

**EARLY FALL**

**WISCONSIN  
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CIRCLE TOUR**  
pg. 22

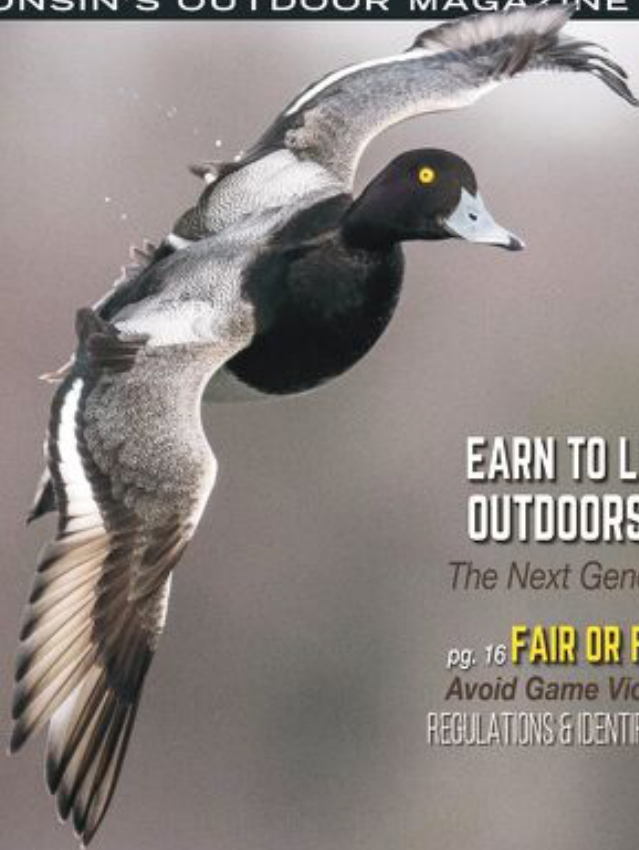
# Badger Sportsman

WISCONSIN'S OUTDOOR MAGAZINE

**Cold Water  
MUSKY  
HOT PURSUIT**

*BUILDING*  
**HUNTING  
CULTURE** *WITH*  
*MENTOR & MENTEE*

**The  
Right to Ask**  
*Gain Permission  
to Hunt Private Land*



**EARN TO LEARN  
OUTDOORSMAN**

*The Next Generation*

pg. 16 **FAIR OR FOWL?**  
*Avoid Game Violations*  
REGULATIONS & IDENTIFICATIONS

**COMMUNITY PROFILE: THE LOON CAPITAL OF THE WORLD - MERCER COUNTY**

## FEATURES

### 16 COVER: Discriminating Ducks

BY BRUCE ROSS

### 22 Fall Camping Road Trip

BY DARREN KIRBY

### 30 It's About Time

BY TARA PORTER

### 34 The Right Ask

BY JESS WAGNER

### 42 Don't Climb That Tree!

BY MARK RAMSEY

### 46 Fill That Freezer!

BY LEE HAASCH

### 60 Big Buddies on Big Muddy

BY MIKE MCCOY

### 64 Fooling Fall Muskies

BY NOAH HUMFELD

### 68 Musky Mayhem

BY KYLE SORENSEN

### 72 Keeping a Fishing Log

BY BILL SCHULTZ

### 74 Spinnerbaits

BY GLENN WALKER

### 78 Barbie Gets a Buck

BY BARB CAREY

### 82 The Rice Shack

BY BERNIE LANDERMAN

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*To help our subscribers have more fun, live more consciously,  
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A FARFROMWORKIN' EXPERIENCE

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2019 *Badger Sportsman* 5

# Discriminating DUCKS

Practical duck identification  
to stay out of trouble  
this season



Photos by Drew Rogowski.

By Bruce Ross, Executive Director,  
Wisconsin Waterfowl Association

"That was a black duck," I whispered to Joe, crouching in the cattails and watching the lonely duck start to circle. It had just completed a slow fly-by, eyeing our dekes and contemplating a visit.

With one mallard hen each, we were 'hen tight' and had not taken the shot, thinking it could be a mallard hen, which would have put us over the bag limit. A critical consideration for every waterfowler, this was especially relevant as Joe's employment with a conservation organization was contingent on avoiding game violations!

But when the bird came around a second time, he shot it, and as my lab retrieved the bird, the identification was confirmed. "Whew!" I had been confident, but there's always

a shadow of a doubt – especially as we were hunting an area that doesn't frequently host black ducks! It's now mounted as his first of that species.

