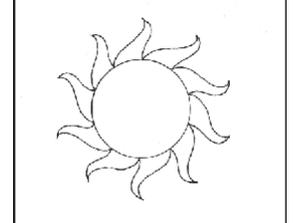
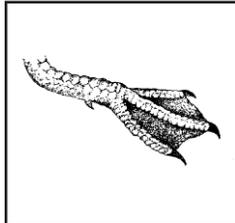
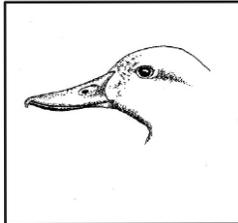
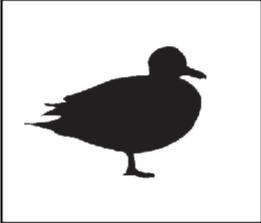




# Diving Ducks

## Order Anseriformes

*Family Anatinae*  
*Subfamily Aythyini*



While the two groups of Pennsylvania ducks can occasionally be seen floating together in rafts, **diving ducks spend more time further from shore than do puddle ducks.** Their preference for deep water requires physical features adapted to underwater feeding since these ducks can dive well below the surface of large lakes and rivers to feed on fish, mollusks, crustaceans, insects and bottom-dwelling aquatic plants. Their **large, broad fully webbed feet** help propel them through water. Their **legs are placed back toward their tail and they have a paddle-like flap on their hind toe.** Both features help them dive efficiently. But **on land, a diving duck is awkward** at best. Their **wings are small compared to their body size.** This, too, helps them dive and swim but makes it more difficult for diving ducks to become airborne. Unlike puddle ducks that can lift directly off the water surface, **diving ducks need to run across the water to build up speed for take-off** (below right).

The **precocial ducklings** are covered with yellow and brown streaks to help camouflage their body outlines as they follow their mother to water soon after hatching. Like puddle ducks, **male diving ducks undergo a post-breeding molt, changing their colorful plumage to resemble the more inconspicuous females.** This helps the males camouflage among vegetation as well as the females since the **males cannot fly during molt.**

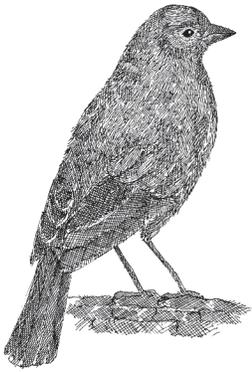


**Ring-necked Duck**  
*Aythya collaris*

**Ring-necked ducks** have faint **rings around their necks**, but the best field mark to identify these dark-headed ducks is the **white ring around their bills.** Their dark bodies (black males and brown females) are contrasted with white chests.

They are **fast flyers** that **feed in shallow waters more often than other diving ducks.** Ring-necks are common migrants in our state, but they do not breed here.

As with almost all waterfowl, **protecting wetland habitat for their food supply** is crucial for the ring-necks' survival as is **conserving marshland and prairies for their nesting** requirements. Both these particular habitats remain among our most fragile.



What do **cowbirds** and **redheaded ducks** have in common? **Both will parasitize other bird nests to raise their young.** Redheads lay their eggs in the nests of many other ducks, but they will sometimes lay a clutch of their own.

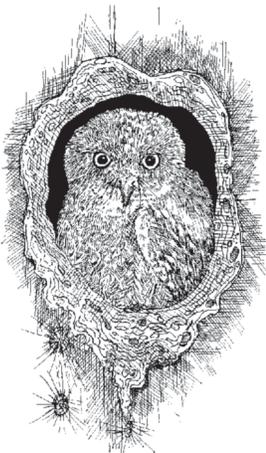
Even though they are diving ducks, they feed in water that is shallower than most other diving ducks. **Drakes have a beautiful bronzed-red head, dark neck and gray body.** Hens are a buffy-brown.

**Redheads** can sometimes be found during fall and spring migrations in Pennsylvania, but their **numbers have declined due to the loss of the prairie habitats, where they nest** throughout northern North America and Canada.

**Canvasbacks** are one of our largest ducks, up to 21 inches long. The male has a beautiful rusty-red head, black neck and white body, with an **elongated elegant head profile.** Canvasbacks are **fast birds that can fly up to 70 mph.** They breed on the prairies in the midwest and are considered popular but **uncommon migrants in Pennsylvania.** They concentrate in huge populations in the Chesapeake Bay during winter. Like all waterfowl in our state, **game seasons on these ducks are regulated closely since over-hunting seriously reduced their numbers in the past.**

The **Lesser Scaup**, nearly identical to the **Greater Scaup** (*Aythya marila*), are also **known as “broadbills” or “bluebills.”** Both male and female have blue bills. **Males are black and white, females, brown and white.**

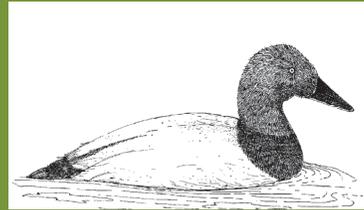
Lesser scaups are **common fall and spring migrants** in our state, while the greater scaup is much less common. These are **true diving ducks, preferring the large open waters of our lakes and rivers.**



**Buffleheads** are small diving ducks weighing about one pound, almost half what most other ducks weigh and only about 13–14 inches in length. The **black and white males have a large white patch on their heads.** Females are brown and white and lack the white head patch. They are **common during spring and fall migrations** and are **fast fliers** with very fast wing beats. Buffleheads nest in Canada and Alaska where they raise their brood in **tree cavities, preferring old flicker nests.**



