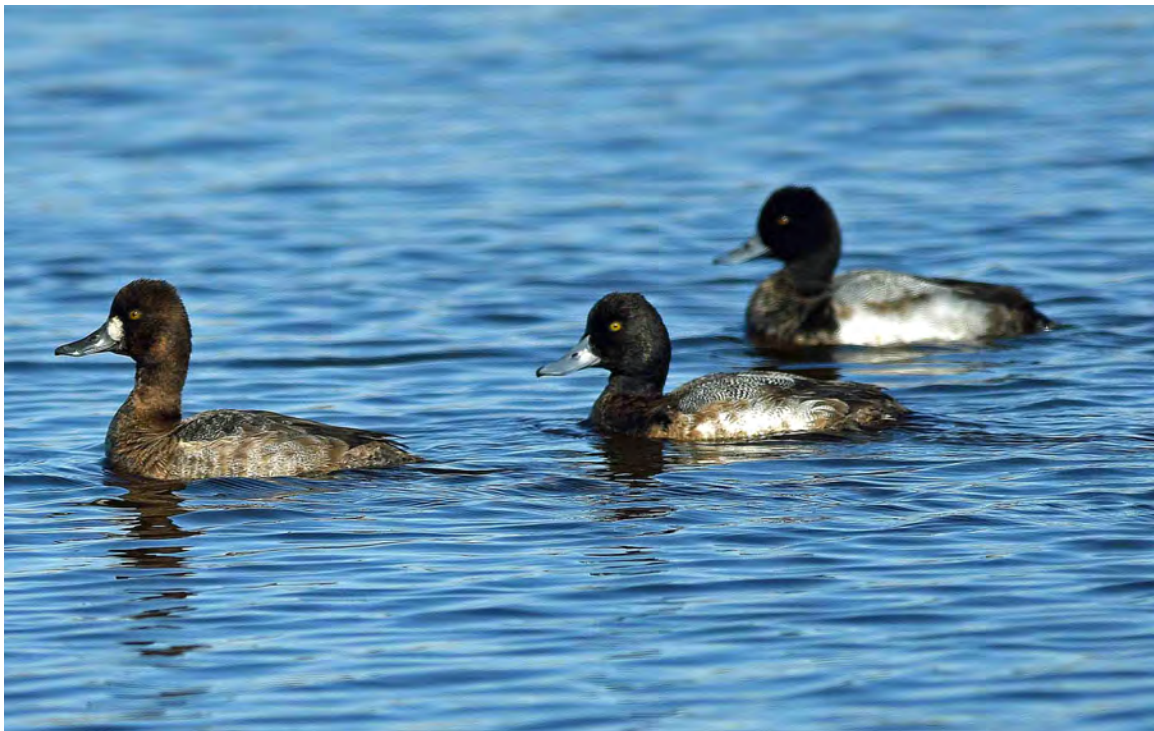


Diving Ducks:

Now we start diving ducks. They ride lower in the water, diving for their food. They are heavier, so the diving expends less energy. Buoyancy underwater is not a good thing! The hunters prefer dabbling ducks (vegetarian), as these diving ducks eat mussels, making them less tasty on the plate. Taking off, they have to paddle a bit over the surface to get airborne, as their diet causes them to be heavier.

Diving ducks are also divided into subgroups, and we'll first look at "bay ducks." These are the two scaups, Redhead, Canvasback and Ring-necked Duck. This also includes Old World species such as Tufted Duck and Pochard. My sense is that they tend toward water nearer the shore and mouths of rivers, than deeper places like out in the Gulf.



In all honesty, there's nothing wrong with calling a bird an "unidentified" scaup. These three are tough, partly as semi-mature individuals, although head shape perhaps favors greater. Years ago I found a scaup skull on the beach and was able to ID it (!), because the nail on the bill of a greater is more than one cm wide, but lessers are less than one CM wide.

Scaup females are brown up front and more gray on the back 2/3. Adult females have the white face, easily separating them from other bay ducks. One kind of odd field mark is that scaups associating with Redheads are almost always greater, as you shall see...



Every winter there are literally thousands of Redheads in West Bay, usually w/ scattered Greater Scaup among them. Look for the dark heads just to the right of center. They also have whiter backs than Redhead males or lessers. Females at this distance are hard. Duck hunters work over these birds unmercifully all winter, as I hear the carnage daily.



Here's a mounted male Greater Scaup. Note the white wingstripe well into the primaries.



The rounded green head and white back all make this an adult male Greater Scaup.



The freshwater counterpart to scaups in winter is the Ring-necked Duck. This pair shows a tinted head and well-marked bill, plus the male has a very dark back. The female also has an eyering not found on scaups. You may wish to compare her to female Redheads. Below- Compare a male Ring-necked Duck (left) to a male scaup on the back right.



Below is a pair of Redheads, showing the heavy bodies of diving ducks.



The female is taking an astronomy class.

Below are some flying Redhead, showing off their light gray wingstripes.



