

# Falcated Duck Discovered in California's Central Valley

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This note describes the discovery and occurrence of a Falcated Duck (*Anas falcate*) in winter 2011-12 at Colusa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and information on the status of this species in western North America.

## SPECIES DISCOVERY

On the morning of 8 December 2011, I met three friends, Gary Fregien, Anne Blandon, and Valerie Phillips, in Davis California for a morning of birding at the Colusa NWR. The refuge, in Colusa County, California, is one of five NWRs in the Sacramento Refuge Complex within the Sacramento Valley, which is the northern portion of the Central Valley, about 70 miles north of the metropolitan area of Sacramento. Colusa NWR comprises 4,567 acres, 78% of which are intensively managed wetland impoundments, with additional grassland and riparian habitat (U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2012a). The refuge was established in 1945 under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Lea Act, with lands acquired with Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (Duck Stamp) funds.

The Central Valley is one of the most important wintering areas for waterfowl in North America. Approximately 44 percent of the Pacific Flyway's total waterfowl population winters in the Sacramento Valley. Colusa NWR typically hosts wintering populations of more than 200,000 ducks and 100,000 geese (U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2012b). In addition to waterfowl, many other migratory and resident birds, mammals, native plants, and other invertebrates occur on the complex's refuges, including the federally threatened Giant Garter Snake (*Thamnophis gigas*).

About an hour after leaving Davis, we turned onto Ohair Road, a maintained gravel road leading to the refuge's entrance. Ohair Road intersects with Highway 20 about 4 miles west of the town of Colusa, and 6 miles east of the Highway 20, Interstate 5 interchange. From Highway 20, Ohair Road heads south through agricultural fields for approximately a quarter mile before turning west, where the habitat abruptly changes from open fields to wetlands. From this turn, it is a little more than 150 m (0.1 mi) to the refuge's viewing platform.

We arrived at the viewing platform at about 9:50 a.m. The birding had already been extremely enjoyable, and we felt we were settling into a

memorable day. I took a position on the west end of the viewing platform and began scanning the near northwestern portion of the pond with my binoculars. Almost immediately, I discovered a duck on the western edge of an island approximately 50 meters northwest of me. The duck was sitting on bare ground facing me, so I could see its breast and one side of the head, but not its legs.

At first glance, I thought it was a Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) because of the similar colors on the head, but almost immediately it was obvious that it was not that species. It appeared larger and bulkier, and its strongly vermiculated breast jumped out as very reminiscent of a drake Gadwall (*Anas strepera*), but much more vivid in color and pattern. The green feathers on the head seemed brighter, almost emerald-like when the bird turned its head in the sunlight. Those feathers extended from the eyes to beyond the back of the head. The dark reddish brown feathering on the top of the head appeared vibrant as well, but a bit darker than in a Green-winged Teal. These feathers also extended to the back of the head. The green and the reddish brown areas on the head were not separated by the white/cream color border as on many Green-winged Teal.

This bird's bill was very dark and appeared narrower and longer than the teal. There was a bold, prominent white spot just above the bill and between the bird's dark eyes. The bird had a snow-white throat and two collars between the throat and breast. The top collar appeared very dark, possibly black; the lower collar, bordering the breast pattern was the same vibrant white as the throat.

About a minute after I first spotted it, the duck moved into the water. It swam south toward a patch of rushes about 25 meters from the island. I could then see its entire set of field marks, including the beautiful long sickle-shaped tertials which seemed to flow off its back. It then was obvious to me that this bird was a drake (male) Falcated Duck.

At this point I advised Gary to take a look at this bird. Gary immediately looked through my scope and said "Do you know what this is? It's a Falcated Duck!" Valerie and Anne also saw the bird well before it disappeared behind the rushes. After a few minutes it reappeared a bit farther away and Gary was able to take a few documentary photos while I called John Sterling to report the bird.

John posted the sighting on the CVBirds listserve at 10:09 a.m. and by 11:30 that morning birders from Redding, Chico, Woodland, and Sacramento were on the viewing platform. By 3:00 p.m. when our group left the refuge, there were 35 people on the platform.

The bird attracted widespread attention in the birding community and beyond during its known period of occurrence at the refuge from 8 December

2011 to 10 February 2012, when it was last reported. Birders came to see the duck from throughout the United States and from at least two Canadian provinces. Using information gathered by his public use staff, Colusa NWR manager Mike Peters estimated that 11,600 people visited the refuge from the date of the duck's discovery until about a week after the last confirmed sighting. This use level represents an increase by 8,000 visitors from the same time period in previous years (Peters, pers. comm.).

## SPECIES DESCRIPTION

The Falcated Duck is a Gadwall-sized dabbling duck (48-51cm), formerly called the "Falcated Teal." In 1997, the English common name was changed to Falcated Duck in the 41<sup>st</sup> Supplement to the AOU Check-List (American Ornithologists' Union 1997) to conform with current worldwide usage.

Breeding males are spectacular and unmistakable (see cover photo and depictions in most major field guides). The female Falcated Duck is dark brown and resembles a shaggy-naped female Gadwall (Alaska Birding 2011). The dark-gray bill and the slight bump on the back of the head, creates a large-headed appearance, distinguishing her from female American Wigeon (*Anas americana*), Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas penelope*), and Gadwall (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The male in eclipse (nonbreeding) plumage is like the female, but darker on the back and head. In flight, both sexes show a broad, dark speculum with a white border (Avian Web 2010).

The Falcated Duck is a species of lowland wetlands, such as wet meadows and shallow lakes. It usually feeds by dabbling for emergent vegetation or grazing on waterside grassland or crops. They nest on the ground, near water and under the cover of taller vegetation. The clutch is 6-10 eggs. The male's vocalization is a clear low whistle, whereas the female's is a gruff "quack" (Avian Web 2010).

## RANGE, DISTRIBUTION AND NORTH AMERICA RECORDS

The Falcated Duck breeds from southern Siberia south to Mongolia, northeastern China, and northern Japan. It winters primarily in southeastern China, southern Japan, North Korea, and South Korea. Small numbers regularly winter in Bangladesh, northeast India, Nepal (rare and irregular), Taiwan, northern Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam (very rare) (BirdLife International 2012). The species is recognized as "near threatened" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (BirdLife International 2012).

The species is a very rare visitor to North America. It occurs rarely in the Aleutian Islands and casually among the Pribilof Islands of western Alaska. Several records of males along the Pacific Coast south of Alaska are generally regarded as natural occurrences due to a credible pattern of vagrancy (Hamilton et al. 2007).

Previous Pacific coast records are from southwestern British Columbia at Swan Lake in April 1932, and the Tofino area of Vancouver Island, three straight winters/springs of 1995-97 (Campbell 2001, Hamilton et al. 2007). The four records from Washington, all coastal, include the Naselle River in January 1979, Sequim Island in July 1993, and Samish Island in February 2002 and February 2005 (Seattle Audubon Society 2007, Washington Ornithological Society 2011).

The four records from Lane County, Oregon near Eugene (February 2004, January 2005, March 2006 and November 2006), apparently involve the same individual returning in successive seasons (Oregon Bird Record Committee. 2011). Three previous California records including one from Upper Newport Bay, Orange County in January 1969, and two records considered to be the same individual at Honey Lake, Lassen County in March 2002 and January 2003 (Hamilton et al. 2007).

There appears to be a trend of frequent annual re-occurrence, so I'll see you on the Colusa NWR viewing platform in November!

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