



Red-breasted Merganser



Snowy Owl



Dark-eyed Junco

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Winter Bird Notes

Anas acuta (Northern Pintail)

ORDER: Anseriformes (3 Family)

FAMILY: Anatidae (174 Species)

The arctic-looking landscape of Lakeshore State Park was breathtaking today. The sun was shining between scattered puffy clouds against a February blue sky. A few inches of light powdery snow blanketed the landscape and sparkled in the sunlight. There is a peaceful feeling walking in fresh snow on a crisp chilly sunny day. The air feels cleaner and everything looks brighter and it is quieter. The only sound I heard was coming from open water where several waterfowl were rapidly swimming and diving. All this activity produced a staccato of rippling wave sounds. The ducks seemed like they were adrenaline charged, as if they hadn't had food or sun or socialization or air to breath in a long time! What made them so over active today? Could it be more sun? Could it be the feeling of late winter and the fact that breeding season is approaching? More male ducks were certainly demonstrating courtship displays!

I decided to walk south toward the red lighthouse at the mouth of the river since there were hundreds of waterfowl swimming in open water close to shore. Some solitary water birds stood out from the regular inhabitants, such as a female Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*), a female Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*), and a male Redhead (*Aythya americana*). Additionally, resting solely on a floating iceberg, was a male Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*)! He was surrounded by mallards either resting on nearby icebergs or dabbling in the limited open water. He was simply riding the gentle waves of the river.

The male Northern Pintail is an elegant **dabbling** duck that has long, thin distinctive markings. He has a long dark tail and black undertail-coverts surrounded by an off-white belly band, a fine curving white line down the back of the head that travels to a narrow white neck, and a long gray bill. The head is a chocolate brown and the eyes are dark. The Northern Pintail has strong sexual dimorphism and the female is brown and spotted. Males will migrate to regions abundant in food and cover to undergo

molting of body and flight feathers late in the breeding season. The males will transform to a dull, female-like or “eclipse” plumage and be flightless for several weeks. Today, the term “eclipse” has gone out of favor and been replaced with **dull alternate** plumage, while the bright colors are called **basic** plumage. The Northern Pintail male is in *basic plumage* nearly year round!

I have often wondered what characteristics differentiate dabbling from diving ducks. Here are some general differences.

Dabbling Ducks	Diving Ducks
Small to medium-sized	Heavier ducks
Smaller feet	Larger feet on short legs
Legs positioned farther forward	Legs positioned farther back
Large wings with respect to body weight	Small wings with respect to body weight
Fly slower	Fly faster
Precision landing and vertical take-off	Need space for taking flight and landing
Forage by skimming water surface or submerging head and neck in shallow water	Forage by diving and propelling
Form mixed flocks in flight	Infrequently form mixed flocks in flight
Walk on land	More difficulty walking on land due to leg position on body

This table can help identify ducks when they are close, however, identifying ducks in flight can be a challenge. The Northern Pintail in flight is unique because of the male’s outstretched tail that looks like a fencing sword. You can often see Pintails flying with Mallards, Teals, Northern Shovelers, Wigeons, Gadwalls and other waterfowl. What a commingling, beautiful duck!!

Ducks, geese, and swans are in the family Anatidae. This family used to be called Unguirostris which is Latin for *unguis*, meaning nail and *rostrum*, meaning beak. Birds in this family have a firm curved shield-shaped growth that forms a small hook at the tip of the beak and is used for grasping things. For dabbling ducks, the nail is used to pick up seeds from the ground. For diving ducks, the nail is used to pry mollusks off of underwater surfaces. The nail also covers and protects mechanoreceptors, or nerve cells sensitive to pressure, touch, and vibration. Be sure to look for this anatomical structure and watch how these waterfowl use them to obtain food!



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