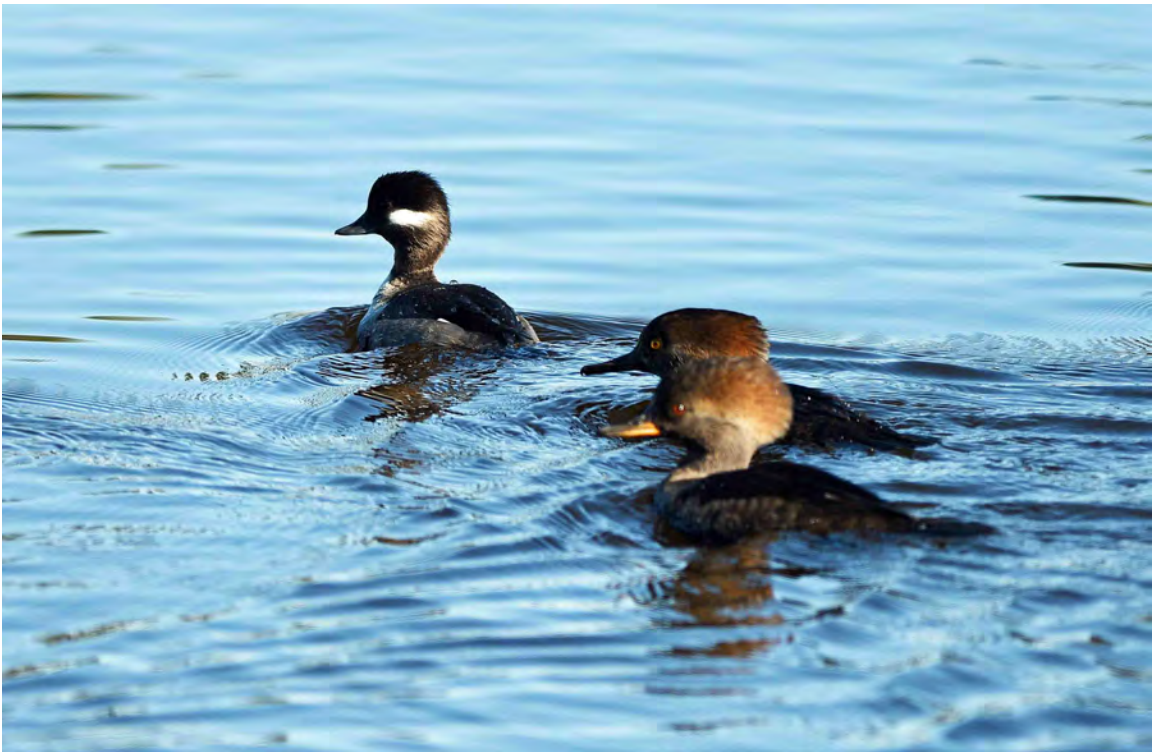


On my trip home over the Christmas holidays I was able to shoot these two Canvasbacks way off at St. Mark's NWR. This is a tough bird to find on the UTC. Note the larger size than the scaups, and the white "canvas" back. For you Seminoles, Lighthouse Pool is a great place for bay ducks and dabblers. [I have another place for the Gators to go.] ;)

Below begins the Sea Ducks, in general a more northern group of quackers than these Bay Ducks we've just perused. Many Sea Ducks have white wing patches, but stripes belong to the Bay Ducks. I can't think of any diving ducks, Sea or Bay, which have a colored speculum. That's also true of the mergansers to come.

