

## Spotting Winter Waterfowl in Las Colinas

Hi, we're in Las Colinas, and we're along Las Colinas Boulevard where there are a series of these canals. Not a place that I would have thought harbored much interesting wildlife. Naturalists don't have this on the list of places that they like to go, but there is some pretty amazing wildlife here.

Today we're going to look at aquatic birds. We have five of them in total. They're only here during the winter, so they're going to be gone within maybe a month or so from now. They come down here to winter only. The star of our show is by far my favorite: the Hooded Merganser.

## Diving Ducks vs. Dabbling Ducks: What is the Difference?

Mergansers are first and foremost diving ducks. Diving ducks are distinguished from surface ducks. Surface ducks are known as puddle ducks affectionately, or they're known as dabblers. The name comes from the fact that their food is usually within reach of them. They will feed on the surface or they'll upend themselves in the shallows so that they can reach food on the bottom.

By contrast, a diving duck, as its name implies, goes whole body underwater. It swims underwater, just like a penguin does. It uses its wings for propulsion and then its legs sort of as a propeller behind them. There are some big physical differences between diving ducks and surface ducks. For one, it's the position of the feet on their body. If you have them out side-by-side for comparison, a diving duck's feet are in the back of the body, compared to a surface dabbler who has its feet in the middle of its body.

The reason mallards and shovelers (which are surface ducks) are built that way is they spend quite a bit of time on land. They need to be able to walk around easily, and that has their center of gravity right above their legs. Diving ducks have to get around underwater. They have their legs in the back, so they're not all that good on land. With the legs in the back, the only way they're going to be able to walk is to get the center of gravity pushed back by raising their body towards the back. They kind of do what a penguin does—they raise their body up and they sort of have to balance a little bit because of their shape.

## Physical Differences and Takeoff Styles

There are quite a few other differences between the two types of ducks. One you see is when they try to take off. A diving duck, because its legs are in the back of its body, can use them for propulsion. So it will beat its wings and start running along the surface of the water until it builds up enough speed. It's an amazing thing to watch.

By contrast, a surface duck has to come straight out of the water. They can't run because their legs are too far forward. It's really interesting. If you watch a mallard take off—which they almost always look like they're terrified when they do so—they have to use their wings with an enormous amount of energy to just explode vertically. It's the only way they can get from water to air. It's quite a thing to watch, and that's the disadvantage of not being able to run. So there are advantages and disadvantages to both types of bodies.

## Meet the Hooded Merganser

Hooded Mergansers are primarily fishermen. They dive, and they have a bill perfectly adapted to catching small fish, which is their favorite food. They also eat regular crustaceans and I guess insects occasionally, but primarily fish.

## The Ring-Necked Duck and Lesser Scaup

Another diving duck that we have today is the Ring-necked Duck. Strangely called a ring-necked when there doesn't seem to be a ring around its neck! There supposedly is if you look very closely and it extends its neck, but you can't see it in any of our footage, and I've never seen it in binoculars. They do have very apparent and very beautiful rings around their bills, so maybe "ring-bill" would be a better name for them.

## How Diving Ducks Stay Warm and Dry

They dive, and you can see an interesting adaptation that the diving ducks have real easily on these ring-necks. When they dive, consider this: they all have to stay dry. For one thing, they're all preening all the time, which means they're taking care of their feathers. They're

also oiling their feathers from a gland near their tail and spreading this oil everywhere so that they're essentially waterproof.

If you consider a Hooded Merganser, it is a small creature, and it swims in very, very cold water. Hypothermia is a serious risk, and they have to be waterproof. If water gets in under the feathers and their little bodies are wet with 40-degree water, they're in serious trouble. Because they have this waterproof shell, they have a layer of air between their skin and the outer feathers, and that's their insulation. Well, that's a lot of air. Imagine trying to swim to the bottom of a swimming pool holding a basketball—it would take a ton of work to stay down.

The same is true for them. If you watch closely just before they submerge, all divers do this: they pump all the air out from underneath their feathers somehow, and they shrink-wrap themselves down to this skinny little duck from the head all the way down to the tail in a split second. Then they go under. You just have to watch it—the last second, shrink, dive. And then when they're done hunting, they come up to the surface, look like they did when they first submerged, and then they reinflate and are back to what they were. I think it's amazing that it works so well.

## The Northern Shoveler: A Classic Dabbler

We also have for surface ducks, a Northern Shoveler. I think this is one of everyone's favorites. It's a beautiful animal, especially the male. It's easily identified by its really large bill.

## The Lesser Scaup

We also have today another diving duck, this is a Lesser Scaup. Scaups—we have two in Dallas, a lesser and a greater. The lesser is more common. They're virtually identical except for their size. The way to tell a scaup from a ring-neck (because they look similar) is number one: the ring-neck has a black back, whereas the scaup does not. The other thing is the ring-neck has that beautiful bill; the scaup's bill is just blue, and it even goes by the nickname "bluebill."

## The American Wigeon: The Clever Thief

Scaups are associated with another duck, almost always seen with them, and that is another one of my favorites: the American Wigeon. Wigeons are not diving ducks, yet they are seen out in the deep where the dabblers are usually in the shallows. This one is out in the deep because that's where the scaup goes.

The scaup dives, comes up, has his food... and in that moment of vulnerability, the otherwise lovable, beautiful American Wigeon does its deed. It's a thief. It steals the food of diving ducks, and it knows that scaups are one of the best to follow around. Yes, your American Wigeon is beautiful to look at, it has a gorgeous song, it's charming with its little bill and very colorful, but it has that dark side as well.

## Tips for Spotting Waterfowl

That's our last duck for today. All five of these will be gone in about a month from now. I want to suggest this to you: come out here and see this for yourself before they're gone for the year. I would bring a pair of binoculars and I'm going to give you a couple of tips.

It wasn't easy for us to get near them, especially the mergansers. They're small and completely interesting. One thing we learned: I wouldn't bother bringing a camo net, but get ducked behind one of these bald cypresses or larger trees and just wait a minute or two. If you come in quietly and you're sitting behind the tree, they're going to lose you. Strangely, a couple of us were standing behind a tree only this wide with all our gear, and for some reason, they lost our track. We were able to get all set up hiding.

I learned this little trick: go around to the other side of the tree where the shadows are going, come around into the shadow, and start scooching forward. You'll end up pretty close to the water's edge and very close to them. You'll love what you see!