

Feeling Ducky?

by
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Now that the cooler weather is here, it's time to get out and get some fresh air and exercise. November is a great time to go in search of wintering waterfowl. The Texas coast regularly hosts three to five species of geese and 20 species of ducks during the winter. The most common geese are Greater White-fronted, Snow, and Ross's.

Greater White-fronted Geese are often called "speckle bellies" by the locals because they have black splotches on their stomachs that are visible when the birds are in flight. These geese are light brown with orange beaks. Snow Geese come in two colors, white and blue. Both have black wing tips. Ross's Geese look just like white Snow Geese, only they are about half the size.

You can find all three of these geese in mixed flocks in farm fields where they feed on waste grain during the winter. Sometimes you can find Canada and Cackling Geese in these flocks too, but they are getting rarer and rarer because these geese are staying farther north for the winter. They are abundant in the Panhandle.

Canada and Cackling Geese are brown with black bills and they are often called "cheeked geese" because they have a white chin strap that makes their cheeks white. As with Snow and Ross's Geese, Cackling Geese have a similar appearance to Canada Geese but they are smaller. While you're out there looking at the geese, don't forget to look for Sandhill Cranes. They aren't waterfowl but they are beautiful to see and the evening show when they come in to roost can be spectacular!

Ducks are divided in two main groups, the dabblers and the divers. Dabbling ducks tip up in shallow water to pull food from the bottom of the pond. You can often see their rear ends sticking up in the water as they feed. Common ducks in this category are Blue and Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, Mottled Duck, Mallard, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, and the gorgeous Wood Duck. The Wood Duck is secretive but can often be spotted in small ponds and wetlands.

Diving ducks live in deeper water and dive under the water to catch fish or other animals or to pull vegetation from the bottom of the pond. Common diving ducks found along the coast include Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, and Ruddy Duck. Other less common diving ducks

include Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead and Hooded Merganser. Sea ducks are diving ducks that are found in salt water. The most common one found here is Red-breasted Merganser.

There are several other species of birds found on ponds and lakes here that are often included with ducks but they aren't waterfowl at all. The American Coot is an all gray bird found in huge flocks that is actually part of the Rail family. Pied-billed Grebes are also found here in large numbers. They are brown with a bi-colored bill and are part of the Grebe family.

These are just a few of the birds found on local water in the winter. Take some time one weekend to see how many of them you can see!

Caption: The Green-winged Teal is one of the more common dabbling ducks. Photo by Sue Heath.