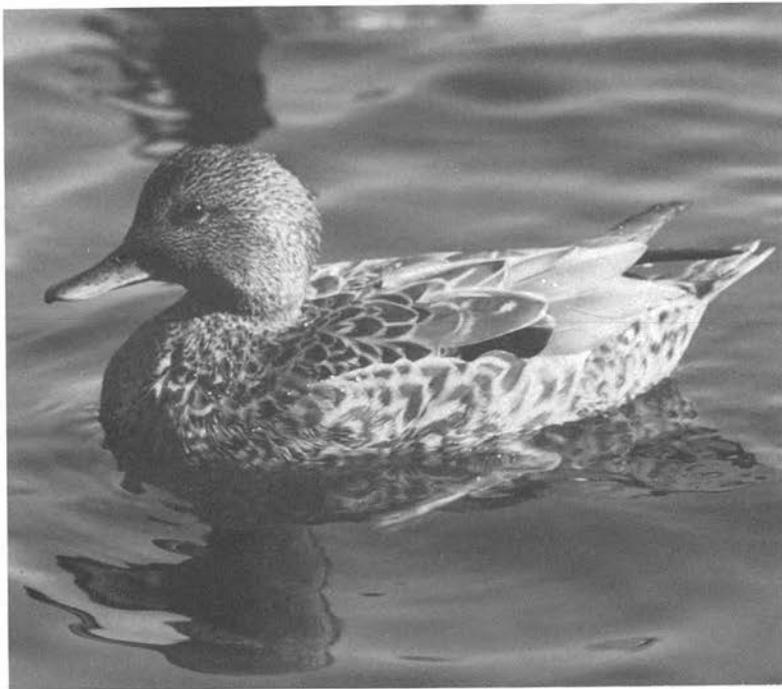


AT A GLANCE *February 1997* _____ *Wayne R. Petersen*

Ducks are one of the most distinctive groups of birds. Their generally broad, flat, round-tipped bills (except for mergansers) quickly distinguish them from other birds that sit on the water, such as loons, grebes, cormorants, gulls, and alcids. For many duck species, color is less important to the identification process than pattern, although for the males of species like scaup, head color is helpful but not essential. After some practice, male waterfowl in showy breeding plumage can readily be identified, even a great distance.

But ducks in juvenile and female plumage, as well as males in summer eclipse plumage, can pose some nasty identification challenges. The February mystery photograph is just such a bird, lacking much in the way of a distinctive pattern.

The first thing to do when working on an unknown duck, regardless of the plumage, is to determine whether it is a diving duck (e.g., scaup, eider, merganser) or one of the dabbling ducks (e.g., Mallard, Wood Duck, teal) that tip up in shallow water or walk on land when foraging. The rather narrow bill, rounded head, pointed tail, strongly mottled pattern, and buoyant carriage on the water are all more or less characteristic of dabbling ducks.



Gadwall

Photo by Hugo H. Schroder, Courtesy of MAS

The lack of obvious markings typical of breeding-plumaged male ducks, except possibly the American Black Duck, combined with the bird's mottled pattern, indicate that the mystery bird is probably a female or juvenile dabbling duck. (Drakes in eclipse plumage almost invariably display at least some of the characteristics of the breeding plumage.)

Having made the determination that the mystery bird is most probably a female or juvenile, there are several features visible in the picture that contribute to the process of elimination. First, the bill is quite narrow and the upper mandible appears to be dark down the center with light edges. American Black Duck, both Green-winged and Blue-winged teal, and Northern Pintail have bills uniform in color and pattern. The two wigeon species have light blue bills with a prominent black tip, and the female Mallard has a broad, dark saddle in the middle of the upper mandible. Northern Shoveler can be easily eliminated because the bill is not broad and spatulate in shape. The female Wood Duck would show a white tear-shaped mark around the eye.

Lest we jump to conclusions at this point, let us further concentrate on the rather uniform pattern of the head, the steep forehead that gives the head an angular appearance on the front, the absence of obvious white on the outer tail feathers, the uniform pale appearance of the tertials, and the presence of a partially visible black secondary feather on the folded wing. Collectively, these features indicate that the duck in the photo can only be a Gadwall (*Anas strepera*), probably a female, although the smooth, unpatterned appearance of the tertials means that a juvenile male cannot be ruled out.

The Gadwall is a locally common migrant and breeder in Massachusetts, and modest numbers routinely winter on coastal ponds, particularly in the southeastern parts of the state.

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AT A GLANCE

Photo by Hugo H. Schroder
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Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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