

Green Scene: Our Wonderful Winter Waterfowl

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The male Barrow's goldeneye, with a crescent-shaped white mark on its head is more commonly seen at the Shoreline Park in Port Moody than the so-called common goldeneye which has a circular white mark on its head and more white on its body. *Hilary Maguire photo.*

In the fall, hundreds of colourful ducks begin to arrive on the west coast where they brighten our waters for several months over the winter. These ducks show up reliably every fall because they depend on coastal habitat for their survival when the fresh water lakes where they nest freeze over in the winter. While the Fraser River delta hosts thousands of these birds including impressively large flocks of snow geese, the quiet waters of Port Moody Arm in Burrard Inlet are also a good place to enjoy observing almost two dozen species of ducks.

In summer, ducks moult and grow new feathers to replace the old ones worn out by the demands of the breeding and nesting seasons. Ducks are synchronous moulters which mean they change all their feathers within only a few weeks. During this time, the ducks are unable to fly so they tend to seek out quiet lakes with few predators for the moulting season. For a few months in the summer, male ducks have new but

drab feathers in what is called their eclipse plumage – this resembles the colouration of the females of their species. However, within only a month or two, male ducks moult again and emerge with bright new feathers for the specific purpose of attracting females.

By the time these ducks arrive on the coast, they are already displaying their mating colours. Thus, the winter months provide great opportunities for people to hone their duck identification skills and enjoy the several species of ducks that use our local waters. Rocky Point pier and trails in Port Moody's Shoreline Park as well as shoreline trails at Belcarra Regional Park provide excellent places to observe local waterfowl. Most species of these ducks appear to use these waters not only for feeding but also as a convenient place to "meet and greet" members of the opposite sex. By December, it is obvious that many pair bonds have already been established between males and females.

Tracking studies carried out by biologists who have attached transmitters to waterfowl have revealed some of the amazing migrations these birds undertake to reach our coast. For example, one study showed western grebes migrated all the way from Manitoba to the west coast for the winter. Recent studies indicate these grebes may now be spending their more of their winter off the coast of California where the fish they eat appear to be more abundant.

One of my favourite groups of ducks is the diving goldeneyes and smaller buffleheads which can be commonly seen from the pier at Rocky Point Park in Port Moody. These ducks, like wood ducks, are cavity nesters. They nest around forested lakes in the interior where they rely on finding cavities in trees in which to lay their eggs. When the ducklings hatch they must leave the nest in about 24 hours, a feat they accomplish by jumping as much as 15 meters to the ground. Ducklings are precocial which means they are born fully-feathered and ready to find their own food under the guidance of their mother. Thus, if these ducklings want to eat, they must to leave their nest, never to return.

Another transmitter study indicated a male Barrow's Goldeneye tagged on the breeding grounds at Riske Creek, BC in May flew all the way to Great Bear Lake in the Northwest Territories to moult in July. He began flying south in September and arrived in the Strait of Georgia in November after an impressive journey of about 2000 kilometers. Once the Barrow's or common goldeneye ducks reach the coast, they spend the winter diving in search of crustaceans or mollusks to eat. They must also spend a considerable portion of their day preening their feathers to keep them well-oiled and waterproof. This means these ducks must haul out on the shore or, in Port Moody, onto log booms to undertake their preening. It is important that the ducks are not disturbed by, e.g., dogs, during this daily ritual.

Although, I must admit, I had never noticed, bufflehead apparently arrive with great punctuality on the coast. A birder in Sidney has been keeping track of their arrival at the Shoal Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary for the past 18 years. He found bufflehead arrive reliably on October 15th (except in leap years when they show up on October 14) usually between 8:30 and 9:00 am. This has apparently led the Municipality of Sidney to declare an All Buffleheads Day on October 15 of each year. Now that I know about this, I will be keeping a close watch at Rocky Point Park on October 15 next year. Maybe, Port Moody should declare an All Buffleheads Day, too!