



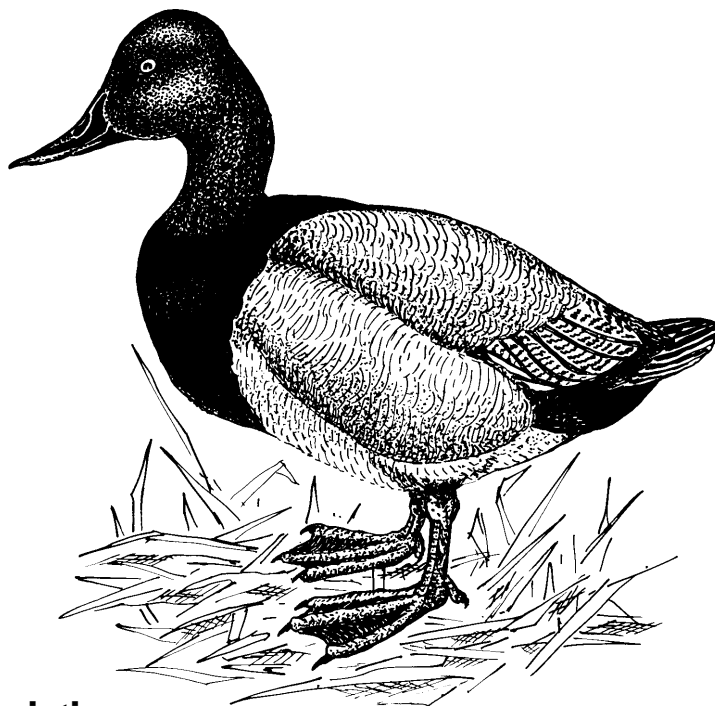
Canvasback Duck

Aythya valisineria

Canvasback ducks get their name from the light gray canvas-colored back of the male (drake) canvasback duck. With its subtle but beautiful coloration, the canvasback duck has long been a favorite of waterfowl enthusiasts around the nation. When migrating, canvasbacks often fly in an impressive V-shaped formation that resembles a squadron of airplanes at high altitude.

History and Status

The coastal areas of North Carolina provide some of the best waterfowl habitat on the East Coast (or Atlantic Flyway) for ducks and geese that migrate south. Earlier in the century, canvasback ducks wintered in North Carolina in large numbers, especially in the northeastern coastal sounds and rivers. But commercial market hunters, who supplied the large cities of the North with fresh meat, shot canvasbacks down to very low levels during the market-hunting period during the first third of the 20th century. Canvasbacks were the favorite targets of market hunters because their meat was considered the tastiest of any duck. Their numbers have rebounded since commercial market hunting was outlawed. However, continued destruction of the canvasback's wetland breeding habitat in the prairie region has kept populations relatively low compared to other duck species. Canvasbacks continue to be troubled by pollution, loss of habitat and increased predator numbers.



Description

The canvasback's flight is characterized by rapid wing beats and it is considered one of the fastest of all ducks on the wing. Aside from its coloration, the canvasback is recognizable by its large, wedge-shaped bill and head. The male duck has a brownish-red head and neck highlighted by its light gray back. The hen (female) has a buffy brown head and chest with a brownish-gray back. Immediately after hatching, both sexes have yellow eyes, but after 10 to 12 weeks the eyes begin to turn red. The wings of the hens are brown flecked with white. The males have nearly white wings with brown primary feathers.

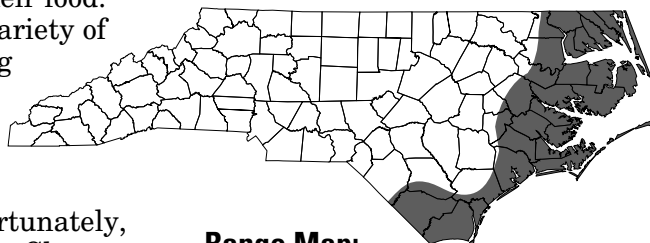
Habits and Habitat

Canvasback ducks are one of several species of diving ducks, meaning that they dive and swim underwater to get their food. Canvasbacks eat a variety of aquatic foods ranging from plants such as pond weeds and widgeon grass to insects, mollusks and small fish. Unfortunately, water pollution in the Chesapeake Bay and other wintering

areas has killed many of their favorite aquatic plants, and lack of nutritious food during winter may mean lower survival during the cold months of winter.

