

2026 Bird of the Year

Northern Pintail

By Josh Gant

The Northern Pintail is a gorgeous duck, prized for its striking colors and pleasant taste. The drake has a chestnut neck and head and a blue bill with a central black streak. It has a bright white streak from the breast up the neck sides, creating a scoop-neck collar appearance. In the right light you may even get a glimpse of the rosy wash where the white streak meets the brown of the back of the head. Pintails are named for their long central tail feathers giving the bird an elongated appearance. Their sides are patterned with light and dark gray vermiculation, a pattern of dense lines with irregular patterns.

The hen pintail is a very finely patterned bird with more delicate features. Many shades of browns and tans mark her slender frame. Although the tail feathers of the hens are not as long as those of the drake, they still are longer than most other North American dabbling duck species. Both the drake and hen have a green speculum with a border of white and tan on their secondary feathers usually only seen in their full brilliance when in flight.

Northern Pintails, also commonly called sprigs or sprig-tails, can be found in shallow coastal and inland waters in New Jersey. They feed primarily on seeds, aquatic vegetation, and invertebrates. On their breeding grounds, they are one of the earliest waterfowl to nest. The female nests away from the water's edge and within one day of the ducklings hatching they walk to the nearest body of water to feed and grow.

As with most of our migratory dabbling ducks in New Jersey, they nest in the wetlands of the prairie pothole region of North America. This geographic region, including much of the Dakotas, Montana, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Canada, was created over tens of thousands of years from glacial activity. As the massive glaciers moved south they scoured shallow scars across the land. As the ice sheets retreated and the scars filled with water, the prairie potholes were born. Needless to say, it took a while for this ecosystem to form.



The glaciers also brought something else into that area, nutrients in the form of crushed rock and displaced soil. This led to the prairie pothole region becoming a hub of agriculture in North America. This has become the largest threat to the Northern Pintail populations. The draining and filling of the potholes for better agricultural conditions has led to many thousands of acres of wetlands being lost. In the 1950's, the population was estimated at 9 million, decreasing in the 70's to an estimated 6 Million. That number was cut in half over the next three decades, and has slowly been recovering since. With a stable current population estimate of 3.3 million, this duck is not considered imperiled but actions must be taken if we are to maintain the population at a healthy number.

Thankfully, since 1958 the federal government has been purchasing, protecting, and restoring wetlands in the prairie pothole region with funds raised through the sale of federal duck stamps. The lands purchased through this program are known as Waterfowl Production Areas. Through this federal program over 668,000 acres of prairie wetlands have been purchased and protected. Although that acreage only makes up 2% of the whole region, these Waterfowl Production Areas produce 23% of the waterfowl there. Just imagine how many more ducks we could have if more of these potholes were protected and restored.