

# BAYLANDS

## Wild Ducks of the Palo Alto Baylands

## Nature Notes

San Francisco Bay is on the Pacific Flyway. This means it is on the route most migratory birds, including ducks, use to travel back and forth between their summer nesting sites and winter homes. Many of the ducks seen in the Palo Alto Baylands in the Spring and Fall are just stopping by to feed on their way north or south, but others make this their year around home. Over the years, a total of twenty three species of ducks have been observed in the Palo Alto Baylands. But five of these species rarely visit our area, so only eighteen are more or less commonly seen here. This Nature Note contains illustrations and brief descriptions of half of these species.

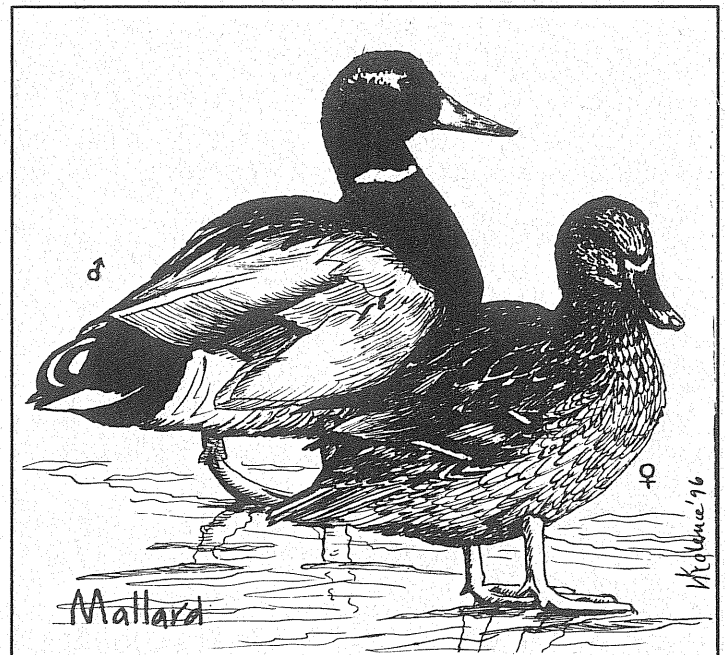
All ducks, as well as geese and swans, belong to the same family of birds due to their similar body structure. However, ducks in particular are divided into a number of different sub-families based on subtle body differences and behavior. Three of these sub-families are represented amongst the ducks described in this Nature Note:

1. *Surface Feeding or Dabbling Ducks:* These ducks feed in shallow water, mostly on plants and plant material. They take to the air with a sudden upward leap. The Mallard, Pintail, Wigeon, Shoveler, and the Green-winged and Cinnamon Teal ducks are all Surface Feeding Ducks.
2. *Diving Ducks:* These ducks feed in deep water by diving and swimming underwater, feeding mainly on plants but also eating small fish and other aquatic animals. They take to the air by running along the surface to gain flying speed. The Canvasback and Goldeneye ducks are Diving Ducks.
3. *Stiff-tailed Ducks:* These are like Diving Ducks, but usually hold their tails up at an angle while swimming and sometimes sink slowly instead of diving. The Ruddy Duck is a Stiff-tailed Duck.

### MALLARD

The male Mallard is probably the best known wild duck, especially at the Palo Alto Duck Pond. It has a handsome green head with a yellow bill, and rusty-brown breast. The Mallard is the most abundant wild duck in the world and the second most in California. The female however is not as generally recognized, perhaps due to her overall drab, mottled brown color. As with most female ducks, this dull plumage camouflages her while incubating her eggs. But both sexes have a beautiful violet-blue speculum (iridescent patch) on their wings.

The Mallard is preferentially a seed eater, but also eats snails, insects, fish eggs, and the leaves and stems of some plants. They are usually the first ducks in the Baylands to begin nesting in the spring. In some years young ducklings can be seen swimming in the Duck Pond as early as February.



## BAYLANDS DUCKS 2

### PINTAIL

The Pintail is the most abundant wild duck in California and the most widely distributed duck in North America. Besides the long, pointed tail of the male, for which this species was named, both sexes are very slender in shape, and have long slim necks compared to other ducks. The male also has a distinctive bright white breast that continues upward to become a white stripe along each side of his neck.

Pintails are chiefly seed eaters, but at times will eat a considerable number of small aquatic animals. Although they breed mostly north of California, a few pairs remain in the Spring and nest in the Flood Control Basin.

