

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture November 19th, 2009.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

The **Black-throated Gray Warbler** is a scarce winter visitor. It is more often seen in the foothills and Central Valley in the winter than it is along the immediate coast. It does breed in the Bay Area in mixed oak woodland or pine-oak woodland mostly at higher elevations on some of the ridges such as the Bolinas ridge or Skyline ridge in San Mateo County, but very scarce. Mostly detected by its song. One was recently seen at Ferry Park. It might just be a late migrant. But there was one wintering there last year, so it may very well be the same bird. The phenomenon is called **philopatry** or site fidelity. Birds that were successful in breeding or wintering in a certain area will often try again. There are some species that are not like this. Birds like the Dickcissel for example are very erratic and don't seem to come to the same place twice, but most birds are creatures of habit.

The latest issue of **Birding Magazine** has an article by Joe about the term **eclipse** and a letter to the editor by Joe about the term **juvenal**. Joe has PDFs on the Publications section of his website. Currently an older version slightly different from what was printed; Joe did not write the introducing paragraph "Female ducks? No problem. ...". It got changed prior to printing.

Diving Ducks

They have their feet located far back on the body and spread fairly far apart, so none of these ducks are very likely to be seen out of the water. Having the feet at the rear is of advantage for propulsion under the water and for submersion.

Diving ducks are usually found on deeper water than surface feeding or dabbling ducks. One of the best places to study diving ducks in the Bay Area is Lake Merritt in Oakland. Interestingly it historically had large numbers of surface feeding ducks like Wigeons and Mallards but now there are almost exclusively diving ducks, quite a few Canvasback, both Scaup and occasionally some additional species.

A behavior diving ducks frequently show is rising up out of the water and flapping. Because their feet are located far back they can haul their whole bodies up, something that surface feeding ducks can't really do.

Eclipse plumage in diving ducks

When they molt their head feathers the shape of the head is altered, and it can be altered dramatically. This is an issue with Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Duck. The big puffy hairdo that they have consists just of feathers and is not represented by the skull shape. In the middle of the summer these birds molt their crown feathers; they have dark heads and the eyes look like they are located well to the top of the head; the bodies are brownish-gray; they often have a ring around their neck; they really don't look like anything in any book.

Canvasback

OCCURRENCE

A pretty strictly North American species. Breeds largely in western NA.

Winters throughout the southern tier of the US and in Mexico.

Winters in much of CA but does not normally breed in CA, just a toehold in northeastern CA.

It is hunted and its population numbers have been affected by overhunting in the past.

Their numbers have dropped in many areas and the bag limits have been reduced.

There used to be fairly large flocks on SF Bay. The Bay has deeper water, therefore diving ducks tend to occur. However, there used to be and maybe still are hunting clubs along the edges of SF Bay. Hunting season generally is from late October to early January. They hunt from boats or from blinds or certain places on shore. Hunting tends to scatter the diving ducks off SF Bay, they move into other areas where hunting is not allowed, such as Lake Merritt. During the hunting season some of these birds may be concentrated at safer places. Big flocks can be seen on the Bay, but more in January and February after the hunting season is over.

They tend to molt before they arrive here to winter; we tend not to see the eclipse plumage.

Sometimes they haul themselves out of the water. This happens especially during the summer months when some individuals may have been crippled, injured or sick and unable to migrate.

FIELD MARKS

The black bill slopes up the forehead with no angle at all, it just curves neatly upward and meets the forehead and continues up onto the fairly rounded crown.

This shape is one of the key field marks in any plumage.

It is so distinctive that the term Canvasback-like profile is used even for other species that have this sloping profile.

No obvious wing stripes in flight.

Long, rather pointed wings. They are very strong flyers as are most species of ducks

Bright Male

Red colored head, it depends on the angle how much red and how much black you see.

Deep red eyes.

White or slightly off-white back and flanks.

Black chest or shield.

Black rear end.

Female

Same size and shape as the male.

Eye dark.

Back and flanks gray rather than whitish.

Chest dark brown or sepia.

Head rather plain light brown.

Black bill.

Buffy eye ring, sometimes a little bit of a mark behind the eye which is not usually very prominent.

Common Pochard

OCCURRENCE

Replaces the Canvasback in Eurasia.

There are records from Alaska.

A few records from southern California.

FIELD MARKS

Beware! A hybrid Redhead x Canvasback might look a lot like a Common Pochard!

Bright Male

Looks quite a bit like a Canvasback.

Red colored head.

Fairly red eye.

Canvasback-like profile.

More gray on the back and body, thus has some resemblance to the Redhead.

Bill black with broad bluish band at the center.

Female

The pale band on the bill is less bright than in the male.

Color of the back comparable to a female Canvasback.

Redhead

OCCURRENCE

Considerable overlap in breeding and wintering ranges with the Canvasback.

Ranges on average a little further south.

Shorter distance migrant than Canvasback.

Breeds in northeastern CA and locally in parts of the Central Valley.

Relatively scarce in the Bay Area. Some individuals may winter regularly at a few localities, show up year after year, they are philopatric. One female Redhead has been coming back to Lake Merritt for the last few years, one male to Redwood City.

Joe saw hundreds of thousands of Redheads at Laguna Aristosa in southern Texas and no Canvasback.

FIELD MARKS

A very rounded head, very steep forehead, not the profile of a Canvasback.

The bill comes out at an angle and is decidedly shorter than that of a Canvasback

In flight a pale gray wing stripe on the trailing edge of the wing helps separate the Redhead from Scaup but not from Ring-necked Duck. Scaup have white on the secondaries. On the Greater Scaup the white extends out on the innermost primaries. But on the Redhead and on the Ring-necked Duck the upper side of the primaries and secondaries is pale gray throughout.

Bright Male

Also a red head.

Eye orange rather than red.

Bill with a broad black tip, a whitish band behind it and a pale base.

Back and flanks gray rather than white.

Eclipse Male

More muted, somewhat female-like.

Often with a bit of a ring around the neck (eclipse Scaup as well).

Female

Uniformly dark brown on the body with some pale reddish mottling in the flanks.

The head is very slightly redder than the body.

Bill most distinctive: broad black tip, narrow white band behind that and a pale gray base.

Eye ring and a stronger buffy line that extends backwards and then down from the eye.

Can easily be confused with the female of the Ring-necked Duck.

Some of the key field marks of the Ring-necked Duck are the ring on the bill, the broad black tip to the bill, the pale band behind the black which is the same pattern as on the Redhead. The female Ring-necked Duck is also a brown-bodied bird, however it has a gray head which is narrow and rather peaked especially in the back of the head, looks quite puffy. Also more contrast between the very dark brown back and the paler brown sides, female Redhead are more uniform. Ring-necked Duck has also an eye ring and pale line behind the eye.