While most duck identifications don't hold our employment status in the balance, making the correct species call is always an ethical and, frequently, a legal concern. This article addresses duck identification to help you stay within the bag limits of the DNR's 2019 Wisconsin Waterfowl Regulations, but will also maximize your bag opportunity – not every duck gives you a second chance! Further, accurate identification on the wing (in flight) increases decoying success, puts better fare on your plate, and increases your sense of accomplishment in becoming a well-rounded waterfowler.

It's usually easy to ID a duck that boasts mature plumage when it's in your hand. With time to pick over the details, they look a lot like all the pictures in all the books. More difficult are flying ducks with immature or eclipse plumage typical of Wisconsin's early season, as the bolder colors and patterns have not fully emerged. Fortunately, ducks on the wing offer other identification clues beyond coloration. Confident identification requires observing and interpreting subtle differences—a skill set which requires experience, but which also can be accelerated with help.

Early in my duck hunting experience, mentors shared identification pointers, and soon I was carrying a waterfowl ID book, and binoculars to view them at a greater distance. Still, I admit to having been surprised by some of the species that fell to my gun. Indeed, I have friends, who will see my by-line on this article and chuckle about such errors they've witnessed.

So even after making it a priority to be a better ducker years ago, I'm also more aware of my shortcomings – my misidentifications today tend to result in missed opportunities rather than surprises in my hand!

### Compiling the clues

Speciation (or, identifying a particular species) on the wing requires quickly assembling clues to solve the identification puzzle. While no single clue is generally conclusive, together they can yield a definitive answer.

The first clue is duck location—large bodies of open water, or smaller shallow marshy areas? This is far from exclusionary, but points you to the diver species or puddlers. I've shot ring-necks in marshes and black ducks in large bays, but it's a starting point.

After location, I was taught "Good Behavior Will Surely Produce Cookies," a mnemonic for what clues to look for. Now it's intuitive, but then, well, I needed all the help I could get.

**G - Groupings** – do flocks fly in a string, a knot, a loose or an open grouping.

**B - Flight Behavior** – level steady flight or erratic maneuverings?

**W - Wing Beat** – fast or slow?

**S - Sound** – what noise is being vocalized, or produced from wings?

**P - Profile** – elongated or wide, crested, square or pointed tail, etc.

**C - Color** – what patterns of what colors distinguish the duck?

Each characteristic is a clue to which species you're seeing. I recommend "Ducks at a Distance," published many years ago by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, but still available, to



provide detail on which ducks display what characteristics. I still carry it into the marsh.

No pamphlet or article can make you an expert duck identifier without time afield, but since hunting regulations limit your bag to specific numbers of particular species, you must be able to positively discriminate similar species from the bag-limited species this season. So this article focuses on 2019 waterfowl bag limits, and in that context, considers identification challenges.

### Early Teal Season

If the wind-over-wings scream of teal close overhead has startled you into spilling your in-blind coffee, then you know the adrenaline rush of teal hunting. Green-winged Teal and Blue-winged Teal are both harvestable beginning in September, a bonus season that began as an experiment four years ago. Wisconsin waterfowlers demonstrated their collective ability to target only teal during this nine-day season, and it has since lost its experimental tag. If it's not clearly a teal, don't take the shot—this early season is not a given unless we harvest only teal.

This daily teal-only hunt begins at sunrise, a half hour after regular season opening times, when better lighting means better identification. Fortunately, you don't have to distinguish between Green-winged Teal and Blue-winged Teal, but there are some ducks that warrant additional consideration.

#### 2019 Statewide Early Teal, Early Canada Goose and Mourning Dove Seasons

Legal Species	Hours	Season Dates	Daily Bag Limit	Required License, Stamps & Permits
Blue-winged & green-winged teal	Sunrise to sunset	Sept. 1-9	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• License authorizing small game hunting in WI</li> <li>• WI waterfowl stamp privilege</li> <li>• Federal migratory bird stamp</li> <li>• IHP registration</li> </ul>

### Teal vs. everything else in the marsh

Tightly knotted groups of small birds, flying low, erratically maneuvering in synch, on rapidly beating wings, are clues that scream teal. Noise, profile, and colors are secondary but useful clues. Let's take a look at two other ducks that may force you to take that closer look.

### Teal vs. Mallard Hen

Mallards, with their slower wing beats, more level flight, and obviously larger size should take them out of your "shoot/no shoot" decision tree early. The hen mallard has a dark blue speculum (iridescent colored feather patch on their wing) and orange bill if you need shooting range confirmation; teal sport green speculums and, for the Blue-winged Teal, a distinctive powder blue wing patch.

