

The Blue Winged Teal

Spatula discors

By Joshua Gant



Who among outdoorsman doesn't love the Blue-winged Teal? Drake Blue-wings have an unmistakably rich blue head and white facial crescent. Speckles adorn their breast and sides. Hens have a muted grayish appearance; their body feathers are edged with light brown and their bellies are buff to gray. The front of the wing has a soft powder blue patch with a thin white strip separating it from the iridescent green speculum. You can see the same wing coloration in both of the Blue-winged Teals closest relatives found in North America, the Northern Shoveler and the Cinnamon Teal.

The name teal is a French word and was commonly used to describe the small species of Green-winged teal in Europe. When European explorers visited this country and saw a similarly small duck they just used the same term to describe them. Thus Teal became the name used for North America's smallest dabbling ducks. Although the two teal species present in our region are similar in name and size, Green-winged and Blue-winged teal are not closely related.

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These small ducks can be found all across North America. They breed mainly in the prairie pothole region, but generally can have a wide breeding distribution. They have even historically bred in New Jersey. These birds arrive early in the spring, usually showing up first around mid to late March. Males leave early in the fall, usually arriving on wintering grounds by mid-August. Females follow suit with fledged young about a month later. The major food source of Blue-wings is aquatic vegetation. This changes during the weeks leading up to nesting season when a diet of protein rich aquatic invertebrates is adopted, especially by hens.

Blue-winged Teal nest on the ground in uplands near fresh water sources. Predation of eggs, young, and hens on nests is one of the main threats facing these birds on their breeding grounds. The conditions of the wetlands also plays a large role in how productive a nesting season is. After a few years of dry conditions Blue-winged Teal numbers had dropped to a 40-year low by 1990, but the population recovered within a decade, nearly doubling in number. The population currently is stable with an estimated 5.5 million individuals. With numbers like this it's no wonder this species is one of the most abundant species of duck in the United States.