

THE RING-NECKED DUCK AS A TRANSIENT
IN THE NORTHEASTERN STATES

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IN Mendall's important announcement (Auk, 55: 401-404, 1938) of the breeding of the Ring-necked Duck (*Nyroca collaris*) in some numbers in northern Maine and New Brunswick, field workers in the northeastern States have at last found an explanation of why this species has changed to a regular transient in recent years, whereas it was formerly an accidental visitant. The degree to which this has become increasingly true in the past five years is information as yet unpublished or scattered in local publications, and a summary of it is offered here as a matter of general record. The facts of chief interest are: (1) the number of birds is far greater than realized; (2) definite spring and fall migration routes have been established; (3) the Ring-necked Duck has very definite habitat preference in the area considered; (4) all these factors suggest very strongly the inference that the local transients are not going to or coming from the original northwestern breeding area, as they do not behave in the way that the other species in this group do.

From 1922 on, in New Jersey and the New York City region, the Ring-necked Duck became a regular spring transient in certain *inland* ponds, marshes and reservoirs. It was several years later that the bird became of regular occurrence on Long Island, and then chiefly in fall and winter (Griscom, Auk, 46: 52, 1929). Farther south in New Jersey, we learn (Stone, 'Bird Studies at Old Cape May') that Delaware City is a good place in spring with a maximum of 83 on April 14, 1935. At Barnegat Bay on the outer coast, however, the late Charles A. Urner found no real spring migration at all. The bird is an uncommon fall migrant, the maximum only thirty-one birds in an entire season, and when wintering lingers to April 1. Farther north, judging from the records in the 'Proceedings' of the Linnaean Society of New York, the Ring-necked Duck is rapidly increasing on the inland ponds and reservoirs of northern New Jersey and New York State (reservoirs of Westchester County). Where we used to see from one to twelve birds in spring, flocks of thirty to a hundred individuals are now of annual occurrence. The spring migration amounts to much less elsewhere, and is often entirely lacking on Long Island. The final point of interest is the lateness of this migration. As with the Blue-winged Teal, early April is often the peak of the flight, and a few birds linger to April 20.

Proceeding northward into New England, the Ring-neck is regularly recorded in the lakes of western Connecticut. In Massachusetts it was not until 1930 (eight years later than in New Jersey) that it became a regular

spring transient. The abundant records before me show that it occurs in maximum numbers in spring in the Housatonic Valley in the Berkshires, where on April 24, 1936, eighty were found in the Stockbridge Bowl by S. M. Pell and G. B. Hendricks. The lateness of the date should also be noted. Farther east in the Connecticut Valley there are fewer birds, the recorded maximum being twenty. Still farther east, near Boston, the Ring-neck is even less common. It is of regular occurrence in very small numbers in the Sudbury Valley and in various ponds in Essex County. When due allowance is made for the fact that the number of active observers and the total area in eastern Massachusetts are much greater than in the Connecticut River Valley, it is clear that the species is relatively commoner in the center of the State. Out on Cape Cod and the islands, this duck is either casual or unknown, and it is doubtful if the spring records represent anything but the wanderings of a nearby wintering population.

A very different state of affairs prevails in fall. In eastern Massachusetts near Boston, it is much commoner in fall than in spring, also arriving regularly early—as early as October 2 in Essex County. The opposite conditions prevail in the interior, since in the Connecticut Valley and the Berkshires, it is much less common in fall than in spring (Bagg and Eliot, 'Birds of the Connecticut Valley,' pp. 80-82, 759, 1937). For some years in eastern Massachusetts what happened to the fall Ring-necks was somewhat of a mystery. From early October on in Essex County, small groups arrived and departed southward. On Cape Cod, however, Ring-necks do not arrive in any numbers until mid-November. It was Mr. and Mrs. Hervey Elkins and Mr. Kimball C. Elkins, I believe, who in 1937 discovered that Little Quitticus Pond near Lakeville was the great fall concentration spot for New England Ring-necks. Here on November 11, 1937, they found 150 individuals, at that time regarded as a fabulous number, without precedent. This pond naturally received attention in 1938. The results are arranged in tabular form for the sake of clarity.

