

BOOK REVIEW

Waterfowl of North America, Europe & Asia: An Identification Guide. by Sébastien Reeber. 2015. Princeton University Press. 656 pages, 72 color plates, over 650 color photographs, 85 color distribution maps. Hardback, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-691-16266-9.

Waterfowl have captured the hearts and minds of birders for generations. Their approachability and preference for open habitats lend themselves to careful study. While drakes in breeding plumage are among the most colorful, distinctive birds out there, waterfowl otherwise account for some of the more vexing identification problems facing birders. It has been 29 years since a major, up-to-date treatment of waterfowl identification has been published. We've come a long way from Peter Scott's *A Coloured Key to the Wildfowl of the World* (Wildfowl Trust), first published in 1957. Steve Madge and Hilary Burn's *Waterfowl: An Identification Guide to the Ducks, Geese and Swans of the World* (Houghton Mifflin), published in 1988, is the last comprehensive treatment of holarctic waterfowl. Since then, much has been learned about the complexities of waterfowl molt, species limits, and the identification of hybrids. Most of this information has been published in various journal articles, regional guides, or texts dealing specifically with the topic of molt. So along has come Sébastien Reeber's *Waterfowl of North America, Europe & Asia*. Originally published in 2015 as *Canards, Cygnes et Oies d'Europe, d'Asie et d'Amerique du Nord* in the author's native French, the book has been translated and repurposed for a North American audience. While there is some Eurocentric feel to the text, this book is a tour de force and an essential reference for any serious student of waterfowl identification. It is not light reading, and might not be the best resource for someone just beginning to identify waterfowl. Making use of nearly 1400 references, it is dense and extremely well researched. The introductory material includes sections on taxonomy and systematics, avian topography, molts and plumages, aging and sexing, and hybridization. These are followed by 72 color plates featuring some 920 illustrations, along with 85 small color maps. The main section contains detailed species accounts, along with over 650 color photographs.

Reeber has played it safe with respect to taxonomy. He has taken a conservative approach to the topic with respect to the number of species described, yet he points out each instance in which various taxonomic authorities are at odds, and makes a point of discussing each perspective in the relevant identification sections. As a result, regardless of the prevailing taxonomy of the moment, one can find information relevant to a particular taxon. The section on avian topography is very brief, touching on terminology relevant primarily to waterfowl (lamellae, grinning patch, speculum, neck grooves, etc.). That on molt and plumages, clearly laid out, adopts the Humphrey and Parkes terminology as modified by Peter Pyle, Steve Howell, and others. Once again, it is well referenced to the primary sources. The section on aging and sexing, while only six pages long, provides some excellent pointers. For sexing, criteria discussed include size and weight, posture and behavior, brood patches, and cloacae; for aging, bill shape and size, as well as differences in the remiges and rectrices, scapulars, upperwing coverts, flank feathers, and molt contrasts, most of which are illustrated with examples. Reeber's treatment of hybridization, a considerable issue in waterfowl identification, is exhaustive to the point where one of the book's two indexes is specifically for hybrids. Most hybrids are illustrated in the plates, and many are featured in photos as well. Many are relevant to western birders, such as the Snow \times Ross's Goose, American \times Eurasian Wigeon, Cinnamon \times Blue-winged Teal, and Barrow's \times Common Goldeneye, as well as dozens of other examples, with nearly 100 in total. The bulk of the book consists of the species accounts, which are detailed and comprehensive. Each begins with a section on taxonomy, followed by sections on identification, plumages, geographic variation, measurements, voice, molt, hybridization, habitat and life cycle, range and

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population, captivity, and references. Each account concludes with a selection of color photographs illustrating specific identification points.

Though I admit my eyes glaze over at the mention of “white-cheeked geese,” Reeber’s treatment of the Cackling and Canada geese is thorough and detailed, in both its explanation of the history and uncertainty of the taxonomy, as well as many of the challenges facing birders attempting to identify individual birds. He follows the current taxonomic treatment comprising two species, the Cackling (with four subspecies) and the Canada (with seven subspecies), while mentioning that further studies might shake this arrangement up. The nagging dilemma of distinguishing subspecies *parvipes* of the Canada Goose from subspecies *taverneri* of the Cackling is well covered, with an abundance of caution in attempts to identify lone individuals to subspecies.

Another topic vexing for western birders is that of the Bean Goose complex. Reeber provides a thorough historical perspective of the taxonomic treatment (fully cited) as well as a nice synopsis of our current understanding, suggesting that there are “undoubtedly four valid taxa” in the complex. Yet maintaining his conservatism, he groups all of them under one species, *Anser fabalis*, cautioning that there is some variation and that intermediates occur. But each of the four “valid taxa” is treated in detail, information useful for birders faced with the identification of a vagrant Bean Goose in western North America. Reeber also lays out some specific lines of research that would help to sort out the complex. This group is illustrated with three plates, including one concentrating on bill structure and coloration (and variation within each taxon) and one comparing flight patterns of the various gray to brown geese of the genus *Anser*.

I was also quite impressed with Reeber’s treatment of the Brant complex. He lays out the taxonomic history in detail and points out the recently discovered nomenclatural dilemma with the name *nigricans*, typically applied to the Black Brant of the Pacific coast, but for which the type specimen appears to belong to the “Gray-bellied” Brant breeding locally in arctic Canada. Recognition of this situation would necessitate referring to the Black Brant as subspecies *orientalis*. The plates, text, and photos are of high quality and should form a solid basis for birders wanting to take Brant identification to the next level. The color plates illustrate detail and variation in neck patterning among the four subspecies close up.

I was curious to read Reeber’s treatment of the Mexican Duck, currently considered subspecies *diazi* of the familiar green-headed Mallard. In keeping with a conservative approach, Reeber maintains it as a subspecies of the Mallard, though his taxonomic notes include references to other different approaches to classification, including treating the Mexican Duck as a subspecies of the Mottled Duck or treating both of these as subspecies of the American Black Duck. The identification of the Mexican Duck and hybrids/intergrades is discussed at length, with weight given to three sources, including J. P. Hubbard’s *The Biological and Taxonomic Status of the Mexican Duck* (New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, 1977); N. J. Scott and R. P. Reynold’s “Phenotypic variation of the Mexican Duck” (*Condor* 86:266–274, 1984); and T. Leukering and S. G. Mlodinow’s “The Mexican Duck in Colorado: Identification and occurrence” (*Colo. Birds* 46:296–307, 2012). Reeber’s account surely must rank as the most detailed synthesis yet on this taxon. Plate 29 covers the green-headed Mallard, Mexican Duck, and the hybrids/intergrades well and in detail. In addition, there are two photos of *diazi*, one being of the Colorado bird discussed by Leukering and Mlodinow, the other of a male and female in flight, taken in Tucson, Arizona.

Another vexing identification problem facing birders in North America is distinguishing female and young Blue-winged and Cinnamon teal. Reeber discusses this topic at length in his account of the Blue-winged Teal, though the selection of Cinnamon Teal images (6 in total, versus 11 of the Blue-winged Teal) for comparison is rather sparse. These photos accentuate the differences rather than focus on the most similar individuals. Thankfully, plate 34 effectively illustrates the variability and how similar the two species can be.

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In summary, it is not very often that such an impressive reference comes along. Anyone with an interest in waterfowl identification will find this indispensable. While not pioneering novel identification tips, it is the best collection and synthesis of identification criteria ever assembled for the northern Anseriformes. It will remain my primary reference for all things waterfowl for years to come!

Chris D. Benesh

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