

# **Green Scene: Wet Weather is for the Ducks**

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[photograph]

[caption: A male northern pintail, a common winter visitor to Port Moody's Shoreline Park.  
Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Wet weather is for the birds - ducks, specifically]

Sub-title: We are lucky to have bounty of birds near us and must make sure to keep them safe]

This season brings an opportunity to observe the waterfowl that arrive on our coast in search of unfrozen water. The number of these species found in Port Moody's Shoreline Park increases dramatically over the summer population, which is little more than Canada geese, to two-dozen or more ducks and a variety of shorebirds. Burrard Inlet is on the edge of the vast Fraser River delta, a critical stopover on the Pacific migratory flyway for millions of birds and one of the most significant bird areas in Canada. While, locally, we cannot experience the thrill of seeing the thousands of ducks, geese and shorebirds found on the main part of the Fraser delta, we have a fairly similar eye-catching mix of species only a short distance away from our homes.

Many of these ducks will have flown, in recent weeks, from the interior of the province or from points further north in search of open water areas with an ample supply of food and refuge. Some species may stay only a few days and continue further south. Others will linger for much of the winter provided they can find sufficient food and quiet places to rest and groom their feathers. Like all wildlife, each species of ducks has evolved to survive in a certain type of habitat. Generally, the ducks found in the Shoreline Park can be divided into two groups: the dabbling ducks which prefer the shallow water of the mudflats and the diving ducks that utilize deeper parts of the harbour where they can find their preferred prey of molluscs, crustaceans or fish.

The dabblers tend to collect at the head of the Inlet and can be best viewed from the boardwalk trail at high tide. This group of ducks includes the common mallard with their shiny green heads, smaller green-winged teal (with a brown head and a green stripe through the eye) and the larger, elegant pintails with their long tail and white neck. Dabblers have a mainly vegetarian diet and root about, rear-ends up in the water, for tender shoots.

Rocky Point pier provides the best vantage point to observe diving ducks. This group includes the energetic little black and white buffleheads and two species of goldeneye. The common goldeneye has a green head with a white spot in the shape of a circle whereas the Barrow's goldeneye has a purplish head with a crescent-shaped white spot. You might also see hooded and common mergansers with their long thin bills designed to grasp small fish. Local libraries offer a variety of bird guidebooks to assist with identification. A pair of binoculars is very helpful for viewing ducks on the water.

The winter months are an excellent time to view ducks because the males will be sporting their colourful breeding plumage (described above). Female ducks are much more non-descript in appearance – this provides useful camouflage when they raise their young. In late summer and early fall, male ducks moult and grow new feathers. For this short period, they assume the drab colouration of females in what is called their eclipse plumage. By early winter, after a second moult, male ducks are resplendent in full breeding colour.

Dabbling ducks, in particular, require safe areas of refuge to haul out of water to preen and oil their feathers. Like all birds, they have oil glands on their rump from which they use their bills to distribute oil to all their feathers. If they are disturbed while preening by, for example, dogs running off-leash, their very existence can be threatened as properly waterproofed feathers are essential for life on the water. If we want to ensure that waterfowl continue to use the head of Burrard Inlet, we should protect all the remaining natural habitat and ensure ducks are not disturbed by inappropriate human activities.