

Wild About Ducks!



Whether it's spring, summer, fall, or winter, it's always lovely weather for ducks in Florida! No matter the season, many of these fabulous, feathered friends enjoy skimming on our waters, waddling on land, or taking to the skies in the Sunshine State. Get to know more about ducks, and you'll find it's easy to go "quackers" over these beautifully colored water birds.



Black Bellied Whistling Duck



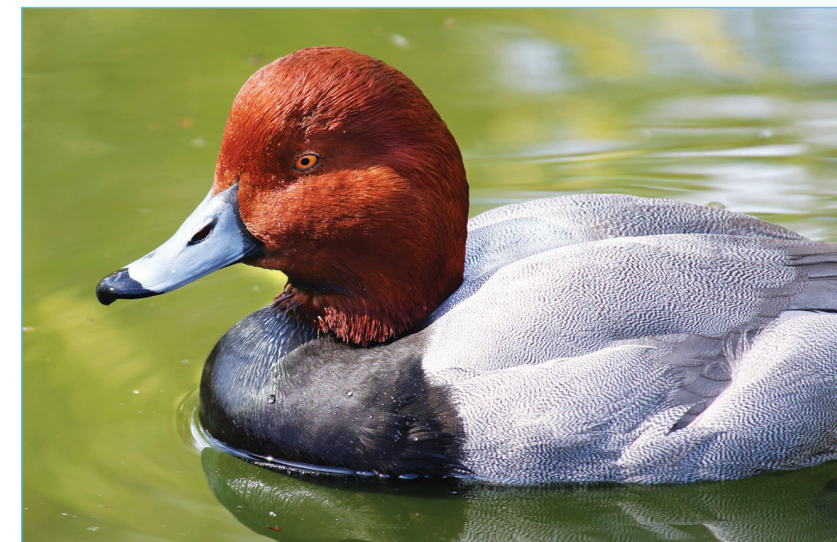
Lesser Scaup

When you start to learn about ducks, you'll discover plenty of varieties to admire, since there are over 100 species. Members of the scientific family *Anatidae* along with the closely related geese and swans, ducks are defined as water birds that are adapted for swimming, floating, and diving, with some types being capable of reaching depths far beneath the surface. Since all ducks exhibit these behaviors to some degree, biologists decided to categorize these birds by the unique ways in which they seek out their food sources, creating three groups. According to the University of Florida's (UF) IFAS, ducks are considered to be either dabbling, diving, or sea ducks which are also known as mergansers.

To understand these distinctions, dabbling ducks are known for looking for their food sources primarily on the water's surface as they strain water through their bills; however, if some edible item is a little deeper in the water,

they will upend their bodies so they can reach down far enough to grab it. Diving ducks swim down into the water to obtain the aquatic plants, fish, mollusks, and shellfish that make up their diet. Like the diving ducks, mergansers predominantly seek their food by swimming beneath the surface; however, the difference is that sea ducks tend to do so in the deepest waters.

While these feeding behaviors give you one clue for determining what type of duck you may be seeing, an overview of each group's physical traits and preferred habitat will help to broaden your understanding. As a rule, with ducks, the males tend to have more distinctive markings than their female counterparts. To help you identify some that you might observe in Florida, we present a few examples.



Redhead Duck



Mallard

Dabbling Ducks

Whether on land, in the air, or in the sea, dabbling ducks tend to be very agile birds, as they are steady walkers, nimble fliers, and adept swimmers. Since they are also capable of picking up food with the tips of their bills while walking on land, they're not limited to the water for finding their sustenance. Aquatic vegetation and invertebrates, rice, seeds, and small fish are their dietary staples. When afloat, they tend to ride high in the water and they can achieve flight by simply launching themselves upward, unlike some other water birds. Dabblers tend to occupy more shallow bodies of water like creeks, small ponds, lakes, marshes, sloughs, and wetlands, where they can easily seek their food.

One of the most easily identifiable birds around the world, the mallard is a large duck with white sides and underparts, a purple-chestnut breast, a bright green head, and orange

legs. The back of its wing is shiny blue with a white line in front and behind. Slightly smaller than the mallard, the mottled duck has a yellow-green bill, dark brown body with buff mottling, light brown with fine dark streaking on its head and neck, white underwing lining, and a greenish-blue coloring at the back of its wing. A large, geoselike duck with a long neck and legs, and a short tail, the black-bellied whistling duck is becoming more common in the southern U.S. Partially named for its black belly, this bird's body is dark overall with a chestnut breast and grayish face, contrasted by its bright white eye-ring and vibrant pink bill and legs. In flight, look for the distinctive white wing patch, which is present in both males and females. Other dabbling ducks that can be observed in Florida include the American wigeon, green-winged teal, gadwall, wood duck, and blue-winged teal, which is the second most abundant duck in North America.



Hooded Merganser

Diving Ducks

Physically, diving ducks are noted for their broad, large, fully webbed feet with strongly lobed hind toes, which help them to paddle through the water efficiently. Also, their wings are smaller, and, anatomically, their legs are positioned further back on their bodies, which enables them to dive efficiently. The very characteristics that make them so powerful under the water work against them when they try to take flight. While dabbling ducks can go directly from the surface of a pond to the air, diving ducks need to run across the surface of the water and build up speed to successfully become airborne. Given the webbing on their feet and the location of their legs on their bodies, they also tend to have less graceful landings than the dabblers.

To observe diving ducks in Florida, it's best to head to larger, deeper water sources such as coastal bays, lakes, and rivers. When seeking the redhead duck, the most obvious feature to look for is its reddish-brown head and neck. This medium-sized duck has smoky gray sides and underparts, black breast and tail, blue-gray bill with black tip, and golden-yellow eyes. Similar in size to the redhead, the lesser scaup has a black breast, neck and tail with medium-gray barring on its back and flanks. Look at its head, which is black with purple gloss, and you'll notice its bluish gray bill with a black tip and yellow eyes. Several other diving duck species can be seen in the region, including the canvasback, greater scaup, and ring-necked duck.



Sea Ducks (Mergansers)

Since their slender bills have serrated edges that enable them to grasp their prey, the crested, fish-eating sea ducks are also known as sawbills. The best divers of all the ducks, mergansers are known for swimming to considerable depths in search of food. Extremely tolerant of saltwater, these water birds have compact plumage with heavy down suitable for cold climates. Most species of sea ducks are found in coastal areas but in Florida they have also become established on inland lakes and rivers.

Two smaller types of sea ducks, the hooded merganser and the red-breasted merganser, are found in Florida, according to the UF IFAS. A small-to-medium-sized duck, the hooded merganser has a black head, bill, and tail, chestnut sides, a black back with white stripes, a white breast with two black bars, and a fluffy white fan-shaped crest. Similar in size, the red-breasted merganser (not pictured) is noted for its gray wavy-lined sides and flanks, black upperparts, blackish head with a green gloss, streaked chestnut breast, and spiked black crest.

Domesticated Ducks

Heading from the outdoors to the backyard, you may find the American Pekin since more and more people have found that this good-natured duck makes a wonderful pet. A white-feathered waddler with an orange bill



American Pekin

and feet, this duck tends to amble about with more of an upright stance than its kin. Its personality is so loveable, that the insurance company, Aflac®, features an American Pekin as its “spokes-duck.” BeautyOfBirds.com shares that these domesticated birds were bred in China from the mallard, and then brought to America around 1873. The Pekin is so amiable that many owners have found that, just like a loyal canine, their friendly fowls follow them, wherever they go.

In the wild or wherever they are found, these wonderful waterfowls are “just ducky!”







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