

Green Scene: Dabblers and Divers

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(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, February 1, 2008, page 18)

[photograph]

[caption: While both the male and female hooded merganser have crests on their head, the black and white fan of the male gives him an especially appealing look.

Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Check out dabblers & divers in the park]

One of the things I enjoy most about the Shoreline Park in Port Moody is watching how the wildlife varies with the changing of the seasons. Now is the perfect time to observe the wide variety of ducks that can be found there. During the fall, waterfowl fly from many areas in western North America to the Pacific coast in search of open water. While the Shoreline Park doesn't attract such large numbers of ducks as, e.g., the Reifel Bird Sanctuary in Delta, you should, nonetheless, be able to see at least a dozen species on every visit.

Generally, ducks are divided into two main groups, divers and dabblers. There is a third group, the sea ducks, which also dive but prefer more open ocean than is found at Shoreline Park. Dabblers, which include species such as the mallard, pintail and green-winged teal, are generally found in shallow water where they feed on vegetation by submerging their heads under the water. They are best viewed from the boardwalks in the Shoreline Park. Dabbling ducks are strong fliers and, when disturbed, take flight with ease directly from the water.

Diving ducks are more typically seen from the end of Rocky Point Pier and Old Orchard beach where the water is deeper. Because their bodies are designed for diving, these ducks have smaller wings and legs set far back on their bodies to help propel them under water. In contrast to the mainly vegetarian diet of the dabblers, they prefer to eat mollusks, crustaceans or fish. The ducks that dive for shellfish have short sturdy bills that help them pry their food loose. In contrast, the fish-eating ducks, namely the mergansers, have slender serrated bills designed for grasping slippery prey.

The diving ducks are an attractive group. As with most birds, the males are far more colourful. The greenish black and white heads of tiny bufflehead make them easy to spot as they bob in the water. The small hooded mergansers also have a striking black and white head; they look especially elegant when their white crest is fully extended. With their dark heads and white necks and bellies, the two species of goldeneye are so similar you may need binoculars to distinguish between them.

Several of the diving ducks are forest-dependent waterfowl that nest in tree cavities. This often comes as a surprise to people who tend to think all ducks build nests in tall rushes near water. While this tends to be true for the dabblers, some of the divers incubate their eggs in tree cavities far above the ground. Because their beaks are not designed for drilling, they must rely on holes created by woodpeckers or those they find in rotting trees. Most will also use nest boxes provided by people. Cavity-nesting species include bufflehead, hooded merganser, common merganser plus the common and Barrow's goldeneye. They share this trait with the aptly-named wood duck, a colourful fresh water species rarely seen at the Shoreline Park.

As spring approaches, the ducks will leave. Some of the dabblers may fly as far east as the prairies where they will nest in sloughs. The diving ducks may not have to undertake such long migrations to find wetlands and lakes surrounded by forests. Although the diving ducks sometimes appear to form loose groups of mixed species during winter months, when spring arrives, they depart with different destinations in mind. Hooded mergansers nest only in the southern half of BC as far east as the Rockies. Common goldeneye are more northern birds, they will nest as far north as Alaska. Similar to the small bufflehead, they are quite at home in boreal forests across most of northern Canada. In contrast, the Barrow's goldeneyes tend to stay within BC and go no further than the east than the Rocky Mountains.

If you want to enjoy the sight of these colourful ducks resplendent in full breeding plumage, now is the best time to see them. In only a few weeks, they will all be gone and not seen here again until fall.