

# AT A GLANCE

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April 2005



DON REIMER

As was prophetically noted in the last issue, “If something looks like a duck and swims like a duck, it’s probably a duck.” While the essence of this rather tired maxim is undeniably true, it does have its caveats. Such is the case with the April mystery bird.

Since this month’s photograph has several ducks depicted, before focusing attention on the one indicated as the mystery individual, it makes sense to determine what the other ducks in the picture are. After all, there’s another homily which suggests that “birds of a feather flock together.”

Cutting to the chase, it appears that all the waterfowl in the picture belong in the rather distinctive genus *Aythya*. This determination is based on the fact that ducks in this group typically exhibit rather long and somewhat tapered bills that are usually accented by a pale band or ring near the tip. Additionally, many *Aythya* drakes have notably dark (i.e., blackish or reddish) heads, and either gray or black backs in contrast to lighter-colored (i.e., gray or white) sides. Females in this genus regularly have a pale or whitish patch at the base of the bill and/or a prominent eye-ring. Armed with these facts, we are ready to move the identification process forward.


Clearly there are at least two different species in the flock of five ducks in the picture. The two birds in the background showing distinct white rings around the distal end of their bills, black backs, somewhat angular heads, and a white vertical

spur behind the black chest, collectively point to their being male Ring-necked Ducks. Likewise, the female duck at the right of the picture also appears to be a Ring-necked, since she shows a noticeable eye-ring and a somewhat diffuse pale or whitish patch at the base of her bill.

Slightly to the right of center is a different-looking duck — a drake showing a pale gray (not black) back, white sides, no vertical white spur behind the dark chest, a rounder and less angular head than the Ring-necked Ducks, and a bill that is only lightly ringed at the tip. This bird is also visibly larger than the adjacent Ring-necked Ducks. Based on these characters, it is fair to assume that it is a male Greater Scaup.

So we're looking at a mixed flock of *Aythya* ducks, not an uncommon scenario on many ponds and lakes across the country. BUT, we still have the unidentified mystery bird in the lower left portion of the picture. In size this bird appears to be, at best, the size of the Ring-necked Ducks in the background, and clearly smaller than the Greater Scaup beside it. Closer examination reveals that the mystery duck has a decided peak on the rear of its crown, affording an almost crested look to the back of the head. Furthermore, its back coloration looks to be somewhere between that of the Greater Scaup and the Ring-necked Ducks (not light gray and not solid black); also, its sides appear slightly lighter in color than those of the Ring-necked Ducks. And finally, the bird scarcely shows a ghost of a white spur behind the black breast, and its bill is only lightly ringed at the tip. In summary the mystery bird seems to be practically intermediate in all characters between a Ring-necked Duck and a scaup. Voila, a hybrid!

Although many hybrids are difficult to recognize in the field, some are so clearly intermediate in features that their mixed parentage is fairly obvious. Hybridization is quite common in the genus *Aythya*, as reflected by the inclusion of illustrations of such birds in several popular field guides. In this instance the mystery duck is most likely a hybrid between a Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*) and a scaup, not a Greater Scaup, but a Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*). This determination is based on the small size of the bird, the conspicuously peaked and angular head shape, light gray (not white) sides, absence of a white spur behind the black chest, and the weakly patterned bill tip. Although it is tempting to suggest that the duck is a Tufted Duck X Ring-necked Duck hybrid, the fact that the dorsal color is obviously lighter than that of either of those species suggests that one parent was a scaup. While one can seldom be certain about the identity such individuals, in this case the evidence is compelling.

Don Reimer photographed the mystery hybrid bird on the Maine coast during the winter of 2004-2005. Although one seldom expects to encounter such hybrids, since both parent species regularly occur during migration and in winter in Massachusetts, local birders should be on the lookout for such individuals. 

Wayne R. Petersen

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ERIC SMITH

Can you identify this bird?

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

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### Western Mass Editor Wanted

*Bird Observer* is looking for an editor or co-editors to contribute and solicit articles and field notes from the western part of the state on a regular basis.

If you are interested in joining our editorial staff, please contact Carolyn Marsh at [cmarsh@jocama.com](mailto:cmarsh@jocama.com).