### Teal vs. Wood Ducks

During this early season, teal and woodies are both present in quantity. While teal are significantly smaller than woodies, both can appear suddenly, requiring a quick firing decision. Large, and rounder with square-ish tails, woodies look like flying bowling pins compared to the sleek silhouette of the teal. Teal quack like a mallard with a sinus infection, but woodies squeal. And, at least in my experience, woodies may change their flight path to swing over decoys, but they tend to continue on their journey; teal, more frequently, will bank and drop in for a visit.

In shooting range, drake woodies can hardly be mistaken for anything else, with distinctive headcrest and brilliant colors worn even early in the season. Woodie hens' white eye patch is also visible from surprising distances if you're looking for it.

### Blue-winged Teal vs. Shovelers

The blue "shoulders" on Blue-winged Teal wings are quite prominent in side view or when going away, but if that's your only identification clue, then a hen or drake shoveler in eclipse plumage—with their similar powder blue shoulder patch—could be at risk on your early season hunt. The spooner will be distinctly larger and of course its bill is twice the size of your Blue-winged Teal's.

### 2019 "Regular" Duck Season

The 2019 Wisconsin regular season waterfowl regulations limit your daily harvest to a total of six ducks, with no more than:

- |  |               |
|--|---------------|
| 1 pintail                                  | 2 black ducks |
| 3 wood ducks                               | 3 scaup       |
| 4 mallards, only one of which can be a hen | 2 redheads    |
|  | 2 canvasback  |

Let's go through each species and consider problem identifications, so you can keep shooting confidently after getting "right" on one or more of these bag-limited ducks.

First, where are you hunting? Open water on big bays or lakes means you start with diver species. Small, shallow water marshes allow you to primarily focus on dabblers. This is not exclusively true, just a starting point; ring-necks and redheads are common in some marshes; mallards raft up in any waters.

The following chart offers one way to understand the options available when you bump up against a species bag limit. It shows the characteristics to look for in ducks that may superficially look like the bag-limited duck, but which may still be legally harvested (assuming you haven't reached



18 Badger Sportsman SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2019

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## Explore your public lands

## Know the Puddle Ducks

In Wisconsin's quiet backwater bays, marshes, ponds, and prairie potholes, puddle ducks skim the water's surface for insects and "tip up" to reach underwater plants. Their large, broad wings lift these dabblers off the water, allowing them to literally "leap" into the air.

## Know the Diving Ducks

Diving ducks prefer the wide open waters of rivers and deep marshes where they search for plant roots, small fish and clams. Less colorful than puddle ducks, "divers" use their set-back legs to "run" on the water's surface to propel them forward, and they dive to feed rather than "tip up" or "dabble" on the surface.



The colorful wing patch on the puddle ducks, called the speculum, is one key ID marker for use in the field. Also, pay attention to shape, size, call, and habitats.

Note: Ducks are for color and shape comparisons only and are not life-sized.



The ducks shown are all drakes. Hens are drab brown to blend in well with their nesting cover.

These are the common waterfowl you'll encounter across Wisconsin. If you see something different, refer to an ID book.

This common water bird is often mistaken for a duck.





## Wisconsin Waterfowl Association and Badger Sportsman 2019 Bag-Limited Duck Identification Guide

(with a particular focus on early-season, eclipse phase identification challenges)



