

# AT A GLANCE

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February 2005



ROGER S. EVERETT

If something “looks like a duck and swims like a duck, it’s probably a duck!” With this wisdom in mind, it is possible to attack the identification of this month’s mystery bird with considerable confidence, so long as it is not forgotten that there are other birds that look and swim like ducks. It is probably obvious to most readers that a simple examination of the bird’s bill is enough to eliminate nearly all of the other waterbirds that are capable of swimming. Most other swimming species possess bills that are either sharply pointed or hooked at the tip (e.g., loons, grebes, alcids, cormorants), are visibly laterally compressed (e.g., gulls, Razorbill), or else possess conspicuous nasal tubes on the upper mandible (e.g., shearwaters). A swimming bird’s bill that is broad at the base and relatively flattened throughout its length almost certainly belongs to a duck.

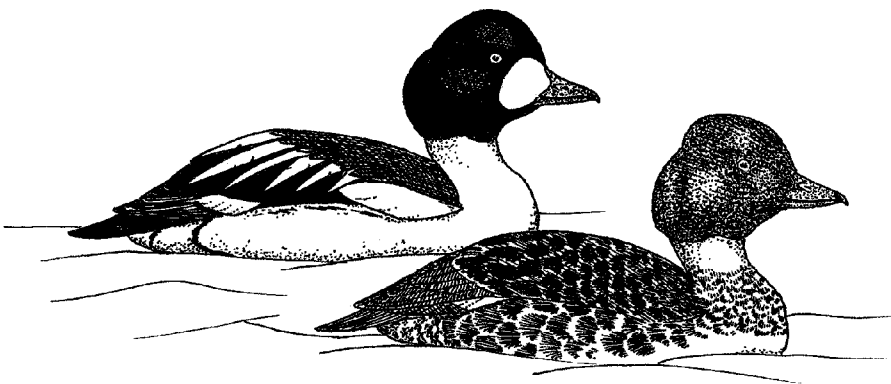
Believing that the pictured bird is a duck, a next step is to consider whether it is a diving duck or a puddle duck. Generally puddle ducks tend to have longer, slimmer necks than divers and, with the exception of the Gadwall, do not exhibit white wing patches when sitting on the water. Furthermore, and of particular importance, puddle ducks do not have prominently white or yellow eyes. Clearly the mystery duck has light-colored eyes, as well as a noticeable white wing patch.

Given that the duck in the photo appears to be more or less gray or brown, and is obviously lacking in distinctive markings on the head or body, indications are that it is either a female or juvenile, or else a drake in eclipse plumage. If the bird belonged in the genus *Aythya* (e.g., scaup, Ring-necked Duck, etc.) its bill would be longer and more slender (as well as paler in coloration and marked at the tip), and there would typically be white feathering, either at the base of the bill or around the eye and running back from the eye as a thin pale line. By way of comparison, the mystery duck has a relatively thick, short bill that is uniformly dark in color, along with an obvious white collar around the neck.

Knowing that the bird is not in the genus *Aythya*, even though it is sporting a strikingly light eye like ducks in that group, one should at once turn to one of the two goldeneye species as a leading identification contender. The absence of a white spot or a white crescent in front of the eye indicates that the bird is not a male in breeding plumage of either goldeneye species, meaning that by default the bird is a female, juvenile male, or an adult male in eclipse plumage. The fact that the head is uniformly dark, with absolutely no suggestion of white between the eye and the base of the bill, no white mottling in the body plumage, and a gray chest in contrast with a white collar, strongly indicates that the bird is an adult female. Since the bill is not light-colored (i.e., yellowish-orange), and the forehead is not steep and abrupt, the evidence suggests that the mystery duck is not a female Barrow's Goldeneye. By process of elimination the bird is a female Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*). The fact that its bill is completely dark indicates that it is not in full breeding condition, a state in which the bill would possess a yellow tip.

Common Goldeneyes are common to locally abundant migrants and winter visitors along the coast and are regular in smaller numbers on ponds and lakes in the interior. Roger S. Everett photographed the female Common Goldeneye in the picture on Cape Cod. 🦆

Wayne R. Petersen



COMMON GOLDENEYES BY GEORGE C. WEST

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DON REIMER

Can you identify the lower left bird?  
Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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