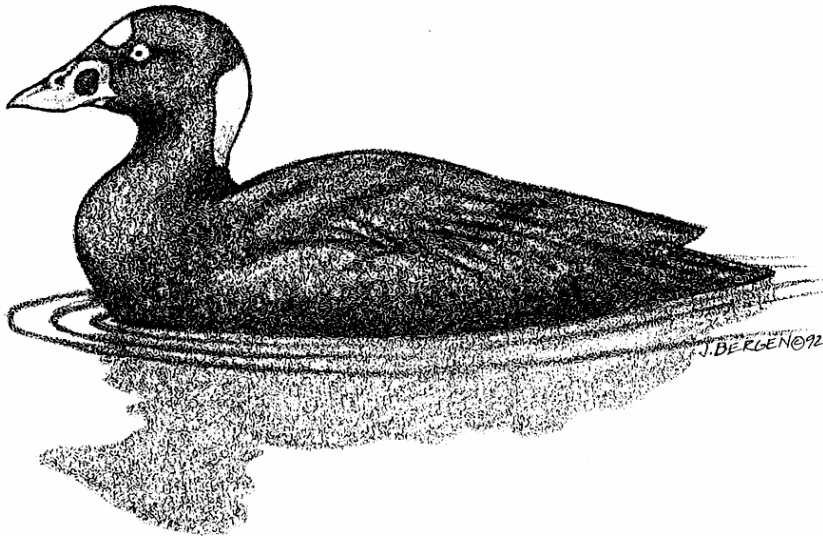


# Waterfowl on the Estuary

by Kenn Oberrecht



*One crisp, sunny Sunday in January, as motorists sped along U.S. 101 near Coos Bay, between Haynes Inlet and North Slough, a solitary car eased off the highway. Its two*

*occupants stepped out of the vehicle and steadied binoculars on a spectacle no one else seemed to notice.*

Mud flats were flooded with a foot or so of water at mid-tide, and strung out across them to the base of the dunes were several thousand ducks--feeding, resting, preening, swimming--seemingly oblivious to all the bustle about them. Hundreds more dozed on shore in a pale patch of sunlight.

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Nearly a dozen duck species were represented. Plump mallards glistened green-headed in the water or stood sleeping one-footed on the mud. Redheads and both kinds of goldeneyes swam with a raft of lesser scaup. Sprightly buffleheads--now you see 'em, now you don't--dived among canvasbacks and ring-necked ducks. Gadwalls and pintails aplenty dabbled in the shallows, and countless widgeons filled in the blanks. Amid the magnificent mayhem swam a gaggle of Canada geese and five tundra swans.

Although waterfowl don't gather on Coos Bay every day in such profusion, similar occurrences are common enough for people to drive by without noticing. The Coos Bay estuary provides such a rich and diverse environment that nearly every species of duck in the Pacific flyway and several kinds of geese are likely to visit the bay sometime during the year. Others are year-round residents.

*Eelgrass beds attract both diving ducks and dabblers. Some feed on vegetation, while others root for small animals and fishes the grass beds harbor.*

Not only do the bay's abundant food and water resources invite migrating waterfowl to rest and feed, but our moderate climate also entices many to overwinter.

White-winged and surf scoters spend the winter, gorging on plentiful mollusks and crustaceans. All three species of mergansers eat some of the same foods but mainly feed on small fishes--hence the nickname, "fish ducks."

Eelgrass beds attract both diving ducks and dabblers. Some feed on vegetation, while others root for small animals and fishes the grass beds harbor. Similarly, tidal marshes provide vegetable and animal matter to nourish flocks of foraging waterfowl.

Coos Bay's waterfowl populations begin swelling with the arrival of darting and swerving flocks of green-winged teal in September, followed shortly by the first pintails. Various species of puddle ducks continue arriving sporadically until the first major storms move great numbers of waterfowl before them. Diver ducks pour in by the thousands after Thanksgiving.

During spring migration, the bay's duck population swells again, and by April most migrants and wintering ducks are winging north to traditional breeding grounds in Canada and Alaska. Some mallards, wood ducks, teal, and Canada geese remain to nest and raise young in the bay's adjacent marshes and the forest-fringed sloughs. In good years, some might even have second broods that will barely have learned to fly when the first teal of autumn arrive and the cycle begins anew.

As North America continues to lose its wetlands to corporate agriculture, industrial development, and urban sprawl, Coos Bay and similar estuaries become increasingly important to the continent's precious but dwindling waterfowl populations.