- October 2—Species arrives in Essex County, north of Boston (Mr. and Mrs. Richard Tousey), the earliest date of record, and is continuously present thereafter.
- November 6—Little Quitticus, 25 (Stackpole).
- November 6—None found on Cape ponds (Griscom et al.).
- November 12—Little Quitticus, 150 (D. L. Garrison).
- November 20—Little Quitticus, 556 (Griscom).
- November 25—Little Quitticus, 630 (Garrison and Griscom). A severe cold wave arrived, with a bitter northwest wind. At least 200 Ring-necks left the pond at sunset, and after circling to a great height migrated either *due south* or *west of southwest*.
- November 26—Little Quitticus, only 30 left (Taber and Stackpole).
- November 26—Outer Cape, 42 birds on various favorable ponds (Garrison and Griscom).

On Cape Cod, the Ring-necked Duck now winters regularly on various favorable ponds in Brewster and Eastham. The population varies with the season. In normally cold winters the number of birds decreases as the season advances. In very mild and open winters the birds increase. Thus nine birds on January 17, 1937, grew to twenty-two birds by February 22, and this group always lingers until late April. There is no evidence of any real number of transients passing through.

An interesting sidelight on the source of supply of the Quitticus Pond population is afforded by the island of Martha's Vineyard. The ponds on this island, particularly Squibnocket, have long been known as the northeasternmost point on the Atlantic coast, where the northwestern ducks, such as Canvasback, Redhead, and Baldpate, occur in some numbers, while Ruddy Ducks are abundant and Whistling Swans are occasional. If the present number of Ring-necks in eastern Massachusetts represents a northwestern population striking the Atlantic coast farther north than they used to, one would expect to obtain proof of it on Martha's Vineyard. It is not without significance then, that this duck is *unknown on the island*; at best it is a mere straggler there, just as it always was.

Proceeding southward, we note with interest that on Long Island the Ring-neck has the same habits as on Cape Cod. The chief concentration spot is at Brookhaven, where 150 birds were reported in January 1935. These birds arrive late, remain all winter if the winter remains open, and linger in spring at least till the middle of March. It should be noted that Brookhaven, Long Island, is *due southwest* of Lakeville, Massachusetts. It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that one locality is in part the source of supply for the other, so perfect is the correlation between arrival and departures and observed direction of flight. Both the Cape and eastern Long Island would appear to be migration terminals for their populations in large part.

When we cross the Hudson River Valley, a radically different picture of the fall migration is presented. We find the Ring-neck common in the lakes and reservoirs of northern New Jersey. Thus 200 are reported at Boonton on November 11, 1933, a date when similar numbers are beginning to gather at Little Quitticus. Urner's records show that this duck reaches Barnegat Bay on the average *earlier than on Cape Cod*. These facts strongly suggest that we are dealing here with some individuals at least coming in from the northwestern breeding grounds rather than from New England, and Mr. Mendall's article, already cited, shows the recent breeding of this species in Michigan and its great increase as a transient on the lakes of central New York.

Until, therefore, banding work supplies definite proof, it seems a reasonable inference that the very great majority of transient Ring-necks in New

England represent the local population breeding in northern New England and New Brunswick. The spring route is primarily via the lakes and reservoirs of northern New Jersey, southern New York, and western Massachusetts. In the fall the flight is more coastal. The great concentration area is Little Quitticus Pond. A minor population winters on Cape Cod, arriving there at about the same time that the birds gather at Little Quitticus. From this locality they are proved to migrate southwestward, and there is a winter population at Brookhaven, Long Island. South of Long Island, the New England Ring-necked Ducks cannot be traced at the present time, as the picture is confused by the very early arrival of other populations from the northwest.

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