### AMERICAN WIGEON

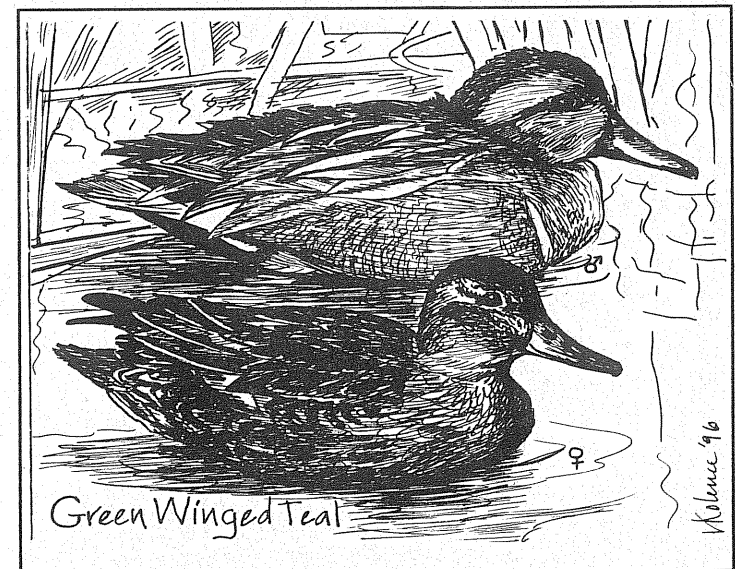
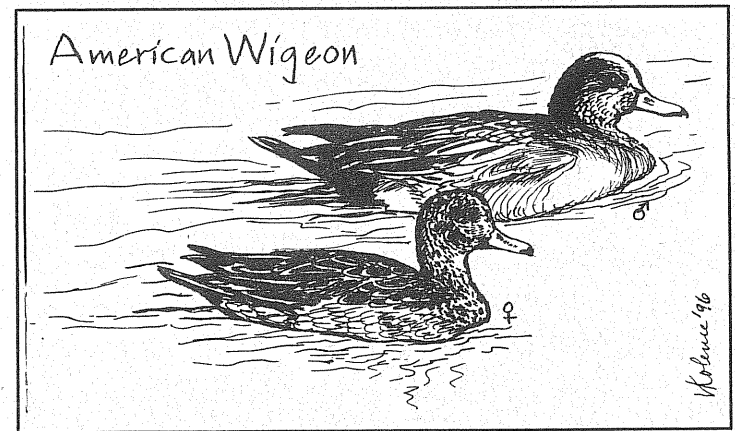
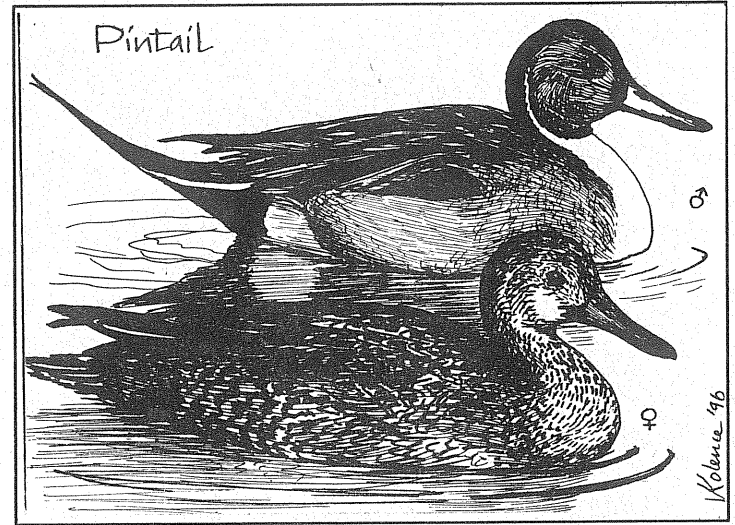
The Wigeon was formally called the Baldpate, due to the white crown of the male. (The Bald Eagle was named for a similar white crown.) In flight the whole fore-part of the inner wing is white above. When the wings are closed, this shows as a large white stripe.

Wigeons are almost wholly vegetarian in their diet, but do eat a few snails. They are the third most abundant wild duck in Northern California. Some only pass through in the Spring and Fall as migrants, but most spend the winter in the Baylands.

### GREEN-WINGED TEAL

This is the smallest North American surface-feeding duck. In flight the wings usually look dark, as their green speculum patch is iridescent and shows up only in sunlight. In spite of the colorful head and wings, the vertical white stripes on each side are the most conspicuous marks for identification at a distance.

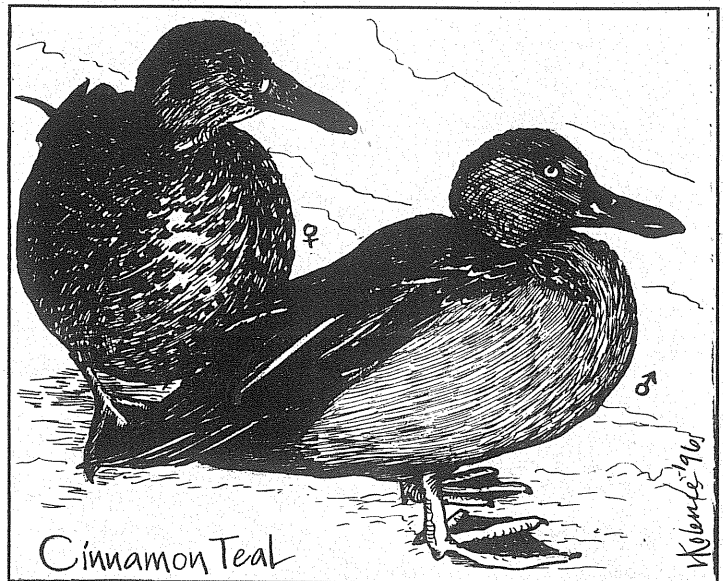
Primarily a seed eater, it will still eat a considerable amount of shellfish and crustaceans in saltwater areas. These are probably the most secretive ducks that spend the winter in the marshes of the Baylands, and are not seen by most visitors. They have never been recorded nesting in Palo Alto, though they do breed in small numbers elsewhere in Northern California.



