

SCAUP IDENTIFICATION

by Tad Lawrence, Cambridge

The following is a collection of some points of scaup identification, which for many people, including myself, is often difficult in the field. Much, if not all, of the information will not be new, but together may help alleviate this nagging field problem.

Scaup breed and raise their seven to 11 young from Alaska southeasterly across western Canada and southward into the Dakotas. Within this area the Greater Scaup (Aythya marila) is restricted to Alaska and northwestern Canada, while the Lesser Scaup's (Aythya affinis) range covers the southern area and overlaps in part of northwestern Canada and central Alaska.

In New England both species generally arrive in September and remain into April. In addition to wintering from Maine to North Carolina, the Greater Scaup is also present along the Pacific coast. The Lesser Scaup winters along all the coasts of the United States from Massachusetts south, including Mexico and much of Central America. As a result, the Greater Scaup is the more common species in New England waters, but both occur and a diligent search can often produce a Lesser. Sider's Pond behind the Falmouth Town Hall is a good place to see and to compare both species.

The field mark that I find most helpful is the extent of white in the wing, although not a certain indicator of species, a highly reliable clue. In the Greater Scaup, the white of the speculum extends along the first six or seven primaries. The Lesser Scaup, on the other hand, has no white on the primaries even though the inner three may appear pale gray. I feel that this field mark is reliable, but unfortunately only in flight.

When the birds are sitting on the water, the best field mark is the relatively strongly vermiculated sides of the Lesser, which give the bird a much grayer appearance than the Greater. Another helpful mark is the shape and color of the head. The Greater has a rounded head, while the Lesser's head often appears squarer and is much more like that of a Ring-necked Duck (Aythya collaris). As for the head color, both species appear dark, almost blackish. However, in proper light, the head of the Greater will have a greenish sheen and the Lesser a purplish one. From my experience, a bird with a green sheen is always a Greater, but one with a purple sheen is not always a Lesser. Some excellent birders, however, will contend that the head color is readily observable and diagnostic.

One of the best field identification aids is the larger size of the Greater, assuming that comparisons are available. In addition, the bill size and character (a good specimen identification aid) can also be helpful occasionally. The Greater's bill is thicker and larger, particularly at the base. The nail shows similar proportions. Some say that the Greater has a thicker neck, but I have never found this useful.

Another often mentioned identification aid that I find misleading is that Greater Scaups frequent large lakes and salt water, while the Lessers use small ponds. This seems to be the case on the breeding grounds, but in New England both can be found on small ponds until they freeze and then both can be found on salt water. As a result, location is not very helpful.

The following list summarizes the primary field marks in the order that I consider most useful:

Greater Scaup

More white in wing

Slightly vermiculated,
whitish sides

Greenish head sheen and
roundish head

Larger size

Heavier bill

Lesser Scaup

Less white in wing

Vermiculated, grayer appearing
sides

Purplish and squarer head

Smaller size

Lighter bill

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THE ANSWERS


See Vol. 6, No. 4, pg. 121 for the quiz submitted by Pat Fox, and Charlotte Wyman.

- 1) Nashville
- 2) Yellowthroat
- 3) Connecticut
- 4) Yellow
- 5) Magnolia
- 6) Chestnut-sided
- 7) Black-throated Green
- 8) Blackburnian
- 9) Palm
- 10) Bay-breasted
- 11) Tennessee
- 12) Cape May
- 13) Pine
- 14) Canada
- 15) Blackpoll
- 16) Kentucky
- 17) Parula
- 18) Wilson's
- 19) Black-throated Green and Blackburnian
- 20) Black-throated Blue



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