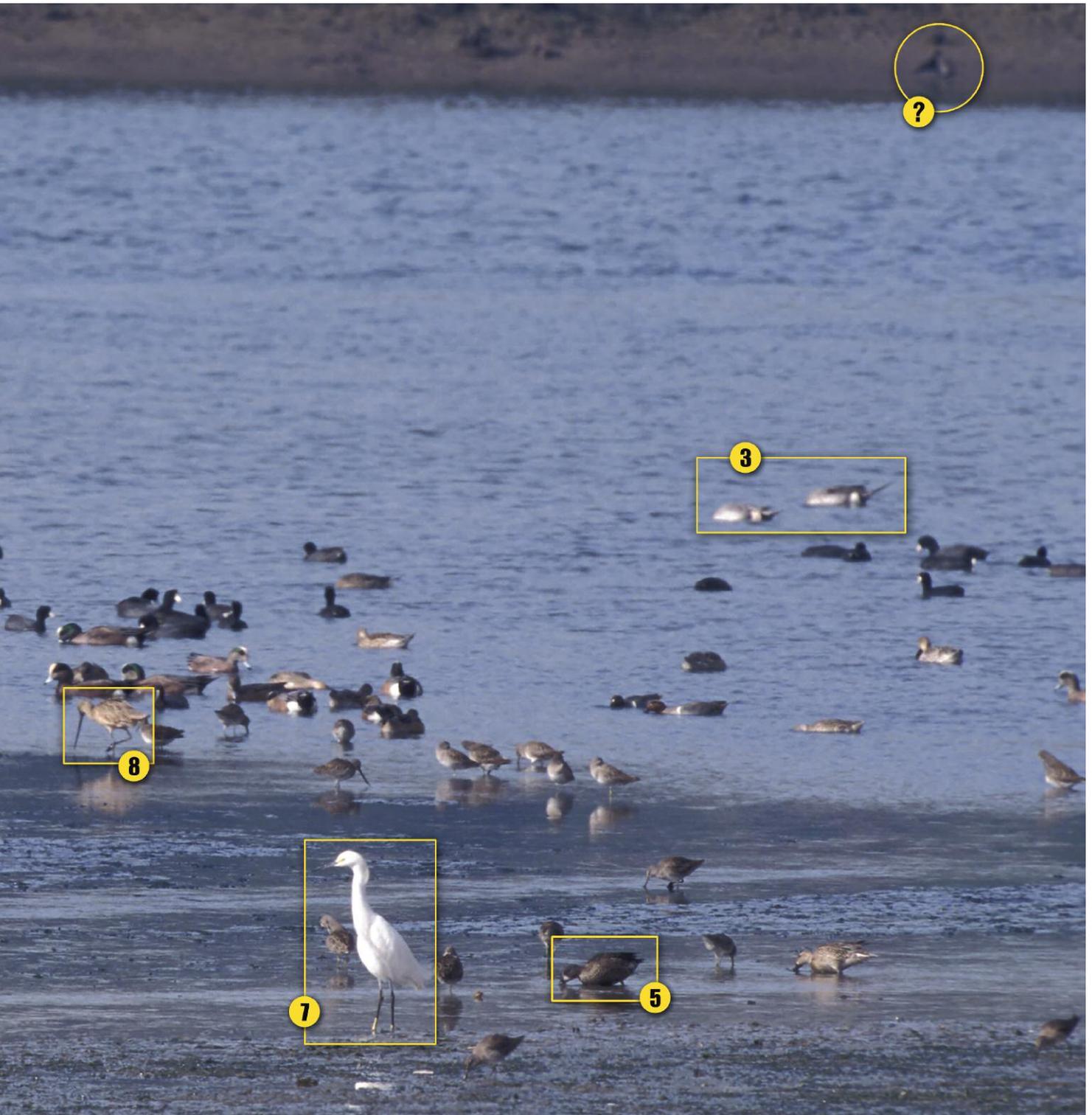
Vancouver, British Columbia

V6K1C7



A lot happens in a birder's mind before the tripod feet even touch the ground. Take this busy scene: We haven't really begun to look by the time we've efficiently identified—or rather recognized—several of the commonest or

most conspicuous birds in the assembly, at least to the level of “group,” and thus unconsciously given ourselves a basis for comparison of size and shape when it comes to the less numerous, the less prominent, or the less straightforward



individuals feeding in the shallows before us.

