

Winter Ducks in Newton

We all notice fewer birds around us during the winter months, but the exception is ducks. There are many more ducks, and more species of ducks in Newton during the winter, when compared to the spring. Many duck species breed farther north, where the freezing of the water there forces them to spend winters with us, unless, of course, our waters freeze over here as well. In that case they either migrate farther south or move out to the coast, where the salt water does not freeze so easily.

Good places to find these ducks are the Charles River and the various ponds such as Crystal Lake, Bullough's Pond, and Chandler Pond in Brighton, across the town line by the Commonwealth Golf Course. There is also a pond off Fuller Street near where it intersects Commonwealth Avenue and near the entrance to the Braeburn Golf Course.

Mallards

Mallards can turn up in any of these places, as well as around smaller bodies of water such as the creek in the above golf course, creeks in Cold Spring Park, and Dolan Pond in West Newton. Mallards will hybridize with our American Black Ducks. This might make looking at Mallards more interesting as one can look for individuals like the one pictured below.



American Black Duck (top) and Mallard hybrid (bottom)

The lower bird has a partially green head and is a hybrid, whereas the upper bird is an American Black Duck. Both of these species are dabbling ducks that eat vegetation and do not usually dive under the water. They tip up to dabble. Mallards will nest anywhere, even in the grassy strip between the sidewalk and the street if they are hard pressed for privacy. They sometimes can be seen eating acorns during the winter months when aquatic vegetation is more difficult to find.



Hooded Merganser

once. The females are grayish-black with a horizontal white mark across their cheek. They nest in holes in trees near inland water sources up in Canada. They are with us for the winter months.

Hooded Mergansers also have white on their heads but have rusty sides, and the white patch is on a crest of feathers that may be raised to show off the white, or folded down in a less ostentatious pose. The females are brown with a rusty head that appears crested. They nest in our area and north of here. Their chosen spots are ponds with standing dead trees where they find woodpecker cavities to nest in. Locally such habitat is a little west of Newton, near route 495 and westward. These colorful ducks turn up on Bullough's Pond and Crystal Lake, as well as in the Charles River.



Male Bufflehead (top), Female Bufflehead (bottom)



Ruddy Duck male with white cheek

Bufflehead. Their tails give them away. They nest mostly in the western part of the United States, along the sides of marshy ponds and lakes. You might see them on Crystal

Finally, look for the Ruddy Ducks, perky little ducks that usually have their tails cocked up vertically. The males have large white cheek patches, the females have a double-horizontal white mark across their cheek somewhat like a female

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Lake, or on the Chestnut Hill Reservoir, just over the city limits by Boston College.

Common Mergansers and Ring-necked Ducks



Male Common Merganser

mentioned species and both Common Mergansers and Ring-necked Ducks.



Female Common Merganser

The male Common Merganser is a sleek bird with a glossy green head that usually appears black. These birds have a serrated edge to their bills, acting like teeth, to grasp fish. The females have a rusty brown head in which the brown on the throat stops in an abrupt line where the plumage changes to white.

The female has a little bit of a wacky crest on the backside of her head. These birds nest west of us in New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York and north of that area in Canada. They prefer to be close to large lakes and will use woodpecker holes or will nest on the ground.

The Charles River is usually the best place for winter ducks in Newton. Ted Kuklinski leads a portion of our Christmas Bird Count party along the banks of the Charles each year. There one can see all of the previously

The Common Mergansers are a colorful species that is easy to get to know. The trick is to go out and spend time looking for them. They are on the Charles every winter. The male Common Merganser



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Male Ring-necked Duck (black head at right) with female to the left

white, with a darker brown head. She has a white band on her bill and white on her face at the base of her bill.

They nest north of Newton, in New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, and up into Canada. Their nests are on drier spots in marshy areas near open water. They do have an iridescent purple ring around their necks. This ring is virtually impossible to see unless you are close and the light is just right.

Other good places to see ducks

If you find yourself ready to face the New England weather in January, February, or March and want some interest in your stroll, try the Blue Heron walk along the Charles River from Watertown Square, upriver to Bridge Street. Other good spots are Auburndale Park, Purgatory Cove, and the trail along Quinobequin Road in Waban.

One can also stray to the Stop and Shop on Pleasant Street in Waltham, just east of Farwell Street. There is a footbridge behind this store and a path in Newton across the river. Parking is easy in the Stop and Shop lot. Bring binoculars if you have them. If not, invite a friend who does have them. The ducks can be at a distance on the river. Depending where you walk, you can also run across muskrats, beavers, and river otters along the Charles River. ■

🌿 Pete Gilmore

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