

Waterfowl of the Upper Texas Coast

By Celeste Silling

There are 29 species of waterfowl that are seen annually in the Greater Houston area. Sometimes they can be difficult to tell apart in the wild, even for us at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. I, for one, often feel my eyes glaze over when faced with identifying a mass of waterfowl in a pond. "There's some... uh... ducks," I say, unenthused. But lately I've been trying to learn more about these birds and have found that each species has its own interesting habits and adaptations. This article is too short to cover all 29 species, but we can discuss a few highlights!

Let's start with the Mottled Duck. The Mottled Duck paddles our coastal marshlands and is a permanent resident, present in all seasons. It has a dark brown body, a paler brown head, and a dark cap. The males of this species have a bright yellow bill, while the females have a slightly duller one. They have bright, iridescent blue-green wing patches that have a black border. They can be distinguished from female mallards because the mallards have white bars on the edge of their iridescent patches. Mottled Ducks live in freshwater wetlands, marshes, rice fields, and flooded prairies.

The Mottled Duck is a dabbling duck, meaning that they dab their bill just below the water in mud, and occasionally stick their butts in the air while doing so. In contrast, there are other duck species who are diving ducks. These ducks dive down deeper into the water in search of food and can sometimes disappear underwater for what feels like an eternity. One of the diving ducks in our area is the Canvasback. The Canvasback dives down as far as 7 feet into the water, looking for plant tubers, seeds, insects, mussels, or any other tasty treats.

Female Canvasbacks have gray bodies with a light brown head and neck and black bill. The males in their breeding plumage, however, have a striking chestnut head and neck, black chest, and white body. The males also have red eyes while the females have black ones. They are almost always in the water in ponds and lakes, even sleeping and nesting on floating mats of plant matter.

One duck that spends perhaps even more time in the water is the Red-breasted Merganser. These ducks are sea ducks, meaning that they can be found in saltwater in bays and even the ocean. The Red-breasted Merganser is so adapted to life on the water, that their legs (oriented far towards the back of their body) can barely walk on land. Having their legs in the back helps these birds paddle faster and even run on water! These runs help them launch into the air at high speeds, making them some of the fastest waterfowl out there!

The Mottled Duck, Canvasback, and Red-breasted Merganser are just a few of the awesome waterfowl we can see here on the Upper Texas Coast, and they've each got their own fun quirks and natural history. So hopefully the next time you (and I) look at a pond full of waterfowl, we'll see more than just a bunch of nondescript ducks!

Photo by Mike Williams: A male Red-breasted Merganser paddles through the ocean water.