

FRESH POND'S AUTUMN WATERFOWL

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The antithesis of nearby Mt. Auburn Cemetery, Fresh Pond's star rises on the northerly winds of autumn rather than on the southerlies of spring. Daily visits to this urban reservoir will yield practically every species of waterfowl common to inland Massachusetts. From September until freezeup, a kaleidoscope of grebes, ducks and geese can be viewed at close range from a location not far from Harvard Square and easily accessible by public transportation. Though the chance is slim that you will see a yearly "speciality" at Fresh Pond, a visit will provide an excellent opportunity to examine critically the post-nuptial (Basic) plumages of many water birds.

Being only a block from my office, Fresh Pond gave me many life birds during my first year at the sport. It also provided an initial opportunity to play local expert. That first December a fellow asked me, "Where's the Ruddy Duck I heard about on The Voice? I've got .205 this year, and this one will break my record!" With half that number on my life list, I could answer, "Over there," and casually walk the other way! A couple of years later my log reads, "November 14, 1970: Dovekie, 1," as if this were an everyday occurrence.

A century ago Fresh Pond must have been a birder's paradise. In his Birds of the Cambridge Region (1906), William Brewster recalled: "Fresh Pond had perfectly natural shores, well wooded in places and indented by no less than five large reedy coves ... It was then a remarkably pretty sheet of water ... " Then he laments: "The removal or serious disfigurement of most of the hills and ridges which encircled the pond, the filling of three of its larger coves, and the total obliteration of all its original shore lines, were among the worst pieces of needless vandalism committed at this time."

Here we have prophetic and eloquent testimony by a great naturalist--50 years before conservation issues became fashionable. The accompanying map, showing both the shorelines of about 1866 and 1970, hints at Fresh Pond's former diverse habitats. I must admit, however, that the blacktop track that now surrounds the pond makes a nice footing for spotting scope tripods--provided they are not knocked over by the ubiquitous joggers!

One of Brewster's coves, formerly known as Black's Nook, is now the small pond adjacent to Concord Avenue. Here one can watch an exhibition of diving dabblers. The water is shallow, and apparently the floor is lush, for the Mallards will dive to the harvest, rather than doing their conventional "end-up." I once timed these dives, the average downtime being about seven seconds. The other small pond, a remnant of Bright's Nook, is much favored by Canada Geese.

Also shown on the map are Fresh Pond's shallow areas, which are popular with most visiting waterfowl. To the contrary, the daily gull population--which does not seem greatly reduced despite the closing of a nearby dump--prefers the deeper water of the pond's western end. Of course, most of the birds will be Herring Gulls, but there will usually be a fair number of Black-backs and occasionally large numbers of Ring-bills. For example, last November 1st I counted 151, 3, and 56 of these species respectively.

When the water level is allowed to go down far enough to expose the mud flats at the rotary end of Fresh Pond, as in 1971, autumn birding can be enhanced substantially. Not only is the habitat made more attractive to the teals, Pintails, and Wigeons, it also lures herons and shorebirds. During such an opportunity, look carefully along the shallow gullies created in the mud by the receding water.

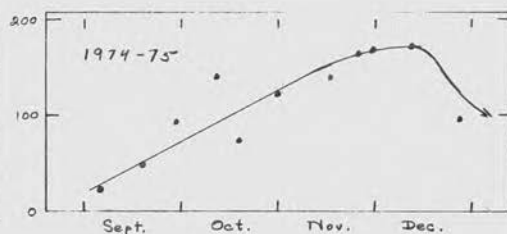
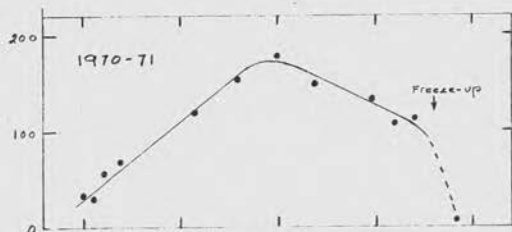
Brewster arranged by relative abundance the waterfowl that came to Fresh Pond during autumn migration: Ruddy Duck, Hooded Merganser, Bufflehead, Lesser Scaup, Coot, and Pied-billed Grebe. Less frequently encountered were Canada Goose, Wood Duck, teal (both kinds), Common Goldeneye, Oldsquaw, Surf Scoter, White-winged Scoter, Common Merganser, and Common Loon.

Today this order seems absurd. From waterfowl counts taken during the past five years, my ranking of the regularly occurring species would be as in the following table.

COMMON FRESH POND WATERFOWL

Rank	Species	Arrival	Departure
1.	Mallard	Sept. 1st	Dec. 2nd
2.	Black Duck	Sept. 1st	Freezeup
3.	Scaup	Sept. 2nd	Freezeup
4.	American Coot	Oct. 2nd	Freezeup
5.	Ring-necked Duck	Sept. 2nd	Freezeup
6.	Canvasback	Nov. 2nd	Freezeup
7.	Pied-billed Grebe	Sept. 1st	Freezeup
8.	Canada Goose	Sept. 1st	Nov. 1st
9.	Ruddy Duck	Oct. 2nd	Freezeup
10.	Pintail	Sept. 2nd	Dec. 1st
11.	Common Goldeney	Nov. 1st	Freezeup
12.	American Wigeon	Oct. 1st	Nov. 2nd
13.	Redhead	Nov. 2nd	Freezeup
14.	Bufflehead	Oct. 2nd	Dec. 1st
15.	Common Merganser	Nov. 1st	Freezeup
16.	Hooded Merganser	Nov. 1st	Freezeup

Largely gone are the freshwater-marsh ducks, such as the teals, and the ocean-loving Scoters and Oldsquaws. Truly, this is the age of the Mallard and the (probably corrupt) Black Duck. Scaup, however, still occur in good numbers--I don't think I've ever felt more confident in identifying Lessers on the water than at Fresh Pond. The close range at which these birds can be seen permits excellent opportunities to observe the vermiculation pattern on their sides, and, hopefully, to compare their generally smaller size relative to the usually more numerous Greateres.



The table above also includes the interval during which the more common visitants can be expected in numbers at Fresh Pond. Arrival and departure dates are for the first (1st) or second (2nd) half of a particular month. Species listed as arriving on "September 1st" may be present earlier in substantial numbers.

The arrival date of each species is consistent with the general migratory pattern prevalent throughout eastern Massachusetts. Many birds will tend to linger until the ice closes over, which may be as early as mid-December or not at all. The accompanying graphs illustrate waterfowl population trends on Fresh Pond during a relatively hard winter (1970-71) and during a very open one (1974-75).

A mild fall will bring the population to a peak later than a colder autumn, which closes the waters to our north and drives the birds southward. Also, the decline from peak populations is less rapid during an open winter, since there is less impetus for further southward migration. It is interesting to note, however, that in both mild and severe years, the total population at Fresh Pond peaked at about 170 birds. Is this the maximum number of waterfowl that the pond can accommodate?

Heretofore, we have been concerned mainly with the pond's contemporary and regularly occurring species--or those of bygone days. Yet the spice of birding is in finding the unexpected, and to me the place can be as important as the bird. On October 18, 1973, I was amazed to see 14 Black Scoters set down on Fresh Pond. Yes, there had been previous records, but the thrill was undiminished.

Historically, Fresh Pond has given sanctuary to virtually every water bird known in the Northeast--as have countless other similar bodies of water. The Thick-billed Murre, Mute Swan and Leach's Storm-petrel may provide moments of high drama, but the Mallard, scaup and Coot are always on stage!



Plate by John Henry Dick from
"A Field Guide to the Birds of India."
(Actual plate is in full color.)

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