

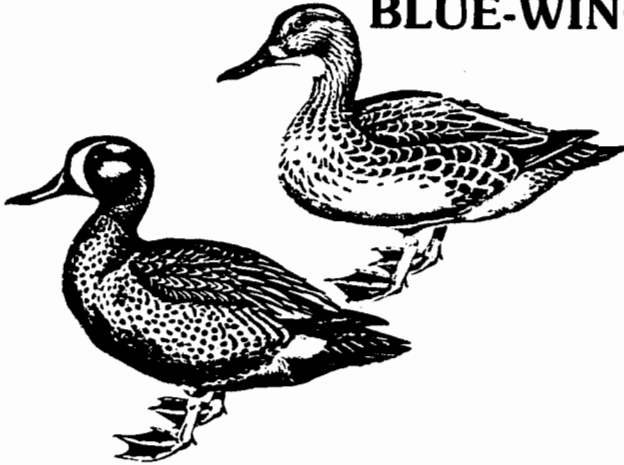
5/4/85



Natural History Notes

MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area, attended Hayward Public Schools, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, University of Minnesota, and Iowa State University. He has a Ph. D. in Fisheries Biology. Mike has worked as an area fishing guide, taught Zoology at UW-Stevens Point, and is now a fisheries biologist with the USDA Forest Service, living in Park Falls, Wisconsin.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL



The blue-winged teal is a common visitor to our lakes and rivers each spring and fall, stopping off to feed and rest along its migratory path. It is a small duck and its most distinguishing feature is the bright blue wing patch present on both male and female. Thus the blue-winged teal is very appropriately named. The drake has a very noticeable white crescent on the side of the face and a white patch on each of its flanks near the base of the tail. These markings distinguish the drake blue-wing from the closely related green-winged and cinnamon teal. The hen blue-winged teal's blue wing patch separates it from the hen green-wing but not from the hen cinnamon teal. The female blue-winged and cinnamon teal are difficult to tell apart.

This species is a puddle duck and is an inhabitant of marshes, sloughs and ponds. It winters in the glades and bayous of the Gulf states and Central America and some migrate to northern South America as far south as Brazil and Chile. Many blue-winged teal spend winters farther south than any other North American duck. There is one account of a blue-wing banded in Quebec, Canada, that was killed in British Guinea 28 days later. This duck traveled more than 2,400 miles or an average of 85 miles per day for 28 days.

The blue-winged teal is a very strong flier. It takes to the air almost straight up from the water. Flocks of blue-wings can be distinguished from other ducks by the small size of individuals, their rapid and erratic flight, and twittering and chirping sounds.

They migrate north later in spring than most other ducks and often do not arrive at the breeding grounds until late May. Breeding grounds range from northern Illinois to Alaska and from Oregon east to New York.

Mating occurs after several days of courting. A nest is constructed of soft dead grass and lined with down. It is usually built in a small hollow very close to the water. The nest is always well hidden by tall overhanging grasses. Usually from 10-12 dull olive-white eggs are laid. The male deserts the female during egg-laying and incubation. He may wait for her at a nearby marsh or pond where he establishes regular waiting spots on logs or rocks. The eggs hatch after 21-23 days of incubation. The cautious mother always leaves and returns to the nest by an indirect route, sneaking through the grass to keep the location of her nest secret. The newly hatched ducklings are experts at hiding, and when danger lurks the mother will try to distract the intruder by a broken wing display and noisy splashing in the water. The young remain with the mother throughout the summer, feeding and growing in preparation for their long migration south to their winter home.

Blue-winged teal are strictly surface feeders and prefer to eat grains like wheat or wild rice. They also eat tender grasses, sedges, pondweeds, algae and, occasionally, animals such as snails, insects and crayfish.

Being a swift flier, the blue-wing has been clocked flying over 50 miles per hour and typical migration flight is 30-40 mph. In late summer they begin to gather in flocks. Migrations start in September, earlier than most other ducks. Adult males often start their migration even earlier in August. Thus juveniles and females make up the greatest portion of the hunter's bag.

In many areas as much as 90% of the teal's breeding habitat has been destroyed by draining wetlands for farming and other development. Overhunting on the wintering grounds has further reduced its numbers. This demonstrates the importance of preservation of wetlands for waterfowl, the need for adequate harvest regulations, and good hunter ethics.