Let's start with those first impressions, probably formed with the naked eye as we carefully made our way to a convenient vantage point. No surprises as we identify the main groups represented on this tidal mudflat: We see ducks, we see shorebirds, we see a white heron. If we happen to be looking at one



of the blackish "ducks" when its head happens to be out of the water, we see the characteristic chalky bill of an **American Coot (1)**. Of the 30 or so present here, even those with heads and necks hidden are easily recognized by their slaty plumage, bulky rear ends, and—in the birds facing away—white undertail coverts.

Where there are coots there are almost always **American Wigeons (2)**, eager to steal plant material brought to the surface by the diving rallids. There are about 23 American Wigeon visible here; the drakes in their bright basic plumage don't present much of a problem, and the more demurely plumed females share the long tail, ovate body, and round, short-billed heads that identify them as wigeon. Since we're on the West Coast, there's a reasonable chance that our wigeon might be of two species. But I don't see any gray-bodied, red-headed drakes, and none of the females seems particularly bright-headed.



At the upper right we find two large ducks. Although they seem to be headless, their silvery plumage and white "fenders" give them away as **Northern Pintails (3)**. The three dark

waterfowl plying the foreground mire are **Cinnamon Teal (4)**, the bright tarsi identifying even the mostly obscured member of the trio. Just to the right of the heron in the photo



is a similarly sized duck with a conspicuous white facial crescent; its mottled brown body, solid gray head, and dark eye confirm that this is a **Blue-winged Teal (5)**—and not an alternate/drab/eclipse-plumaged Northern Shoveler.



It's often safe to identify "brown" ducks by the colorful birds in their company, but the bird to the right of the Blue-winged Teal in the photo is not a hen of that species but rather a Green-winged Teal, as her pale belly and white tail-edges reveal. If we look behind her on the flat, we can see another two brown Green-wings and two bright drakes, both



of the latter showing the vertical white breast-borders and relatively plain faces of **American Green-winged Teal (6)**. Near the middle of the image, in front of the gang of coots, yet another drake is dipping his bill into the water, providing an odd and beautiful head-on view.

That's it for the waterfowl, so we can turn our attention to the longer-legged birds frequenting the flat. Up to now we've used that white heron only as a landmark, but a quick look at its thick neck and slender, dark bill identifies it as a **Snowy Egret (7)**. There's always a chance at an outlander, of course, but we'll use the bright lore and thick nape crest as reliable distinctions from Little Egret.



And now it's time to get serious. The scopes are set up, the birds have settled back down, and we begin to look closely at the individuals we might not have been able to identify immediately. Our first scan of the ducks helped us get a read on size, and now we see that most of the brown birds wading in the water are small but not tiny. The exception is a strikingly large, extravagantly long-



billed bird at the center of the image, its buffy-pink body hardly smaller than those of the wigeon surrounding it. This is, unmistakably, a **Marbled Godwit (8)**, a species that provides a great example of convergence in plumage: Apart from its straight or recurved bill, Marbled Godwit more closely resembles that other prairie-nesting hyper-piper, Long-billed Curlew, than it does any of its congeners. The individual in our photo poses no risk of confusion, but a sleeping bird, its bill tucked between its shoulders, can; a good clue is tarsus color, bluish in the curlew, blackish in the godwit.

What about the other three dozen brown shorebirds in the photo? Many birders will simply shut down, perhaps with a muttered imprecation on Frank Pitelka's head, on noting the chubby shape, long bills, mid-length legs, and vertical "jabbing" habit of these birds. Yes, they're dowitchers.