If you are at your bag limit of...	A similar looking duck you may legally shoot is a...	...So pay particular attention to these distinguishing characteristics to avoid exceeding your bag limit. Assuming, of course, you haven't already reached your daily limit of 6 birds in total!
Mallard's hens	Pintail (hen or drake)	Look for the pintail's zealous circling, its rapid wing beat, and bluish bill. Listen for the drakes soft whistle. Eclipse drakes won't have a strongly defined chestnut head and white neck stripe, so look for the elegant neck and pointed tail that create the impression of a slender stretched body with back-swept wings extending from the middle of its body.
	Black duck (hen or drake)	The black duck's dark brown, almost black, body color is in sharp contrast to its white underwing, which creates a strobe-like effect when flapping. Unlike the mallard hen, the black duck has no white bars on either side of its speculum, which is a deeper, purplish hue than the mallard's blue. Bill is generally olive in contrast to the mallard's yellow (drake) or orange (hen). Quacks are similar.
	Gadwall — the "Grey Duck"	The gadwall drake, with its distinctively grey body and black bill, is easily distinguished from the mallard. But the hens of both species are remarkably similar in size, body coloration, bill color and quacks. Look for the Gadwall hen's white-only speculum as a surefire, but up-close differentiator.
	Widgeon — aka "Baldpate"	Widgeon fly more erratically and in tighter groups than the mallard, but both hens share a similar body size, and color viewed from the top or on the water. Underneath, however, the widgeon has a distinctly lighter whitish belly, and has a narrow white wing speculum — with no color — in contrast with the mallard hen's blue-banded-by-white speculum. Similar quacks but Widgeon's is lower-pitched.
Mallard drakes	Shovelers (eclipse)	The drakes' green heads are similar, but the mallard's reddish breast, dark blue speculum and yellow bill should not easily be confused with the white breast of the spoonbill, even in the eclipse phases of both ducks. Curled tail in profile = mallard. Both spooner sexes have a powder blue shoulder patch, and their outsized, black spoon bill will help you target them. Spoonies grunt more than quack.
Wood ducks	Hmm?	No puddle duck is too similar to the square-tailed, bowling pin-shaped and crested wood duck, with its rapid wing beat, high-pitched squeal, and distinctive markings. At shooting range, the white eye patch of the hen, and drake's colorful patterning and red/yellow bill is conclusive, even in eclipse phase.
Pintails	Mallard, Gadwall or Widgeon hens	No long, slender body with rapid wing beats with a cautious nature? Maybe it's a mallard, gadwall or widgeon hen — these tend to decoy more readily, and can be distinguished from eclipse or hen pintails by the characteristics noted above.
Scaup /Bluebill	Ringneck	Ringnecks are less often found in open water than scaup, but it's still a regular occurrence. Distinguish them by the ringneck's noticeably smaller size, darker back, and lighter underwing, and the white banding on either end of its bluish bill. Sounds are similar, so that won't help much.
Canvasback (or Redhead)	Redhead (or Canvasback)	Cans are BIG, and flocks tend to fly in twos or larger groups in strings, while Redheads group in tighter knots. Closer in, you'll be able to distinguish the Can's head slopes gently to a black bill, in contrast to the Red's rounded head and distinctly blue bill. Their sounds are subtly distinguishable—Cans with a deep, growled "GRRR", and redheads with a trilled "brrr".



the total daily limit of 6 ducks). I don't shoot many divers, so I asked Wisconsin Waterfowl Association President, Bruce Urban, a Green Bay open water hunter and renowned decoy carver for his insights.

The chart only addresses bag-limited birds and their superficial "doppelgangers" —especially early in the season when drakes are in eclipse plumage. It assumes you have not reached your 6-bird limit. And please understand that this chart does not encourage — or discourage — the harvest of hens. While many waterfowlers avoid shooting hens entirely — a commendable decision — the chart strictly deals with the legal bag limits in 2019. Nor does the chart address widgeon, since you could take up to 6 per day in the regular season. The same would be true for gadwall, teal, shovelers, ringnecks, goldeneye, bufflehead, ruddy duck or any of the mergansers or sea ducks.

2019 Wild Duck Season			
Zone	Hours	Season	Daily Bag Limit
Southern	Half hour before sunrise to sunset	<u>Open Season</u> Sept. 28-Oct. 6 Oct. 12-Dec. 1	Six ducks in total to include not more than: • 4 mallards (of which only one may be a hen); • 3 wood ducks; • 2 redheads; • 3 scaup; • 2 canvasback; • 1 pintail and • 2 black ducks.
		<u>Closed Season</u> Oct. 7-Oct. 11	
Mississippi River	Half hour before sunrise to sunset	<u>Open Season</u> Sept. 28-Oct. 4 Oct. 12-Dec. 3	For species of ducks not listed, such as teal and ring-necks, the combined total with all other species may not exceed six ducks.
		<u>Closed Season</u> Oct. 5-Oct. 11	
Northern	Half hour before sunrise to sunset	Sept. 28-Nov. 26	

**Possession limit is 3 times daily bag limit.**

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If you think there's value in the chart, tear/shrink/copy/laminate for use in the field! Good luck discerning, and happy hunting!



Bruce Ross has chased waterfowl for nearly 35 years from the New England coast to the Chesapeake Bay and into the Midwest and Canada. He currently serves as Executive Director of the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association (WWA), after a 28-year career with the US Coast Guard, and subsequent service in the private sector and with conservation non-profits. Celebrating its 35th anniversary, WWA undertakes small-scale wetland restorations, exclusively in Wisconsin, that are fundamental to the breeding success of the majority of ducks harvested by WIWaterfowlers; they represent WIWaterfowler interests with the DNR and legislators; and they educate the next generation of WIWaterfowlers, young and old. Bruce can't understand why any WIWaterfowler wouldn't find value in being a member of such an organization.

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2019 Badger Sportsman 21