

Insider Info

FOR THE BIRDS

Whether you're trying to figure out which birds are coming toward your blind or into your backyard, here's some advice about avian arrivals. BY LISA DENSMORE BALLARD



IDENTIFYING DUCKS.

Know the species in flight and in low light.

It's 20 minutes before sunrise. The light is dim, but it's legal shooting time. Your decoys bob gently on the water in front of you as you hunker in your blind. Suddenly, the dog starts to quiver as a flight of ducks set their wings, about to land in front of you, but you aren't sure what kind they are. Rather than miss an opportunity, says Scott Yaich, chief scientist for Ducks Unlimited, use the duck's size, shape, and color as clues to its species.

Atlantic Flyway: Two duck species that are commonly confused in the Atlantic Flyway are black ducks and hen mallards, which can often be found together, says Yaich. He offers a few tell-tale clues: "Black ducks stand out in flight due to the contrast between their dark breast and their stark, light underwing. If you're close and can see the top of the wing spread out, mallards have white bars on the leading and trailing edge of the speculum [iridescent patch on the upper wing]. Black ducks have no white bars."

On the water, bill color is another clue. Black duck bills are olive green whereas hen mallard bills have an orange tone. Black ducks, which are really not black but dark brown, also look much darker than mallards when they are mixed together.

Mississippi/Central Flyways: Waterfowlers in the mid-continent flyways often mistake widgeons and gadwalls in flight, even though they look quite different close up. The birds are similar in size, and both have prominent white patches on their wings. The location of those white marks is the key to telling them apart.

"In flight, you know it's a gadwall if the patch on the rear of the wing is close to the body, where the speculum would be on a mallard," says Yaich. "On widgeons, that patch is on the front portion of the wing away from body — what you might say is the bird's elbow (though it's really its wrist)."

Pacific Flyway: Even though blue wing teal are smaller, hunters sometimes mix up shovelers and blue wing teal, especially during the early teal seasons when the male blue wings

are not in their full plumage and are missing the obvious white crescent on their faces. "Both have blue patches on the leading edge of their wings, but the shoveler has a prominent, spoon-shaped, and larger bill," says Yaich. "If you're teal hunting, cue on the bill — otherwise, they look very similar during much of the hunting season."

Other Look-Alikes: Bill shape is also diagnostic when differentiating between redhead and canvasback ducks in flight or in low light. A canvasback has a long, wedge-shaped bill that slopes from its forehead to the point, whereas a redhead has a more typical duck-shaped bill.

Scaup and ring-necked ducks, which are similar in size and color, are two other potential look-alikes. Yaich says to look for white on the trailing inside edge of the wing, indicating a scaup. If it's gray, it's a ring-necked duck. Ring-necks also have a bulge of feathers on the back of the head and a distinctive ring on the bill, whereas scaup have a traditional duck-shaped head and no ring on the bill.

"As a rule of thumb, never shoot something you can't identify if it risks putting you over your bag limit," says Yaich. "It's always best to positively ID what you shoot."

WORD WISE

Ornithology, the branch of zoology dealing with the study of birds, first appeared in the English language in the late 17th century. It is derived either from the Latin word *ornithologia* or from the Greek word *ornithologos*, both meaning "the treatment of birds."