

IDENTIFYING DUCKS IN COASTAL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Generally, waterfowl provide an excellent group to identify for beginner-birders. Ducks and geese are relatively large, common at many local parks, and usually distinctive. Although both sexes of geese look the same (other than size), most ducks are distinctly “sexually dimorphic”—meaning that males look different than females. Typically the males are showy, so are relatively easy to identify. The females, on the other hand, are quite brown and non-descript, which can pose problems for even some experienced birders. Do not assume that just because a female duck is with an obvious male of a particular species that she is the same species. Unless the bird is obscured or quite far away, you should be able to make the correct identification using tips from this guide.

It is also important to realize that not all brown dabbling ducks are females. Sometimes they are young males that have not yet reached the maturity of alternate (breeding) plumage. Also, in late summer/early fall, you may be seeing a few adult males in what many refer to as “eclipse” plumage—when males moult into a female-like plumage, prior to their new pre-alternate molt in the fall/winter.

IDENTIFICATION FEATURES

- 1) Bill colour and shape
- 2) Head colour and shape
- 3) Markings on flanks/wing (e.g. colour of the “speculum”)
- 4) Tail shape/markings
- 5) Leg colour and
- 6) Overall size/structure

Mallard (MALL)

- Bright orange legs/feet
- Orange beak with darkish centre
- Distinct, dark eye-stripe
- White outer tail feathers
- Blue/purple speculum

Female Mallard (Photo: Ralph Hocken) ▶



Male Northern Pintail
in eclipse plumage
(Photo: Mike Yip) ▶

Northern Pintail (NOPI)

- Large flocks pass by BC coast in spring/fall, especially around Fraser Delta
- Grey legs/feet
- Longer, more slender bodied than MALL (pointed tail)
- Plain, un-patterned face
- Dark grey beak

Female Northern Pintail (Photo: Paul Kusmin) ▶



IDENTIFYING DUCKS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Gadwall (GADW)

- Similar to Mallard but daintier build
- High forehead (small but blocky-looking)
- Orange on bill is limited to the edges
- Yellowish legs
- White secondary patch is often visible (not coloured speculum)

Female Gadwall (Photo: Mike Yip)



American Wigeon (AMWI)

- Like NOPI, especially common in spring/fall, but also numerous in winter
- Notorious grazer; found in flocks in farm fields, golf-courses etc.
- Head shape/colour (dark shadowing around eye) is distinctively wigeon-like
- Pinkish-beige flanks, contrasts with grayish face
- Small gray beak with black tip

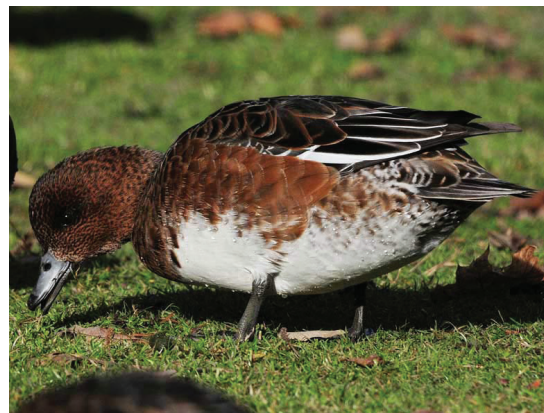
Female American Wigeon (Photo: Mike Yip)



Eurasian Wigeon (EUWI)

- Similar to AMWI but note uniform warm-brown colouring
- Face is noticeably browner than AMWI
- Edge of beak usually lacks black border of AMWI
- Greyish underwing visible in flight (AMWI has white)

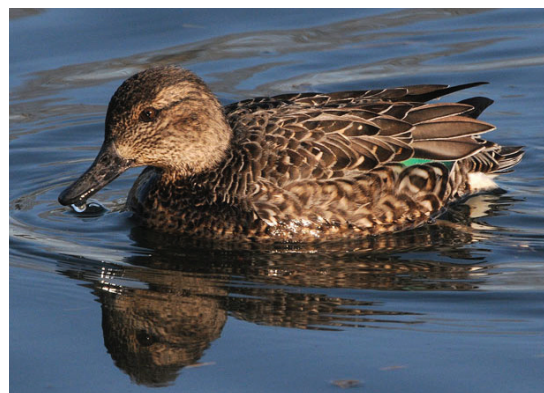
Female Eurasian Wigeon (Photo: Mike Yip)



