

ABOUT THE COVER

Bufflehead

The Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*), our smallest diving duck, is a plump, delightful little bird, disappearing in a smooth dive and then reappearing some distance away, bobbing to the surface like a little black-and-white cork. The male appears big-headed with a large white patch on the back of his otherwise black head, a tiny bill, his body glossy-black above and white below—a very flashy little duck. The female has a small white cheek patch, and is duller, browner, and more subdued in tone. In flight the male has a white stripe the width of his wing, while in the female the white patch is restricted to the trailing edge. Females are smaller than males. Buffleheads are monotypic, related to mergansers, and most closely related to their congeners, the goldeneyes.

The Bufflehead's breeding range is largely the boreal forest and aspen parklands of the interior northwest, from Alaska across Canada south of Hudson's Bay to Quebec, dipping in a few spots into the United States. They are widely dispersed in winter across the U.S. north to the Great Lakes, and on the coasts from Alaska to Baja California and Nova Scotia to Florida. In Massachusetts they are an abundant coastal migrant and winter resident, with peak fall migration in October and November. They are winter site-faithful, congregating mostly along the coast in shallow bays and inlets, but also on inland rivers, lakes and ponds. They leave us for the north country in March and April.

Buffleheads first breed at two years of age and produce a single brood. They are one of the few duck species that have a long-term pair bond. The females are philopatric, returning to their natal area, while males are not. They may reuse the same nest for years. They nest in tree cavities in deciduous/conifer boreal forests near ponds or small lakes. Buffleheads are highly territorial, with a male defending an area of water that is essentially a feeding area for the female. Males threaten intruders, including other duck species, with head-forward displays with back feathers raised, or attack flap-paddling or from underwater. Disputes often involve bumping and wing-thrashing. Females defend a brood territory. Nuptial displays occur throughout most of the year, and include head-bobbing, head-shaking, and wing-lifting. The various displays are often accompanied by grating and chattering sounds, and the female's call to her brood has been described as *cuc-cuc-cuc*.

The nest is a natural cavity or woodpecker hole lined with down, and they will use nest boxes. They frequently nest in cavities made by flickers, and it has been suggested that their small size has evolved as an adaptation to this nesting strategy. This serves to reduce competition with their larger, cavity-nesting congeners, the goldeneyes. The female lays 8-10 yellowish or olive-buff eggs, and she alone has a brood-patch and incubates. The eggs hatch in a little over four weeks, and the precocial young stay in the nest for 1-2 days and then leap to the ground and follow the female to water. The males leave the breeding area to molt in June or July. The

female abandons her brood in 5-6 weeks, and broods from adjacent territories may amalgamate. The young first fly at 7-8 weeks of age, long after they have been abandoned. The young feed themselves initially on insects at the surface, but are diving for food within a few days. Buffleheads are exclusively diving ducks and feed in groups with a sentry often remaining on the surface. Underwater they propel themselves with their feet alone, their wings held pressed against their sides. They feed largely on aquatic insect larvae, amphipods, and some seeds when foraging in fresh water, but on crustaceans, snails, and molluscs in salt and brackish water. Fish may be an important food in winter.

Buffleheads were seriously reduced by shooting by the end of the nineteenth century, but have recovered, especially since the 1950s. They are subject to predation by raptors, and shooting is still a major cause of mortality. Their range has probably contracted somewhat during the twentieth century due to land clearing, and in some areas starlings compete with them for nesting cavities. Storms can have a major influence on chick survival. Despite all of these pressures, most Bufflehead populations appear to be stable, and the dull, dreary days of Massachusetts winters continue to be brightened by these marvelous little ducks. ↗

William E. Davis, Jr



Short-eared Owl
by David A. Sibley

About the Cover Artist

David Sibley, son of the well-known ornithologist Fred Sibley, began seriously watching and drawing birds in 1969, at age seven. He has written and illustrated articles on bird identification for *Birding* and *American Birds* (now *Field Notes*) as well as regional publications and books including *Hawks in Flight* and *The Birds of Cape May*. Since 1980 David has traveled the continent watching birds on his own and as a tour leader for WINGS, Inc. He has spent most of the last six years at a drawing table writing and illustrating the new *Sibley Guide to Birds*, a comprehensive field guide to North American birds. This book was published in October 2000 and is now in the fourth printing. You can see more of David's artwork at his website <www.sibleyart.com>. He lives in Concord, Massachusetts, with his wife and two sons. ↗