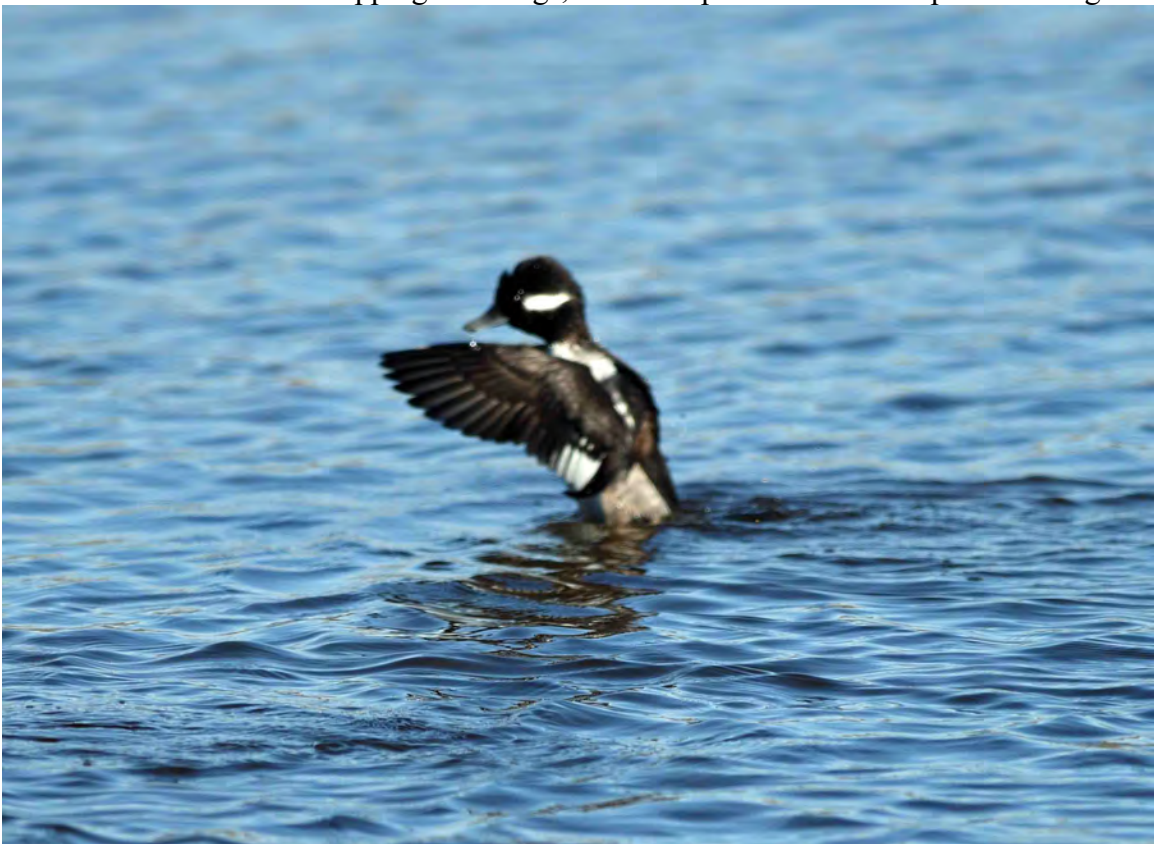


Sea Ducks are waterfowl that live in deeper marine waters than bay ducks, like these two male Bufflehead above. They are in the best place around for this species and goldeneye as well: the Texas City Dike, east side. They feed on mollusks and are below the surface a lot. A Bufflehead female is below, with two hen Hooded Mergansers.





Here's a hen Bufflehead flapping her wings, with the speculum on the top of the wings.





Common Goldeneye are larger than Bufflehead but occupy much the same niche around oyster bars in the Bay. Note the low, sloping profile, unlike that of the rare Barrow's GE. Below is a mounted male Common Goldeneye at the Museum of Brazosport College.





Scoters are three species of sea ducks with black males, brown females and ornate beaks. Commonest are the Surf Scoter seen above, but all-dark Black Scoters and easily-to-ID White-winged Scoters also appear occasionally. The best time for scoters is ahead of late fall cold fronts, flying east offshore in rainy weather. In North Florida, Mud Cove is good for them, on Alligator Point. [Or used to be?]



A highly ornate bird with loads of ruptive marks is the Harlequin Duck, seen occasionally on the UTC from the far North. Their favorite habitat is the rocky shores of the Atlantic or Pacific's northern range, especially New England or southern Alaska. These birds eat the encrusting organisms like mollusks which grow on rocks, etc.

Mergansers are our only fish-eating ducks, and have a long, serrate bill for catching them. This diet gives their meat a strong, fishy odor that makes them unpalatable. They may not even be legal to hunt, I dunno. By far our most common merganser is the red-breasted, but lately we've had a lot of hoodies on the Dike along the southeat edge of Brazosport. A Common Merganser shows up in the South somewhere about once a year.



Adult male Red-breasted Mergansers are handsome beauties with their shaggy crests.





Females of that species are more brown, as always with ducks, and one needs to be more careful for the rare Common Merganser. This is a RB, but at this angle, sometimes the neck appears to have the sharp demarcation of a female Common. See?

Below are two adult male RB on the right and perhaps some young males on the left, as I think I see some green-black feathering coming in on some necks. These birds swim in shallows like Orcas, cornering killifish (*Fundgulus*) against banks, grabbing them easily.





Above is a comparison of another diving duck (a female scaup) to a lady RB Merganser, showing the serrate bill for catching fish on the merganser. They are the only group of fish-eating ducks, and that explains why hunters don't shoot them. Their flesh is awful!

Below are Red-breasted Mergansers, where all are immature males. Later they'll have a green head and a pinkish breast. In winter, many species have radically different adult & immature males. Many waterbirds like gulls make bird identification tricky coz of this.





One of the most beautiful ducks is the male Hooded Merganser. You can see the serrate bill for grabbing fish, and the wouser of an erect hood for gaining favor with the females. This is a bird far more common back East, although the dike around the SE corner of Brazosport has quite a few hoodies this year, chasing small fish in the ditch. This one was at Wakulla Springs, just south of Tallahassee, over Christmas.

As your field guide maps would indicate, there're quite a few northern ducks that seldom (if ever) venture into southern waters in winter. That include Barrow's Goldeneye, eiders, Harlequin Duck, Common Merganser and Long-tailed Duck (oldsquaw).



Rather unrelated to our other waterfowl is the Ruddy Duck, actually in a family around the tropical regions of the World. [That includes the very rare Masked Duck.] This is the female, and males in winter look very similar, but with a white cheek patch. As a diving duck, they do ride low in the water, and have a stiff tail that often sticks up. If you're ever in Austin in the spring, go to Hornsby Bend and admire the breeding plumage Ruddy Duck males.

There are certainly some beautiful ducks, eh?