

Photo Feature: Identifying Wintering Female Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal in the Central Valley, California

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Distinguishing female Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) and Cinnamon Teal (*A. cyanoptera*) is widely considered difficult, even for experienced birders. For example, bird guides published as recently as the 1970s characterized females of the two species as being "indistinguishable in the field and barely so in the hand" (Cogswell 1977).

The 1999 National Geographic Society (1999) field guide notes that the Blue-winged Teal female's "grayer plumage, smaller bill, and bolder facial pattern, including white lore and more prominent broken eye ring" than the Blue-winged Teal. It also notes that the Cinnamon Teal's "plumage is richer brown... and the bill is longer and more spatulate". Illustrations of the two species, however, are nearly identical, except for a white lore spot shown for the Blue-winged Teal.

Several of the more recent well-known field guides show and describe subtle differences between females of the species. Sibley (2003) notes distinct characteristics of the female Blue-winged Teal as "a pale patch at the base of the bill and white eye-arcs." He also notes that the plumage is "grayer and more patterned than Cinnamon (teal)" and that the Cinnamon Teal's bill is longer than the Blue-winged Teal. Accompanying illustrations show the head pattern and bill size relatively distinctly, but body coloration and patterning are shown as quite similar.

Considering the distance at which one often observes female ducks, the head and bill characteristics are not always usable to distinguish these two teal species. Therefore, it is not surprising that many birders may find it difficult to identify female Blue-winged and Cinnamon teal at typical field viewing distances using field guide information.

A relatively large number of Blue-winged and Cinnamon teal assemble together during December and January on Bridgeway Island Pond, West Sacramento, Yolo County, California (<http://ebird.org/ebird/GuideMe?cmd=decisionPage&getLocations=hotspots&hotspots=L473045&yr=all&m=>).

Many individuals are obviously paired during this period, allowing close looks at presumed Blue-winged and Cinnamon teal females. Observation and photographs of these birds (Figures 1 and 2) show that the described field marks, especially the greater amount of white in the face of the female Blue-winged, is also relatively easy to see in close-to-mid-distance birds, and can serve as an effective confirmatory field mark. Comparison of the two species together shows numerous differences, including several that are not reported or shown in field guides. These field marks include the following.

- *Body plumage:* the background coloring in breast and undersides are a richer red in the female Cinnamon and light gray in the Blue-winged teal. This pattern, however, differs among individuals and especially with lighting. Birds facing the observer tend to appear paler than birds viewed from the side. Thus, there is overlap in this character among some individuals.
- *Breast pattern:* feather patterning is U-shaped in the Cinnamon and finer tweed-like in the Blue-winged Teal, and is considerably more distinct than the two most common field guides illustrate.
- *Head pattern:* Blue-winged Teal females almost always have a thicker smudgy eye-line (often continuing into the lores) with a contrasting pale supercilium and pale areas at the base of the bill. Cinnamon Teal often show a plain face and pencil eye-line, almost never extending into the lores. As with body plumage, the head pattern is more distinctive when viewed from the side and may appear washed out and pale when viewed from the front. Compare the female Blue-winged Teal in Figure 1 with the one in Figure 2.
- *Bill and head shape:* Cinnamon Teal have a longer "Roman-nosed" bill and a more rounded head; Blue-winged Teal have a shorter and evenly curved bill and a more "blocky" head. This can often be the easiest field mark on which to identify the species.
- *Overall size:* Cinnamon Teal females are larger than Blue-winged Teal.

While the pairing of females with males helps confirm identification during this period, we suggest that birders may more confidently identify female teal in many situations even when only one species or sex is present based on body color and pattern, rather than resorting to the use of "teal sp.".

LITERATURE CITED

- Cogswell, H.L. 1977. *Water Birds of California*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
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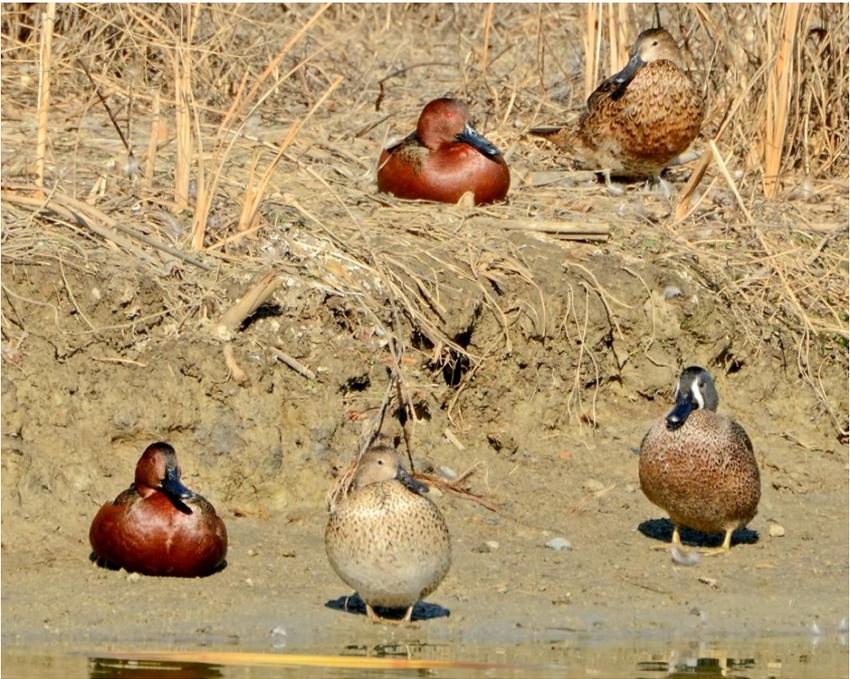


Figure 1. Female Blue-winged Teal (center foreground) with female Cinnamon Teal (right rear) with males of both species at Bridgeway Island Pond, West Sacramento, Yolo Co. 15 January 2014. *Photo © Dan Brown.*



Figure 2. Female Blue-winged (left) and two female Cinnamon teal. Note variability in facial patterns and darkness of body feathers among female Cinnamons, presumably due either to individual variation or light angle. *Photo © Dan Brown.*