

# The Bufflehead

## *Bucephala albeola*

Buffleheads are a small member of the sea-duck family. The name “Bufflehead”, which is a shortening of Buffalo Head, apparently comes from its large headed appearance. At a distance the drakes show a unique bi-colored body. A sleek black

and white duck with a brilliant iridescent head whose true colors can only be admired in the right light. The drakes have a large white patch across the back of their heads. Hens are a muted brown with a very conspicuous white ear patch. Both hens and drakes have gray bills but the drakes sport brighter pink feet in comparison to the hen’s dull pink feet. Buffleheads are known to be the smallest diving duck in North America.



You can find these ducks wintering in bays, lakes, and rivers. They can be seen frequently diving in search of small aquatic prey and submerged vegetation. Commonly seen in small flocks, one bird will usually be at the surface to watch for predators while the others feed. The lookout position will frequently change as other ducks re-surface. This technique allows for optimal feeding while also evading predators like eagles, owls and falcons.

Buffleheads begin their migration towards the Barnegat Bay in October and usually arrive by mid-November. You can easily find large groups of buffleheads in the bays of New Jersey throughout the winter months. Come February, flocks will start moving north to the breeding grounds. Buffleheads can still be seen in Jersey until mid-April. After that your chances of seeing one is very low.

Buffleheads are monogamous, meaning they will have the same mate for at least a few years. The hens nest in tree cavities, especially cavities created by the Northern Flicker. The hollows buffleheads nest in provide a safe home for the young, but minks and weasels have been known to get into the nests and eat the eggs. Hens may also nest in nest boxes provided the interior space is the right size. This compact duck prefers small cavities to nest in over larger ones.

Interestingly, buffleheads do not add material to nests. They will lay their eggs directly into the bare bottom of a tree cavity, or on top of the last occupants nest. Nest sites are constantly reused, both by the same individual hen, or others hens that find it from year to year.

The Bufflehead population has stabilized and is slowly rising. The current global population is estimated at almost 1.4 million.