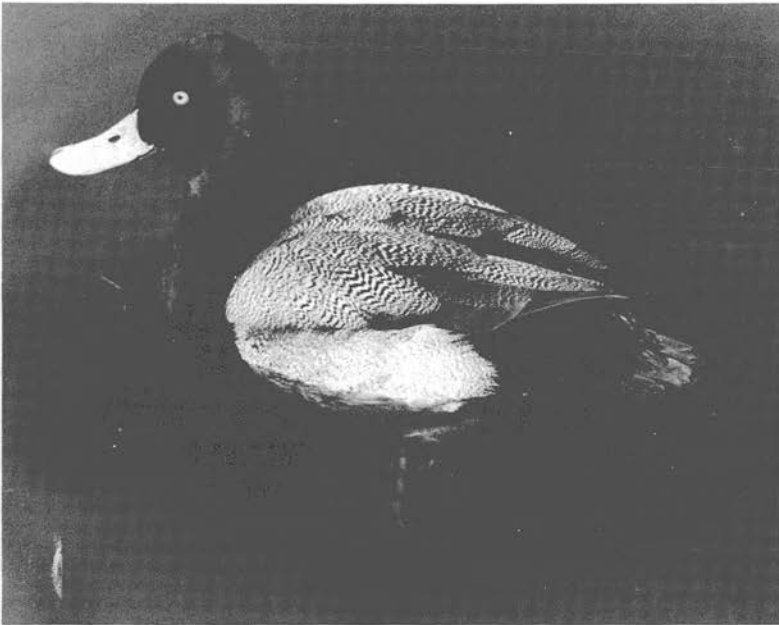


In the April issue of *Bird Observer*, readers were invited to identify a Gadwall in a plumage other than that of a breeding drake. The challenge highlighted the difficulties associated with identifying ducks in juvenal, female, and eclipse drake plumages. It was further suggested that most male ducks in breeding plumage are relatively easy to identify.

April's mystery duck undermines this contention. In at least one species pair—the Greater and Lesser scaup—identifying males in breeding plumage is nearly as problematic distinguishing the females of the two species. Scaup are difficult not only because of their similarity, but also because of the difficulty in observing and interpreting their features correctly under field conditions.

Before proceeding with a discussion of scaup identification, other duck species should first be eliminated. The male Ring-necked Duck is the bird most apt to be confused with male scaup, but it can readily be distinguished by its entirely black back, more angular head shape, prominent white ring around the tip of the bill (scaup have plain, powder-blue bills), and vertical white slash behind the black sides of the chest. In a black and white photograph, the male Redhead also resembles a male scaup; however, its light eye shows less contrast



Lesser Scaup

Photo by Hugo H. Schroder, Courtesy of MAS

with the face, its bill possesses a dark end with a distinct pale ring near the tip, and its back and sides are grayer and less contrasting with the black chest.

To determine that the mystery bird is a scaup species is relatively simple. No other North American waterfowl displays the combination of a black head and chest, grayish back and sides, and black tail and flank area. In other words, male scaup are "black at both ends and gray in the middle." The problem lies in the fact that males of the two scaup species differ only in subtle ways.

When faced with the problem of identifying a single male scaup, always examine the head first. Head shape, and sometimes head color, are especially useful field marks. Greater Scaup tend to have a puffy-headed look, and a flat-looking top to the head. Lesser Scaup exhibit an abrupt forehead, an angular peak on the rear of the head, and less of a puffy look on the sides of the face. In good light, the gloss on the head of a Lesser Scaup is characteristically violet; that of a Greater Scaup tends to be greenish, though it sometimes appears to have violet highlights. The Greater Scaup is the greater chameleon in this regard. And finally, the bill of the Greater Scaup appears wide and flat at the distal end, while the bill of a Lesser Scaup is more narrow and shows a smaller nail at its tip.

The body of a Lesser Scaup tends to have more extensive dark vermiculations on the back and sides than the Greater Scaup, which often looks gleaming white on the sides rather than dusky gray. In a flock of scaup, try to get a sense of all of these features by looking at various individuals, not just one bird. But remember, the two species occasionally flock together during migration and winter. A more reliable feature than the body coloration, when it can be seen, is the extent of the white stripe on the trailing edge of the wing. The wing stripe of a Greater Scaup is bold, flashing, and extends nearly to the end of the outer primaries; that of a Lesser Scaup usually extends only through the secondaries, ending fairly abruptly in the middle of the wing.

After considering the field marks discussed above, it should be clear that April's mystery bird is a male Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*). In Massachusetts, Lesser Scaup tend to concentrate on fresh water, especially lakes and ponds in the southeastern portion of the state, including Cape Cod and the islands. Greater Scaup, while they do visit fresh water, tend to be most numerous on salt ponds and on saltwater bays and harbors.

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Roger Everett



Can you identify this bird?

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

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