



**Drake Buffleheads swim in the surf  
near the Kure Beach pier**



**Male Red-breasted Mergansers always  
have bad hair days**

## **Brunswick Wildlife Watching Winter Ducks**

We are fortunate many species of ducks overwinter in the Lower Cape Fear. The east coast, from Long Island to Merritt Island, should be called the “Waterfowl Rivera”. Actually, ducks overwinter coast-to-coast where they find open water free of ice.

Ducks likely to be seen in our area are dabbling ducks, diving ducks, eiders, sea ducks, mergansers, and stiff-tailed ducks. Dabbling ducks feed on or near the surface, sometimes tipping upside down to feed off the bottom. Sea ducks include scoters, Harlequin Ducks, Long-tailed Ducks, Buffleheads and Common Goldeneyes.

Groupings give clues to finding certain species based on their on foraging methods and preferred winter habitat. For example, dabbling ducks are generally found in more shallow waters than diving ducks.

This week’s featured birds are the Bufflehead, a sea duck in the genus *Bucephala*, and Hooded and Red-breasted Mergansers that are in genera *Lophodytes* and *Mergus* respectively. The above categories may be a loose fit. Buffleheads are classified as sea ducks; however, they dive for food and may be found in deeper freshwater ponds and lakes.

Buffleheads breed in boreal forests and open aspen parkland dominated by ponds and small lakes where they dive for insect larvae and amphipods. Buffleheads are one of our smallest ducks. As such, they nest in cavities of Northern Flickers, avoiding niche competition since the holes are too small for larger cavity-nesting ducks.

In winter, Buffleheads are primarily saltwater, coastal ducks, eating crustaceans and mollusks in sounds, inlets, and off the beach. Fortunately, they are one of the few species of ducks whose numbers have increased significantly in the past sixty years.

Hooded Mergansers breed most commonly in the Great Lakes region and throughout eastern forests and the northwest, with populations densities based on the availability of suitable nest cavities. They dive to nab small fish, aquatic insects, and crayfish and other crustaceans.

Red-breasted Mergansers breed at high latitudes, in tundra and boreal forest zones, and inhabit coastal bays, large lakes, and rivers. They are expert divers and eat mostly fish, captured with their serrated bills.

In winter, Red-breasted Mergansers are generally found in inlets and the ocean; however, many may be found in calmer waters such as the bird above which was photographed in the Southport marina basin.

My favorite local duck watching sites include Ft. Fisher, along the Cape Fear River including the Southport Riverwalk, and Sunset Beach's Twin Lakes. There is generally a raft of sea ducks off the rocks across from the Ft. Fisher museum near the gazebo. Species generally include buffleheads, Red-Breasted mergansers, scoters, and scaup; however, look for uncommon prizes such as Long-tailed Ducks, Common Goldeneyes, and Common Eiders.

In case the raft is at the coquina rock outcrop north of the Ft. Fisher rocks, drive to CAMA Beach Access 1347, park in the lot across the highway, and take the boardwalk to the beach. The end of the boardwalk provides a good vista overlooking the beach and birds.

The ultimate winter birding tour in North Carolina includes Lake Mattamuskeet, Alligator River NWR, Pea Island NWR, and the Ocracoke to Swan Quarter Ferry. Overwintering waterfowl seen from the ferry generally include dozens of Long-tailed Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers, and the possibility of seeing all three species of Scoter plus other overwintering species such as Brant and Common and Red-throated Loons. The Pamlico Sound as you approach Swan Quarter is the most reliable site for observing Long-tailed Ducks in North Carolina.

I generally spend on the first night of the tour in Manteo and the second on Ocracoke Island, taking the earliest ferry the following morning. Caution: taking the Ocracoke to Cedar Island Ferry will get you home quicker; however, the birding on that ferry is not nearly as good.

A great side trip on the way home is the Minnesott to Cherry Branch Ferry. This is a free ferry of short duration from Minnesott Beach across the Neuse River to the Havelock area. The ride is reliable for observing scoters, Canvasbacks, and scaup.

Finally, winter birding along the Grand Strand provides great ducks just waiting to be ogled. It makes a great day trip that does not require as much driving or an overnight stay as a Outer Banks trip. The principle destination is Huntington Beach State Park.

My field guides group duck genera and species into different categories within the family Anatidae and subfamily Anatidae. I chose to use the groupings in the National Geographic Field Guide (fifth edition). In researching taxonomy, Google revealed a website I know you

will enjoy: <http://duckman.pettho.com/tree/american.html>. Just kidding...it is Donald Duck's family tree.

John Ennis



**In winter, Hooded Mergansers may be found in freshwater wetlands, brackish estuaries, and tidal creeks**

