

Bufflehead

Bucephala albeola

A buoyant, large-headed duck that abruptly vanishes and resurfaces as it feeds, the tiny Bufflehead spends winters bobbing in bays, estuaries, reservoirs, and lakes. Males are striking black-and white from a distance. A closer look at the head shows glossy green and purple setting off the striking white patch. Females are a subdued gray-brown with a neat white patch on the cheek. Bufflehead nest in old woodpecker holes, particularly those made by Northern Flickers, in the forests of northern North America.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Bufflehead are very small, compact ducks with large, rounded heads and short, wide bills.

Color Pattern

Adult male Bufflehead have a white body, black back, and a dark head with a large white patch that wraps around the back of the head. Females and first-year males are gray-brown overall with an oval, white cheek patch. In flight adult males have a large white patch on the upperwing; females and first-year males have a smaller white wing patch.

Behavior

Bufflehead dive underwater to catch aquatic invertebrates. When courting females, male Buffleheads swim in front of them, rapidly bobbing their heads up and down. In flight, you can identify Bufflehead by noting their small size, fast wingbeats, and pattern of rocking side-to side as they fly.

Habitat

Bufflehead are most widespread in migration and winter, when they move south to coasts and large bodies of water, particularly shallow saltwater bays. They breed near lakes in northern forests where conifers mix with poplars or aspens. Bufflehead nest in tree cavities, especially old Northern Flicker holes.

