



Sea Duck Information Series

Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*)

French: *Petit garrot*

Description

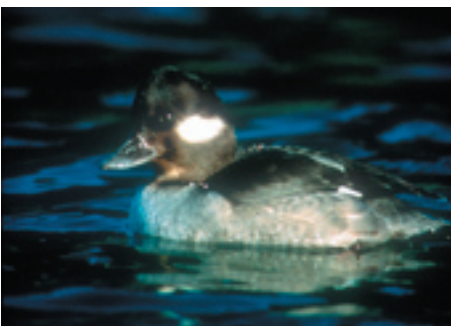
The bufflehead is the smallest diving duck in North America. Males weigh about 450 g (1 lb.) and females 325 g (11 oz.).

Breeding males are striking with a black head glossed green and purple, a large white patch covering the back of the head, a black back, white underparts, and black wings with a large white patch covering most of the inner wing.

Females are mostly dark brown on head, back, and wings, and pale gray on underparts. They have a white ear patch and their white wing patch is smaller than on males. Immature birds, yearling males, and males in eclipse (molting) plumage resemble females. Both males and females have short bills.

Buffleheads have a rapid wingbeat, and usually fly low over water but high over land. They take flight by running on water, but can achieve flight more quickly than other diving ducks because of their small body mass. Their wings do not whistle as they do in goldeneyes.

They are usually silent, although courting males will often make a loud chattering noise or sometimes a growl. Females make a guttural loud and rapid *cuk-cuk-cuk* when prospecting for nest sites in the spring.



Female Bufflehead

Range

Buffleheads breed across North America boreal forest and Aspen Parkland regions, from interior Alaska to western Quebec, southwards to Wyoming, Oregon, and California. Ninety percent of the population is believed to breed



Adult male Bufflehead

from Manitoba westward. Highest densities occur in British Columbia and the Athabasca River delta in northern Alberta.

Fall migration for birds breeding west of the Rocky Mountains is westward to the Pacific coast traveling through interior British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest. Birds breeding in the Northwest Territories and east of Alberta migrate east to the Atlantic and south to the Gulf Coast traveling over the Midwest and Great Lakes. Alberta breeders migrate to either coast.

There are substantial populations of bufflehead on both Atlantic and Pacific coasts. In the Atlantic, they winter from the Maritime provinces south to Mexico. Birds breeding west of the Rocky Mountains winter along the Pacific coast from Alaska to Baja, California, with highest densities in Puget Sound, Washington, and south-coastal British Columbia.

Habitat and Habits

Spring migration routes are basically the reverse of those during fall. Both males and females first breed after their second year. Buffleheads form pairs during winter or spring and keep the same mates for several years. Females are faithful to their natal, breeding, and

molting areas and often use the same nest site year after year.

Males defend a territory and their mate and will attack intruding males or pairs of bufflehead or other waterfowl species.

Breeding habitat is dominated by ponds and small lakes. They prefer elevations between 300-1430 meters. Buffleheads are cavity nesters, often using holes made by northern flickers or pileated woodpeckers. Nest entrances are 6-7 cm in diameter. Trees most commonly used are aspen and poplar, and sometimes in pines. They will also readily nest in boxes.

The female lays 6-11 eggs, one every 1-3 days, adding down gradually through egg-laying. Incubation period is 28-33 days. Ducklings are precocial and remain in the nest 24-36 hours after hatching.

A female with brood strongly defends a territory, presumably to secure food for her ducklings. Ducklings may either dive or dabble to obtain food, mainly insect larvae and adults. The female abandons the brood when they are 5-6 weeks old, before they are able to fly (at 50-55 days old). Once abandoned, neighboring broods may congregate and form large brood flocks.

Bufflehead feed by diving in open, shallow water, usually less than 3 m deep. Their diet consists mainly

of aquatic invertebrates, including insects (larve of damselfly, dragonfly, mayflies and midge, and water boatmen), crustaceans (shrimps, crabs, amphipods isopods), mollusks (snails and clams), and sometimes small fish or fish eggs. During winter, they often feed during both day and night.

Both males and females often return to the same wintering area. In winter, buffleheads use sheltered areas more often than other sea ducks, and are commonly found in shallow waters of coves, harbors, estuaries, or along beaches.

Population Size and Status

The continental population of bufflehead is roughly estimated at about 1.4 million. Most survey data show that their numbers have increased markedly since the mid-1950s. Little is known about trends for the large population that breeds in British Columbia and winters along the Pacific coast.

Management and Conservation

In recent years, an estimated 162,000 bufflehead were shot annually by hunters in the U.S. About 75% of that harvest occurred in the Mississippi and Atlantic flyways. Most harvest occurs on lakes during fall migration. Subsistence harvest in Alaska is insignificant, with only a few hundred birds shot annually.

Although not prized by hunters, shooting is believed to be a significant mortality factor, although their populations have increased despite hunting pressure. Because females return to their natal areas and both males and females return to the same wintering area, recolonization of areas where local populations are overharvested may be slow.

Bufflehead may be affected indirectly by forest harvesting, which can alter the availability of suitable cavity nesting trees for nest sites. Because nest boxes are used readily, they may be a useful management tool



Distribution of Bufflehead in North America

in areas where natural nesting habitat is destroyed.

Breeding populations in the prairies are threatened by agricultural expansion. Wintering populations are vulnerable to oil spills on coastal areas.

References and Resources

Gauthier, G. 1993. Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 67 (A. F. Poole and F. B. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

Seaduckjv.org – the website for the Sea Duck Joint Venture.



The Sea Duck Joint Venture is a conservation partnership under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan

To learn more about the Sea Duck Joint Venture (SDJV), visit seaduckjv.org or contact:

SDJV Coordinator, U.S./West
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
1011 East Tudor Road
Anchorage, AK 99503
(907) 786-3569

SDJV Coordinator, Canada/East
Canadian Wildlife Service
17 Waterfowl Lane, P.O. Box 6227
Sackville, New Brunswick E4L 1G6
(506) 364-5013

Sea Duck Joint Venture Partners:

