

FIELD CRAFT

How to identify drab dabbling ducks

BTO Training Manager Nick Moran discusses some tips for identifying dabbling ducks.

Dabbling ducks (as opposed to diving ducks) are so called because they ‘dabble’ whilst feeding. They do this in two ways: by skimming along the water whilst holding the bill parallel to the surface to sieve it for food, and by stretching down with their necks to reach below the surface. The latter can involve ‘up-ending’, where the body is held vertically with the tail up in the air, to extend the distance they can reach. Most dabbling ducks are capable of both ways of feeding, though some will favour one.

Although the breeding plumages of male dabbling ducks are often distinctive, other plumages can present identification challenges at the best of times. The problems are compounded in summer and early autumn by the presence of juvenile birds and drakes in eclipse plumage. However, with challenge comes opportunity! In this case, a chance to focus on features that apply to any fully-grown duck of a given species, without the ‘distraction’ of one or two dominant

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traits, like the green head and yellow bill of a male Mallard in the breeding season. Building familiarity with features that are consistent regardless of a bird’s age, sex and plumage state makes it easier to identify ducks throughout the year.

STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE

Structure usually remains constant within a species. Even though there can be slight variation in shape and build between male and female ducks of the same species, the differences between species are usually clearer, thus providing a dependable clue to identification. Gadwall is a good example: the rather angular head shape, particularly the high



▲ Female Mallards can resemble females of other species at first glance, but focusing on structural features can help you to tell them apart.

Changing plumage

When discussing ducks, the term ‘eclipse’ refers to the drab plumage that drakes acquire for a few weeks between July and September. This coincides with the stage of their moult cycle when they drop their primary wing feathers and are rendered flightless, whilst new feathers grow.

forehead (rising almost vertically from the base of the bill, like a wall – Gadwall!) will help to distinguish this species from other mottled, brown dabbling ducks, such as Mallard.

Structural signs

The structural characteristics of many ducks provide a strong indication of their identity, without the need to see any plumage details.



The **heavy bill** of the Shoveler is distinctive in even the poorest of light conditions.



The **tail extension** of the Pintail is often the best giveaway for this species.

Plumage pointers

Speculum colour can be a helpful plumage feature for distinguishing between certain dabbling ducks.



While most of us find that it takes longer to learn to recognise structural characteristics than plumage colours and patterns, it is worth the extra effort: not only will it help with identifying birds other than males in breeding plumage, but also distant and back-lit individuals, where the plumage details cannot be seen well. Imagine searching through a flock of feeding Teal in the hope of finding a Garganey: the latter's slightly longer tail, which is often held more elevated, and longer, more spatulate bill are good points to look for, before starting to examine subtle plumage features. Whenever watching a mixed flock of ducks, try to ignore any conspicuous plumage differences for a few minutes, and spend that time comparing the structural features of the various species.

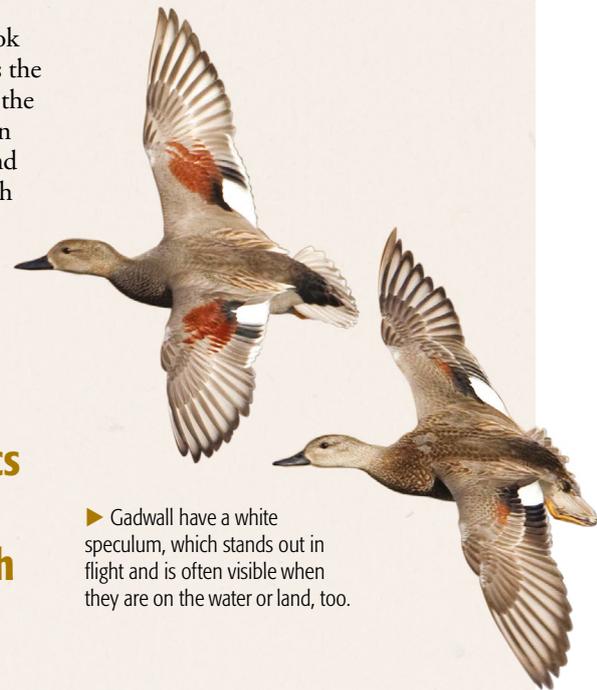
PERMITTED PLUMAGE POINTERS!

There are of course some aspects of plumage that will help with the identification of ducks at any time of the year. Perhaps the most reliable of these is the colour of the speculum – a bright patch of colour on the secondary feathers, which can often be seen even when the wing is folded. Three good ones to remember are the Mallard's blue speculum (think of the colour of the famous steam locomotive), the green speculum in Teal ('green tea-l?') and the white patch in Gadwall.

Another good plumage feature to look out for in all non-breeding plumages is the prominent horizontal white line along the tails of Teal – a simple marking that can be quite easy to see, even at distance and when birds are feeding or roosting, with their heads hidden much of the time.

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Bare-part colouration can be helpful too, such as the greyish legs of Garganey, Pintail, Wigeon and Teal, compared with the orange of Gadwall, Mallard and Shoveler. Bill colour is more problematic, as there are differences between females and eclipse males in some species, including Mallard (females have brown bills with variable orange markings, whereas eclipse drakes have dull yellow bills). However, there are some consistent things to look for: the neat orange sides and black mid section of the upper mandibles of Gadwall, and the black-tipped, pale grey bill of Wigeon. ■



Find out more

You can add value to your waterbird watching by taking part in the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS), a straightforward survey that involves a monthly count of ducks and other waterbirds. For further information, please visit: www.bto.org/webs

We also run two relevant online courses: Waterbird ID (two 90-minute sessions; £20) and Counting birds and the Wetland Bird Survey (one 90-minute session; free). Check www.bto.org/develop-your-skills or sign up to our monthly newsletter to find out when these courses are available.