

Lesser Scaup

SCIENTIFIC NAME: The lesser scaup, *Aythya affinis*, is a member of the Anatidae family of ducks, geese and swans. The genus name, *Aythya*, is the Latin translation of the Greek word *aithuia*, which means “a kind of diving bird.” The species name, *affinis*, is Latin for “adjacent” or “related to.”

In North America we find two species of scaup, greater and lesser, with the lesser scaup being smaller in size. The word “scaup” (of Scottish origin) refers to ledges found in the ocean that at times are above the water level. The lesser scaup also is known as little bluebill, broad-bill, little black-head and black-jack.

During winter, large numbers of lesser scaup are found on lakes, reservoirs, backwaters, large wetlands and rivers.

DESCRIPTION: Lesser scaup are medium-sized diving ducks from 15–18 inches long. They have a wingspan of 26–31 inches and weigh 1–2.75 pounds. Males are distinctly larger and more colorful than females. Males in breeding plumage have a blue bill and are purplish-black on the head, neck, chest and rump. The back is white with thin black zig-zag-patterned lines, the sides are white with some black streaks and the belly is white. Females, males not in breeding plumage and juveniles have a dark gray bill with a white patch at the base and are medium brown with lighter sides. The secondary flight feathers of both sexes are tipped in white, creating a white stripe on the trailing edge along the topside of the wing during flight.

DISTRIBUTION: The greater scaup is associated more commonly with saltwater areas, while the lesser scaup more often is found inland in freshwater areas.



Lesser scaup breed during the summer months from the Pacific Northwest to the southern half of Alaska and as far east as Manitoba, Canada. Unlike other ducks, these ducks nest in waters of the boreal forests instead of the prairie potholes. They winter throughout the southern half of the United States and in Mexico and Central America. Some even are found on the islands of Hawaii, the Canary Islands and the British Isles. One of the most plentiful and widespread diving ducks in North America, lesser scaup are relatively uncommon in Arizona.

HABITAT: During winter, large numbers of lesser scaup are found on lakes, reservoirs, backwaters, large wetlands and rivers. In Arizona, they favor the deep-water reservoirs in the Salt and Verde river drainages. In the summer nesting period, they inhabit small wetland areas of the boreal forest with emergent vegetation.

BIOLOGY: Lesser scaup mainly eat invertebrates, mollusks, insect larvae and aquatic plants and their seeds. Although many species of ducks reach sexual maturity at the same time, lesser scaup males are sexually mature in their second year while lesser

scaup females are not successful at breeding and nesting until their third year. Compared to other ducks, this species is a late nester, waiting until late May or early June. Females build a bowl-shaped nest lined with grasses and down feathers and lay dark olive-buff-colored eggs. These can number between five and 14 with an average of nine. Incubation lasts three to four weeks. Chicks fully fledge seven to eight weeks after hatching. Their late migration south is triggered when most open water has frozen over. The equally late migration north occurs in May.

STATUS: Lesser scaup numbers have been in decline since the mid 1980s, leading to more restrictive hunting limitations. Part of this decline may be due to the drying-out of the boreal forest, habitat that is critical to the species' breeding success.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: In Arizona, lesser scaup need deep and open waters with a vibrant invertebrate population. The greatest need is identifying, protecting, preserving and enhancing wetlands in the boreal forests of upper North America. 🦆

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