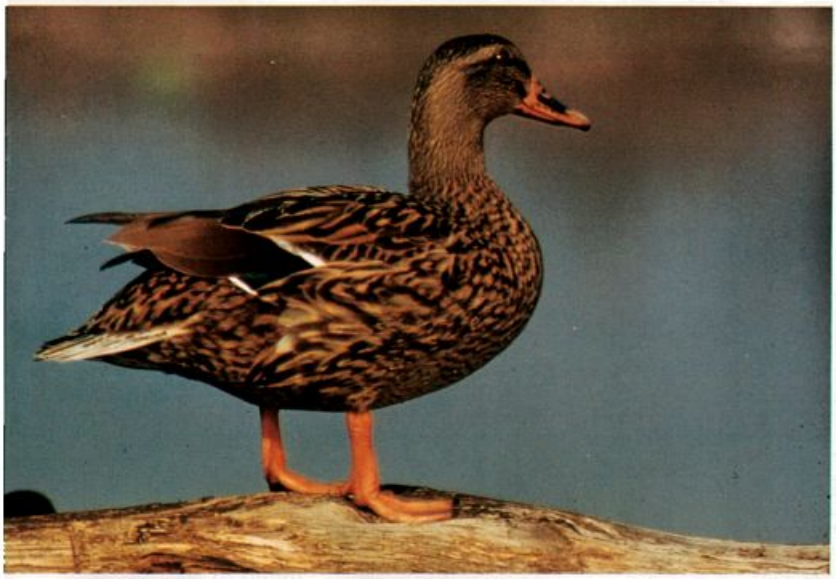


Female Mallard. Photo: Helen Cruickshank/VIREO (c03/6/150)

THE PRACTICED EYE

Female dabbling ducks

Kenn Kaufman

photographs from VIREO

THE LATE THOMAS H. DAVIS, WHOM I always admired for his sharp and colorful eloquence, used to wear a T-shirt sometimes that said simply: *Ducks suck.* This inelegant slogan reflected an anti-duck sentiment that seems to be common to many birders. As far as I can figure out, the bias against ducks has three major reasons: (1) most male ducks are too easy to identify; (2) most female ducks are too plain; (3) if you happen to find something really rare, chances are that it escaped from a collection of exotic waterfowl on someone's pond.

That last point is hard to contradict. But despite that, ducks have been among my favorite birds for years. As a kid, unable to afford a telescope, I could still name the gaudy male ducks far out on the reservoir. Later, when I figured out that wild waterfowl would associate with the tame flock in the local park

Female Northern Shoveler. Photo: Helen Cruickshank/ VIREO (c03/6/188)

Female Green-winged Teal. Photo: E. F. Knights/ VIREO (k05/3/001)

Female Mallard. Photo: Allan Cruickshank/VIREO (c02/13/064)

Female Gadwall. Photo: Helen Cruickshank/VIREO (c03/6/127)

Female Northern Pintail. Photo: Arthur Morris/VIREO (m17/5/043)

and would thus allow close approach, I began to appreciate the subtle beauty of female ducks.

Breeding biology is what dictates the soft hues of female ducks. In most duck species, females do all the incubation of the eggs, and bright colors would make the sitting bird and the nest even more vulnerable than they already are. The males, with few duties besides attracting a mate in the first place, are designed to be attractive. Females are designed to escape detection.

Comparing the two major groups—the so-called "dabbling ducks" and "diving ducks"—female divers mostly wear solid grays and browns, while female dabblers wear stripes, bars, crescents, and zigzags. The difference may be related to the fact that many dabbling ducks nest in grassy spots, where the intricate patterns make better camouflage.

This *Practiced Eye* looks at females of some of our dabbling ducks.

The female Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) provides an extreme example of a good basic point: bill shape is a major field mark for female ducks. In fact, the combination of bill shape, bill *color*, head shape, and face pattern provides most of the evidence we need for naming any female dabbling duck on the water. When they take to the air, their wing patterns are also distinctive—but that's another story. For the moment, suffice it to say that the shoveler's big trowel of a bill separates it from all contenders. Its bill is gray and orange, its face is rather dark and plain, and its head has to be rather large to support the bill.