**CINNAMON TEAL**

The male is a small, cinnamon-red duck with a large, chalky-blue patch on the top fore-edge of its wings. The Cinnamon Teal is a close relative of the Blue-winged Teal of the Eastern United States, replacing it both geographically and ecologically in the far Western states. In fact, the females of the two species are virtually identical in appearance.

This species is resident in fresh water areas throughout most of California, although many birds withdraw to the south in the winter. Small numbers winter in the Baylands salt marshes and a few pairs stay until Spring to nest in the Flood Control Basin. As with most other surface-feeding ducks, Cinnamon Teal feed primarily on seeds, but at times take quantities of snails, insects, and crustaceans.



Cinnamon Teal

**NORTHERN SHOVELER**

The Shoveler is named for its spoon-shaped bill, which has a comblike edge along the sides used to filter food from the water. This species is one of the most carnivorous of the surface feeding ducks, taking large numbers of snails, crustaceans, insects, and even small fish.

With its green head, rufous belly and sides, blue wing patches, and orange legs, the male Shoveler is probably the most colorful duck in our Baylands. It is a mostly a winter visitor to California from the north and east, but a few pairs remain to breed in the Spring in places like the Flood Control Basin.

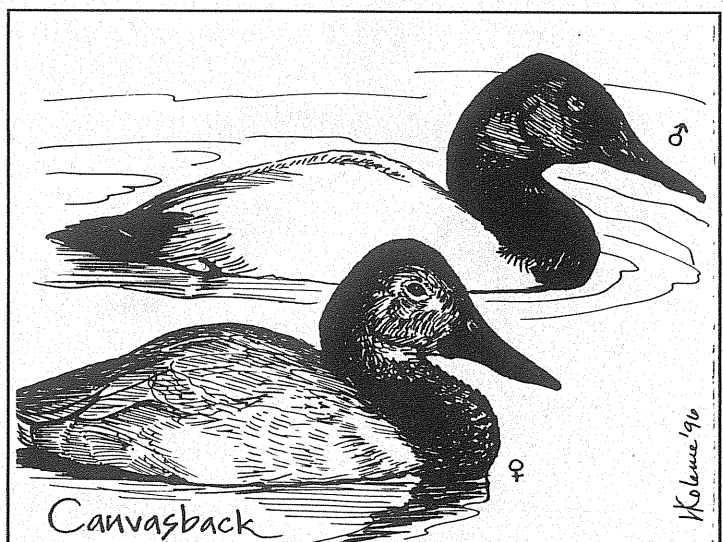


Northern Shoveler

**CANVASBACK**

The Canvasback duck is named for the male's light gray back, but the unique shape and reddish color of the male's head and neck are really more distinctive. Note the long sloping head profile of both sexes and their large size in the illustration at right.

Canvasbacks are winter visitors to California from the north. These Diving Ducks gather together in large flocks (called rafts) in the Bay far from shore, so only small numbers are seen in the Yacht Harbor Lagoon, and Flood Control Basin. Roots, tubers, and the basal portions of underwater plants are their chief foods. But when they are wintering on saltwater they dine largely on shrimp, shellfish, and fish.



Canvasback

### COMMON GOLDENEYE

In spite of its name, the Common Goldeneye is not common in the Palo Alto Baylands nor anywhere else in the San Francisco Bay area. In fact, it is only a winter visitor to California, nesting in cavities of the trees of the northern coniferous forests. Although it has a golden-colored eye, a large round white spot in front of the male's eye is a much more noticeable field mark.

Goldeneyes are also often called "Whistlers" because of the loud high-pitched whir of their wings. A Diving Duck, their preferred foods are crayfish, aquatic insects, and shrimplike crustaceans.

### RUDDY DUCK

The Ruddy Duck is the only Stiff-tailed Duck found in California. It does not, however, always cock its tail up. It is named after the rusty-red plumage of the male during the breeding season. During the winter he is colored a dull gray-brown, but can still be easily identified by his bright white cheek patches.

The Ruddy Duck is widespread in both fresh water and salt water bays, from Canada to South America. It is quite common in Palo Alto in the winter and has even been found nesting in the Flood Control Basin. On fresh water some three-fourths of its diet is pond or marsh plants, but on salt water its diet is mainly worms, crustaceans, and mollusks.

*Edited and Illustrated by Virginia Kolence*

