



This was only the second confirmed sighting of this species in the state



Birders from around NC flocked to see the Mottled Duck

Brunswick Wildlife One Rare Duck

In birding, serendipity is often your sidekick. In October, Randy Climpson of Ocean Isle Beach observed a drake Mottled Duck at the easternmost of the Twin Lakes in Sunset Beach. I am fairly sure serendipity was standing nearby.

Randy filed a rare bird report with the Carolina Bird Club, the ornithological society of the Carolinas. The Chair of the North Carolina Record Committee, Harry LeGrand, Jr., forwarded a copy of the report to me and I shared the sighting with a number of other area birders. We were unable to relocate the bird at first but the search went on. In the meantime, Randy continued to occasionally see the duck.

Over the Thanksgiving weekend, Taylor Piephoff from Charlotte relocated the bird and confirmed its identity. Taylor is a member of the South Carolina Records Committee who spends a lot of time birding in our area since he has a place at Ocean Isle Beach. Harry LeGrand then drove down from Raleigh and he too confirmed the sighting, which is only the second accepted record for the state.

Then the rush was on! At least a hundred NC birders visited to see this rarity! The longer it stays, the more will come. Annually this “ritual” is repeated dozens of times around the state, from rarity to rarity.

Most birders keep a list of “lifer” birds by state and most needed this bird for their list. At the top of the heap, there are probably twenty or so birders that have seen over four hundred of the 450 plus official and provisional state records. One might conclude that there is a lot of competition at the top and one would be right.

What about the SC list keepers? Just as competitive and some may have come to see the Sunset Beach duck; however, there have been multiple SC sightings so most of those list keepers already had their bird...unless they also keep a NC list.

We birders keep lists! I keep a North American life list, a list by year, and a yard bird list like most other birders I know. Many birders also have extensive world lists to track their international birding.

Possibly the most competitive situation I have encountered was a group of birders in the area where two South Carolina counties (Pickens and Greenville) and one NC county (Transylvania) come together near Sassafras Mountain. These combatants also keep county lists!

The state line crosses the mountain, a good birding destination, so it is possible to get a “twofer” with a single bird. Please note it would be against the American Birding Association Code of Ethics to flush a bird just to pad your state list so I am sure that is never practiced.

With the Sunset Beach discovery, a question remained about identification of the second duck. The male with its bright yellow bill is shown on the right in the photo (the female’s bill has more orange). The female was tightly associated with the drake and seemed to be its mate. First thought to be a female Mallard, after studies of telephoto images and additional detailed notes from Randy, it proved to be a female Mottled Duck.

The Mottled Duck, a member of the mallard group (genus *Anas*), which also includes the Mallard and American Black Duck, is a resident of Florida and coastal marshes along the Gulf of Mexico to Texas and south to Tampico, Mexico. Small numbers also reside in Georgia and South Carolina.

Species of the mallard group are three of several duck species known as “dabblers” since they dabble and feed on the surface in shallow, muddy water. Migratory wild mallards and black ducks overwinter in the Lower Cape Fear. The Mottled Duck, however, is non-migratory but may be extending its range northward.

The Mottled is darker than the Mallard; however, it has a lighter, buffy head and neck. The Mottled Duck has a distinctive black spot where its upper and lower bills meet.

The American Black Duck is considerably darker than the other two. It has a gray, lightly streaked throat (versus the buffy non-streaked throat of the Mottled) and an olive to greenish-yellow bill. Black ducks may also be found on the Twin Lakes.

Breeding behavior has been observed by Randy and others so there is a good possibility that the Sunset Beach pair of Mottled Ducks will set a record for the first known nest in North Carolina. Hopefully, we will all see ducklings this spring.

John Ennis



Randy Climpson (left) shows other birders his rare find



Some birders brought their “heavy artillery”