The North American *Limnodromus* species had been split a good generation before I started birding in the 1970s, but even still the words of Roger Tory Peterson in what was then the current, and is still today the best, edition of his *Field Guide* rang in our ears: "It is probably safer," he wrote in 1947, "to call them all Dowitchers and forget the splitting." The effects of that magisterial pronouncement are still felt today, and in spite of significant advances in identification strategies, a great many birders remain less comfortable with this species pair even than with such other venerable bugaboos as scaup or *Empidonax*.

Our dowitchers aren't going to vocalize, so the best approach is to look for a "baseline" individual that can be identified with some certainty. In practice, this usually means searching for a particularly large bird with an especially long bill and a noticeably bulky and angular body. One such bird is feeding actively two birds to the left of the Marbled Godwit. This is, with some confidence, a **Long-billed Dowitcher (9)**, its monstrously hunchbacked body making the rear end look a full size too small and the head like a marble. This bird's bill is very straight and enormously long, in proportion not much less lavish than that of the nearby godwit. With some confidence, I would not only call this bird a Long-billed Dowitcher, but sex it as well: Huge and long-billed, this is likely a female.



hunchbacked body making the rear end look a full size too small and the head like a marble. This bird's bill is very straight and enormously long, in proportion not much less lavish than that of the nearby godwit. With some confidence, I would not only call this bird a Long-billed Dowitcher, but sex it as well: Huge and long-billed, this is likely a female.

Once satisfied with that identification, we might be tempted to leave the bird. But it often pays to zoom back down and see what we can learn from a comparison with its nearest companions. The sleeping bird to the right—halfway between the long-billed dowitcher and the longer-billed godwit—is noticeably less bulky, with a subtly larger head and a smooth, flat back that shows no noticeable step or stop with the tail. We can't see this sleeping bird's face or bill, but we can see the tibia, that segment of the bird's leg above the tibiotarsal joint, or "ankle." That bit of leg is shorter on this **Short-billed Dowitcher (10)** than on the Long-bill we've been looking at—a comparative feature that can be of some use in sorting through drab, distant, or silent dowitchers.



If we now go through the flock systematically, we find another Long-billed Dowitcher just over the Snowy Egret's head, but most of these birds appear to be Short-billed Dowitchers, smooth-backed and short-legged. Most of the

birds that are not dozing have their bills in the water, but a few, captured at the high point of their poking and prodding, do show relatively short and decidedly droop-tipped bills.

In life, we'd give this flock a few more minutes, waiting for heads to be untucked, wings to be stretched, calls to be uttered. Even then, certain of the dowitchers might go unidentified to species, but we can be confident, I think, that our final tallies would not differ greatly from what we have discovered in this photograph:

- 1 - American Coot 32
- 2 - American Wigeon 23
- 3 - Northern Pintail 2
- 4 - Cinnamon Teal 3
- 5 - Blue-winged Teal 1
- 6 - American Green-winged Teal 3
- 6a - Green-winged Teal (s)sp. 3
- 7 - Snowy Egret 1
- 8 - Marbled Godwit 1
- 9 - Long-billed Dowitcher 2
- 10 - Short-billed Dowitcher and dowitcher sp. 28

There are at least two birds in the image I have left entirely unidentified. At the very right upper corner of the photo, a medium-sized, apparently long-legged brown bird perches on the shore. There is very little to see in this blurry smudge, but my impression is of a slender shorebird, perhaps a Greater Yellowlegs.

More visible, and thus more daunting, is the bird asleep on the water in the upper left corner of the flock. The reddish glow of this bird's head might make us think at first of a Eurasian Wigeon, but its undertail is too extensively white—almost recalling a Brant—and the upperparts too dark. I will rely on the better part of valor and the American Coot steaming in so resolutely from the right to wake this bird up.