The main breeding area for canvasbacks is the prairie pot-hole region in the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and states such as North and South Dakota. Nesting typically begins in early May. The success rate of these nests varies from year to year, depending on rainfall and other weather conditions and also on predation rates. Rain is needed to fill the pothole ponds in the region. Unfortunately, severe and prolonged drought devastated the region in the 1980s and many potholes were plowed under by farmers during that time. Consequently, populations have been hurt.

Another factor affecting nest-



Range Map:

Occupied Range ■

**WILD
Facts**

ing success is the instinct of red-head ducks to lay eggs in canvasback nests. This parasitic behavior has a direct effect on the number of canvasback eggs hatched. Predators such as skunks, raccoons and foxes have also greatly increased in the prairie region lately. These predators destroy duck nests and eggs, and they also kill the hens.

Range and Distribution

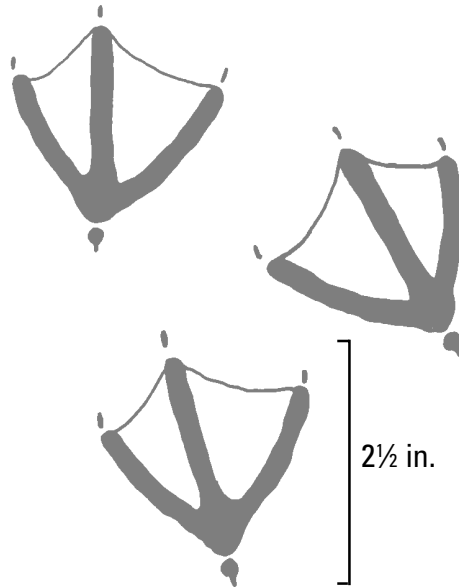
During early fall, canvasbacks begin migrating south to wintering areas. The ducks' wintering areas are dispersed all over the country, but large concentrations of canvasbacks fly to the Chesapeake Bay area. From there, some continue to North Carolina. North-eastern North Carolina's coastal sounds still provide excellent wintering habitat for the canvasbacks.

The nesting sites of canvasbacks are diverse. Many studies have found nests in large marshes, ponds, sloughs and potholes. Most pond-nesting sites are less than an acre in size and are surrounded by bulrushes and cattails. Canvasbacks do not nest in North Carolina.

People Interactions

Unless you are a farmer in the prairie pothole region, a duck hunter, or a visitor to a national wildlife refuge, you won't see canvasbacks as often as mallards or Canada geese. The hunting season for canvasbacks has been closed or restricted through much of the past 30 years because of low numbers.

Currently, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and state wildlife agencies like the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission are working to restore waterfowl numbers through the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. This plan seeks to preserve and restore the valuable wetlands needed by waterfowl and other species.



References

Bellrose, Frank C. *Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America* (Stackpole Books, 1980).
 Bent, Arthur Cleveland. *Life Histories of North American Wild Fowl* (Dover Publications, 1987).
 Johnsgard, Paul A. *A Guide to North American Waterfowl* (Indiana University Press, 1979).

Credits

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 Produced August 1992 by the Division of Conservation Education, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.
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CANVASBACK

Classification

Class: Bird
 Order: Anseriformes

Average Size

Length: Adult male 20-21.9 in.; adult female 18.8-20.4 in.
 Weight: Adult male 1.9 lbs.-3.5 lbs.; adult female 2.0 lbs.-3.4 lbs.

Food

Plants, insects, fish, widgeon grass, mollusks, wild celery and pond weeds (sago).

Breeding

Male is called drake; female is called hen. Birds become sexually mature at 1 year. Some yearling hens breed but not as effectively as adult hens.

Young

Called duckling. Average clutch size is 7.7 eggs in nests parasitized by other birds, and 9.9 eggs in unparasitized nests. Eggs are large and green with a smooth shell. Incubation time ranges from 24-29 days.