

Here a Quack, There a Quack

Ducks are almost EVERYWHERE in North Carolina, yet not all ducks are the same

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The duckling peers from the nest. The mother duck, called a hen, is calling in the water below. She perches, uncertain of what to do. Her siblings, called a brood, are crowded behind her pushing to leave the nest. She knows she can't stay. Staying means no mother and no food. The duckling hesitates and then with one giant push of her feet, she falls 30 feet to the water below. Little chirps sound behind her as the other ducks launch themselves from the nest. Plop, plop, plop—all eight join her swimming behind their mother.

The world looks much bigger from the water. The duckling sees other ducks diving into the water, others dunking their heads into the water. A barred owl blinks at her from a high branch, so she swims closer to mom after looking in those big eyes. Little does she know, in as little as six weeks, she will be on her own.

NOT YOUR AVERAGE DUCK

Ducks can be found anywhere there is water, including lakes, rivers and streams. They are warm-blooded animals, covered with feathers, webbed feet and a bill for feeding. As an important part of aquatic ecosystems, ducks help spread plant seeds as they fly from one source of water to the next.

Wood ducks and hooded mergansers are two types of ducks that nest in cavities. This means that they look for tree hollows, stumps and nest boxes to lay their eggs. By laying their eggs in hard-to-reach places, ducks are trying to avoid predators, like rat snakes and woodpeckers, who find their eggs a tasty snack. Mallards and other ducks lay their eggs in nests near wetlands, which allows their ducklings to waddle toward the water instead of taking the plunge like the wood duck duckling.

How ducks gather those seeds to spread is different. Northern shoveler ducks have specially designed bills that they sweep side to side in the water to filter out aquatic invertebrates, insects and seeds. These are one of the many ducks whose tails

stick out of the water as they reach their long necks down into the aquatic vegetation. Diving ducks, such as buffleheads and canvasbacks, take sweeping dives into the water for their food. Ducks that dive are ones that you typically find in deeper water, like lakes and rivers, as well as coastal bays and inlets.

With more than 25 duck species across North Carolina, how do biologists keep track of all these behaviors, habitats and species?

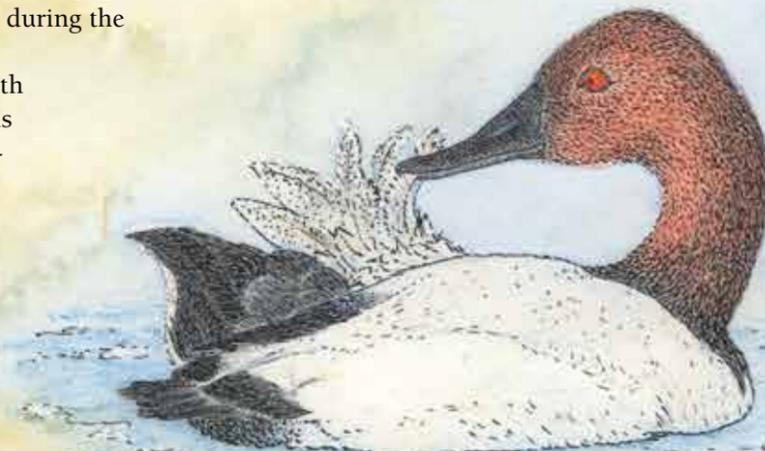
THERE'S A JOB FOR THAT?

At the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, biologists monitor all migratory bird species that cross into and live within North Carolina. Every year, millions of birds take the long trek from colder climates to warmer ones for winter. Canada geese come here around wintertime, with hundreds gathering around water, adding to the population of geese that live here all year. Duck populations also increase during the winter as many make their way south.

There are four routes, also known as flyways, across North America that birds use during migration. North Carolina is part of the 17 states, plus Canadian provinces, in the Atlantic Flyway. Ducks, loons, geese, swans, hawks and many more birds use that flyway to travel to and live across the state during certain times of the year. Biologists place bands on birds to help monitor them.

Duck banding is when a biologist places a metal ring with a special number on the leg of a duck. Each duck band has its own number for identification. That way, when biologists recapture the duck, or the duck is shot by a hunter, they know exactly which duck it is and when and where it was banded. Our biologists use the information they obtain from duck banding to help set hunting seasons and daily bag limits so duck populations remain at a certain level.

Biologists also place duck boxes out for cavity nesters. They check them throughout the nesting season of March through June. This helps determine how many of the eggs hatch and how many ducklings are produced, giving biologists an understanding of how productive hens are that nest in duck boxes.



THE SCIENCE OF WATERPROOFING ACTIVITY

Ever hear someone say, "It's like water off a duck's back?" Normally people are referring to not letting something bother you, but water really does fall off a duck's back.

How does this happen? Ducks take their bills and straighten and clean their feathers by carefully running each feather through an oily substance that they gather from a gland near their tails. This is called preening. By using this oil, ducks keep their feathers clean and waterproofed. The oil also allows for feathers to be put back into place if they get ruffled. This helps with flight.

WANT TO TRY WATERPROOFING AT HOME? FIRST ASK AN ADULT AND GATHER ALL THE MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED:

- Paper
- Wax candle
- Spray bottle with water

Fold your piece of paper in half. On one half rub the wax candle, making sure every exposed surface is covered. Leave the other side blank.

Take the spray bottle and spray both sides of the paper. Which one held up better?

The wax from the candle is an oil-based substance that helped protect the paper and waterproofed it, just like a duck preening its feathers. If you want to take this activity a step further, use a piece of cloth and try it again with the wax candle. If the cloth is frayed at the edges, scrape a piece of the wax candle off and rub the frayed edges with the wax. Here, you can really see how the oil binds the feather together and helps keep it smooth and ready for diving, dabbling or flying.