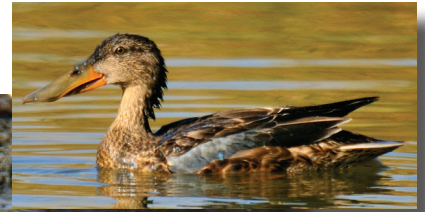
Green-winged Teal (GWTE)

- Obviously smaller than other dabblers
- Green speculum usually visible
- Cream-coloured streak on outer tail feathers usually prominent
- Facial pattern is like a mini-mallard but bill is small and greyish

Female Green-winged Teal (Photo: Mike Yip)



Male NOSL in eclipse plumage
(Photo: Paul Kushmin) ▶



Northern Shoveler (NOSL)

- Large shovel-like bill is very distinctive
- Otherwise similar to female Mallard but with green speculum

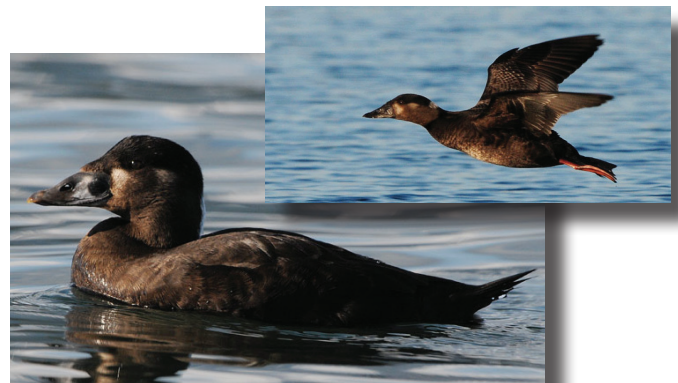
Female Northern Shoveler (Photo: Paul Kusmin) ▶



Surf Scoter (SUSC)

- Most widespread scoter species on BC coast
- Usually most common scoter near Victoria & Vancouver
- Completely dark-brown wings
- Smaller more square-shaped head than WWSC
- Vertical white patch at base of bill
- Adult females have pale eye

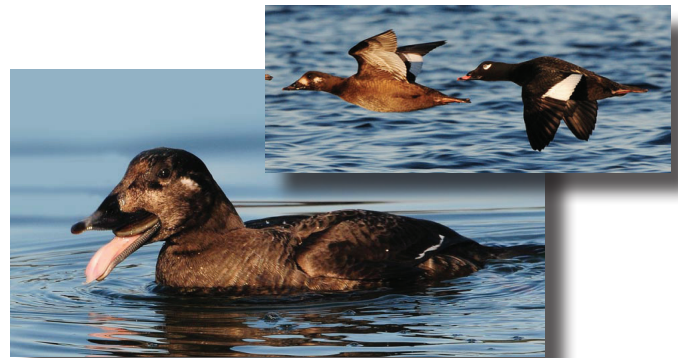
Female Surf Scoter swimming and in flight (Photos: Mike Yip) ▶



White-winged Scoter (WWSC)

- White secondaries usually visible while at rest
- Longer, more evenly-sloped forehead
- Pale lore patch at base of bill is usually more oval-shaped than Surf
- Larger than other two scoter species
- All females have dark eyes

Female White-winged Scoter swimming and female with male in flight (Photos: Mike Yip) ▶



Black Scoter (BLSC)

- Very local-to-rare around Victoria and Vancouver
- Often the most abundant scoter along the Sunshine Coast and upper Vancouver Island
- Females have dark caps and uniformly pale cheeks
- Bill is thinner than other scoters/eiders; often with some yellow near base
- Wings are uniformly dark

Female BLSC swimming alone and with male (Photos: Mike Yip) ▶

