

Ruddy Duck

Oxyura jamaicensis

Ruddy Ducks are compact, thick-necked waterfowl with seemingly oversized tails that they habitually hold upright. Breeding males are almost cartoonishly bold, with a sky-blue bill, shining white cheek patch, and gleaming chestnut body. They court females by beating their bill against their neck hard enough to create a swirl of bubbles in the water. This widespread duck breeds mostly in the prairie pothole region of North America and winters in wetlands throughout the U.S. and Mexico.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

These are small, compact ducks with stout, scoop-shaped bills, and long, stiff tails they often hold cocked upward. They have slightly peaked heads and fairly short, thick necks.

Color Pattern

Male Ruddy Ducks have blackish caps that contrast with bright white cheeks. In summer, they have rich chestnut bodies with bright blue bills. In winter, they are dull gray-brown above and paler below with dull gray bills. Females and first-year males are brownish, somewhat like winter males but with a blurry stripe across the pale cheek patch. In flight, Ruddy Ducks show solidly dark tops of the wings.

Behavior

Ruddy Ducks dive to feed on aquatic invertebrates, especially midge larvae. They feed most actively at night, so you'll often see Ruddy Ducks sleeping during the day, head tucked under a wing and tail cocked up.

Habitat

They nest in marshes adjacent to lakes and ponds, primarily in the Prairie Potholes region. In migration, they flock to large rivers, ponds, and lakes, and also gather in coastal estuaries, frequently mixing with other diving ducks such as Bufflehead and goldeneyes.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 13.8 - 16.9 inches
- Wingspan - 22 - 24 inches
- Weight - 10.6 - 30 ounces