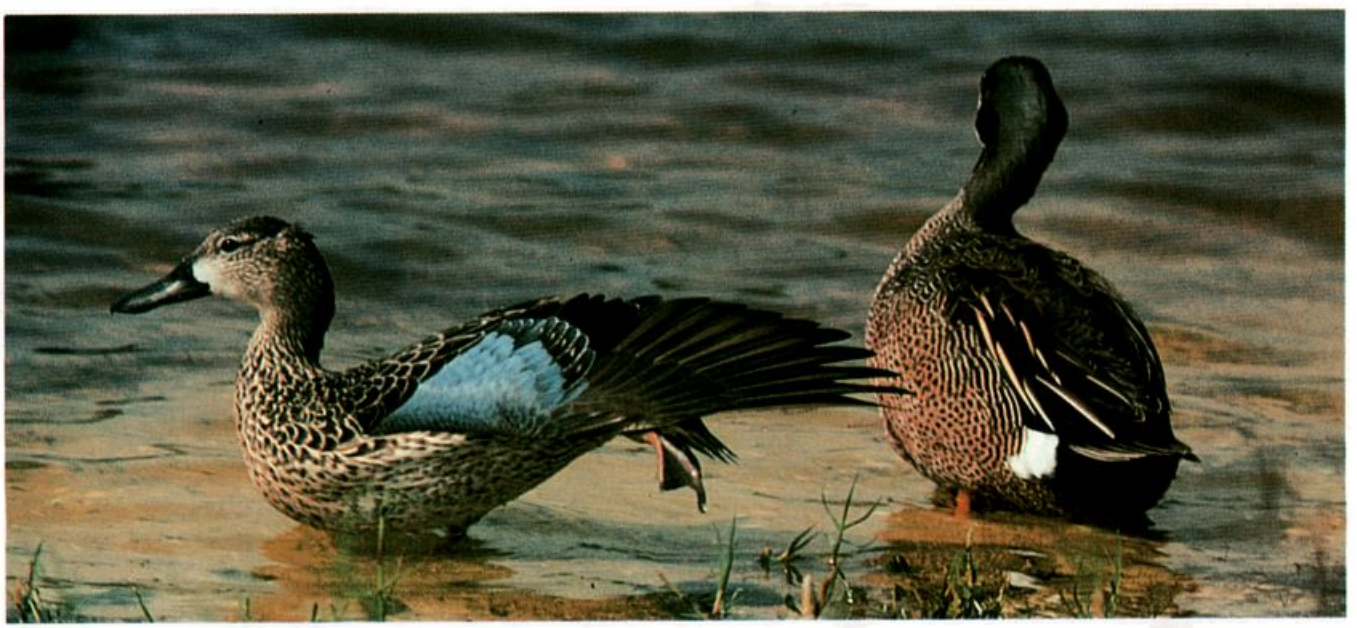
At the opposite end of the spectrum, the female Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) has a small, delicate bill. Its head is small, with a steep forehead, and the face is rather plain gray-brown with a prominent dark eye-stripe, especially behind the eye.

Most dabbling ducks are between these two extremes. The Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), which could be considered the "prototype duck," has a medium-sized bill—perhaps indicative of a bird with a generalized diet; successful generalists are often the most common birds. The female Mallard's bill is orange with a dusky "saddle" across the top. It has a fairly long sloping forehead, but the most noticeable thing about its face is the very dark line from the eye to the bill—darker than the line behind the eye, and more conspicuous than on most ducks.

The female Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) has bill colors somewhat like the Mallard's—dusky at the top and orange at

Female American Wigeon. Photo: Crawford H. Greenewalt/ VIREO (g02/26/279)

Female Cinnamon Teal. Photo: Crawford H. Greenewalt/ VIREO (g02/26/287)



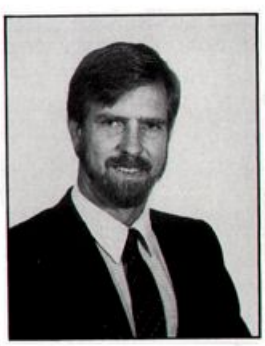
Female Blue-winged Teal. Photo: Olin S. Pettingill, Jr./VIREO (p03/1/118)

the sides—but its bill is smaller and its forehead is steeper, nearly vertical. Its dark eye-stripe is less obvious than that of the Mallard, especially in front of the eye, so that the Gadwall has a gentler facial expression.

A bird that virtually lacks any dark eye-stripe is the female Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*). Its face is nearly uniform warm buffy-brown, and its bill is plain gray. The rather thin bill, small head, long neck, and slightly elongated tail give the female pintail a quietly elegant look.

Also rather plain-faced but more compact in build is the female American Wigeon (*Anas americana*). It has a short blue-gray bill with a noticeable black tip, and its head is rounded. Its heavily mottled face is grayer than the rest of the plumage, and it can have an irregular dark patch around the eye but it usually lacks a dark eye-stripe.

One of the main identification problems among dabbling ducks involves separating the female Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) from the female Cinnamon Teal (*Anas cyanoptera*). The differences between them are mostly differences of degree. Cinnamon Teal has a longer and heavier bill, plainer and darker face, less distinct markings on the chest and sides, and warmer brown tones overall as compared to Blue-winged Teal. These comparisons break down somewhat in fall because the *juvenile* teal differ slightly from adults. Thus, a juvenile Cinnamon may have more distinct markings on the body feathers, a paler face with a more distinct dark eye-stripe, and even a shorter bill than the adult at first, and all of these things will make it a little more similar to Blue-winged Teal. Observers who are confident that they can separate these two teal in winter and spring still have to be cautious about attempting the same feat in autumn.



VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the world's first and foremost scientifically-curated collection of bird photographs. Established in 1979, the collection now holds more than 100,000 images, representing well over one-third of the world's bird species. For more background, see the feature on VIREO by J. P. Myers *et al.* in *American Birds* Volume 38, Number 3, May–June 1984

Hello! I'm Susan Roney Drennan, editor of *American Birds*. Turn to page 1346 to find out how you can help me make this the most successful Birdathon ever.