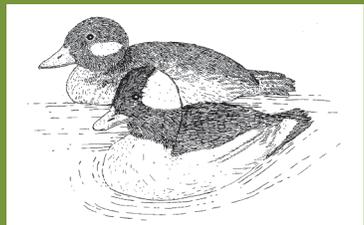
**Redhead**  
*Aythya americana*



**Canvasback**  
*Aythya valisineria*



**Lesser Scaup**  
*Aythya affinis*



**Bufflehead**  
*Bucephala albeola*



**Ruddy Duck**  
*Oxyura jamaicensis*

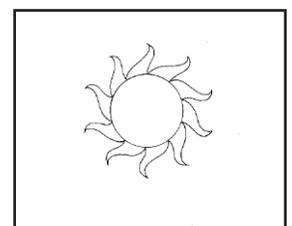
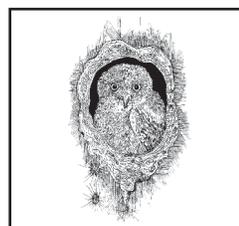
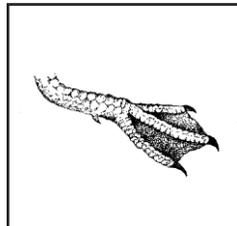
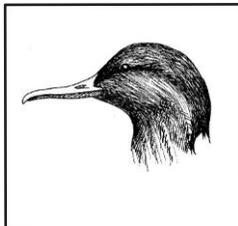
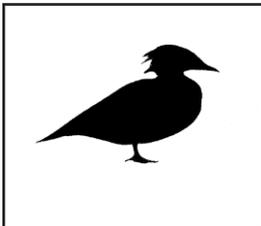
**Ruddy ducks** are about as **small as buffleheads**. They have a distinct **short, stubby upturned tail**, large **white patches on their face** under a dark cap, and a **blue bill**. **When threatened**, ruddy ducks will **dive underwater** rather than fly away. They fly in tight flocks that skim closely over the water's surface and are **common migrants** in our state.

Other migrants and occasional winter residents to our state are the **common goldeneye** (*Bucephala clangula*) and the **oldsquaw** (*Clangula hyemalis*).

The more **rare species of scoters** (*Melanitta*) are **sea ducks that migrate through Pennsylvania on their way to Canada** and Alaska to breed and then back toward their wintering sites along the Atlantic coast.



**Mergansers**  
Order Anseriformes  
Family Anatinae  
Subfamily Mergini

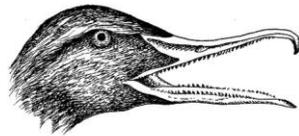


**The Mergansers are grouped among the diving ducks but belong to their own subfamily.** They are **long, slender-bodied** diving ducks with **long, narrow saw-edged** (or serrated-below, center) **bills**, which help them grip and hold on to fish. Often called "sawbirds," mergansers are known for their **colorful plumage** and habits of **flying fast and close to the water's surface**. Most species have **crests on their heads**, which they can hold up or down at will (top photos and below left). **In flight, their head, bill, body and tail are held in a straight horizontal line.**

Mergansers prey on fish, fish eggs and other aquatic animals. The **hooded merganser** (*Lophodytes cucullatus*)—top right—lives among reeds in Pennsylvania's **swampy, woodland habitats** using a **tree cavity** near a pond, lake, river or stream. They will also use a man-made nesting box placed in the proper habitat.

The **common merganser** (*Mergus merganser*)—top left—needs a **wilder, less inhabited** site in order to nest. They, too, are **cavity-nesters but will also nest in a rock pile or even a hole in a stream bank (like a kingfisher).**

**Red-breasted merganser** (*Mergus serrator*) females build their nests in thick vegetation on the ground, though they nest in Canada and Alaska, not in Pennsylvania. They can be seen on our open rivers during migration. Merganser ducklings from various nests are often grouped together and looked after by a single female.



## A Simple Review of Diving Ducks & Mergansers



**Diving ducks are a group of ducks that prefer to live on large open bodies of water.** They are designed to dive down into deep water in search of small fish and other aquatic creatures. They will also pull up submerged plants for their food. Some diving ducks, like canvasbacks and redheads, prefer fresh water. Other diving ducks, such as buffleheads and oldsquaws, like salt water. Those ducks even have a special gland in the bill to get rid of the salt.

**Diving ducks** have large webbed feet and **are strong swimmers** as well as divers, but they **do not walk well on land.** That's because their legs are placed well back on their bodies. This helps them dive but makes them awkward on land. Some diving ducks can get stranded on land. One diving duck, the ring-necked duck, deals with this by pretending to be dead if it is grabbed on land by a predator like a fox.

**Like all ducks, diving ducks use their bills to strain plant parts and small creatures from water** or its muddy bottom. Sometimes they can swallow lead shot left over from a hunting season or pollutants that might be in the water. If the marshes, lakes, rivers and bays where these ducks live are not clean, the ducks can become ill.

When puddle ducks take flight, they lift straight up off the water. But **when diving ducks take off, they need to run across the water's surface before they become airborne.** When diving ducks do fly, they are really fast. Canvasbacks, who get their name from coloring that looks like a piece of canvas, can fly as fast as 70 mph. Ring-necks and goldeneyes make whistling sounds with their wings as they fly overhead.



**Mergansers are a group of waterfowl closely related to diving ducks.** Mergansers are built long and flat, and they sit low in the water like a raft. They have **long, narrow bills with serrated edges.** Those sharp edges help them hold on to small, slippery fish they catch while diving. Sometimes they are called “sawbills.”

**Mergansers** are beautifully colored birds and excellent swimmers. Before they dive underwater, they **lift the front of their body up out of the water and then arch their body down into the water, rather like a porpoise.** The hooded merganser nests in Pennsylvania and will travel some distance from water to find a suitable tree cavity in which to nest. **While underwater, mergansers propel themselves with both their feet and their wings.**