

The Ruddy Duck

Oxyura jamaicensis

By Joshua Gant



Unique among North American waterfowl, this miniscule diving duck is in a class all its own. Being the smallest regularly occurring diving duck in North America, a hunter would need to bag quite a few of these morsels for a good sized meal. Currently the Ruddy Duck is considered poor table fare, although records

from the late 1800's show quite a bit of hunting pressure with these ducks being the third most taken. Not known for being the brightest, nor sneakiest ducks on the pond, sometimes swimming right up to boats and blinds, Ruddy Ducks were easily hunted on the open bay and ponds they called home.

In spring, the male Ruddy Duck is a beautiful sight. Dark cinnamon brown sides, back, and neck, a large white cheek patch, and a beautiful light blue bill. The females are a cool gray-brown with a black bill and a dark line through the eye. In the fall and winter Ruddy Ducks lose that blue color on the bill, returning to black until the following spring. They can dive up to 10 feet in search of aquatic invertebrates and submerged vegetation. Ruddy Ducks can use their stiff tail like rudder to help them maneuver underwater. The stiff upheld tail is also an ID feature unique to this genus of ducks and makes them quite identifiable even at a distance.

The many nicknames of the Ruddy Duck give a lively telling of this species behaviors from sportsmen over the years, from Butterball, and Hard Head, to Sleepy-brother and Shotpouch. Not too many people around New Jersey get to see this duck in its breeding best. Along with the neat colors this bird shows during the breeding season you may also get to hear its amazing display ritual. Ruddy's make little quacking sounds and smack their bills against the water to perform a bubbling display for their partners before mating. Males will also perform display flights around the nesting area. They frequently lay their eggs in other duck's nests spreading the approximately 14 young out while only keeping a few for themselves to raise, while also getting parasitized back by other duck species.

From the 1955 to 1979 the long stable population in the Chesapeake Bay dropped precipitously. The main driver behind this was the disappearance of the wild celery also known as eelgrass from the bay. The shift in diet to invertebrates in saltier water led to the duck's edibility changing from succulent to sour. They have re-stabilized in the Chesapeake Bay thanks to a low take by hunters and improving water quality and habitat, with help from non-profit organization like DU. With an average population of about 1.3 million worldwide, this species is currently a species of least concern.