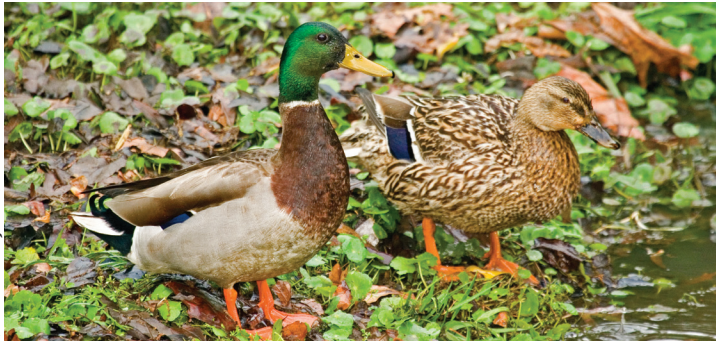


(Jarrett Wyant)



Anatidae the WHISTLING DUCKS, GEESE, SWANS, and DUCKS

Ducks, geese, and swans are collectively known as waterfowl. They are all stout-bodied swimming birds, with broad bills, webbed feet, and dense coats of feathers layered over heavy down. Since prehistoric times, waterfowl have been hunted by man for food, feathers, medicinal use, and for sport. These birds have been important to the cultures of many peoples worldwide and they remain a favorite of sportsmen and birders in our region today.

Historically, habitat for waterfowl in the Central Carolinas was limited. Stopover or wintering habitat was present only along the major river and stream corridors. Glaciers never impacted the Carolinas and there were almost no natural lakes here. However, the number of lakes and ponds dramatically increased in the Carolina Piedmont over the past 150 years. Scores of mill ponds were built in the 1800s. Rivers were dammed and large lakes were built beginning in the early 1900s, and thousands of farm ponds and other recreational lakes have been built since. This has resulted in a diversity of lake and pond habitat where none was found before. Waterfowl diversity in the region has increased over the past century because species that roost and forage on open lakes and ponds as opposed to on river or stream corridors, can now take advantage of local waters.

While waterfowl diversity has increased, waterfowl numbers have varied greatly in the region over the past 150 years. This was largely due to variations in hunting pressure, breeding success, and aquatic habitat availability. In 1903, Dr. J.B. Alexander shared his recollection of migratory ducks wintering in this area before the Civil War: “Wild ducks fifty years ago were in great flocks all along every creek and every mill-pond, to say nothing of the vast quantities that congregated on the larger streams. They would fly around in large numbers in the winter, near the water courses where they found excellent feeding grounds. In early spring they would go off to raise their young.” He noted that things changed in later years. “Nearly all the grain is now ground by steam mills, hence there are very few ponds for water fowls [*sic*] to swim or wade in.”

Intense market and pot hunting around the turn of the twentieth century seriously decimated waterfowl and other bird populations throughout North America. Bird conservation became a topic of national importance and the federal Lacey Act of 1900 and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 were enacted to help protect bird populations. William McIlwaine shared this comment about local waterfowl with listeners on an early WBT radio broadcast in 1930: “Now it must be remembered that Charlotte is in the piedmont country, where there are now very few water birds. Oh, out on the Catawba River, 10 miles away, you will find a few mallard, black duck, wood duck and pied-billed grebes, and possibly a loon or two; but that is about all.”

In 1934, the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act was passed to fund national waterfowl habitat conservation efforts. By purchasing a Duck Stamp, waterfowl hunters and others became active in protecting waterfowl habitat. Many hunters became leaders in this conservation effort and actively contributed additional time and money toward achieving stable or increasing waterfowl populations. The national Pittman-Robertson Act, passed in 1937, provided funding for state wildlife agencies to help protect wildlife at the state level. With this help, waterfowl populations began a long slow process towards recovery.

In the summer of 1937, J. Lockhart Gaddy built a fishing pond for his mother-in-law on his farm off of U.S. 52, in Ansonville. He named it Honker’s Pond, but it later became nationally famous as Gaddy’s Wild Goose Refuge. Gaddy added a few domesticated Canada Geese as decoys which attracted wild geese to the lake. He began feeding the wild geese each winter, and within a few short years, thousands of wild geese and ducks were wintering there. The pond became a national tourist attraction and was featured in the magazines: *Life*, *Nature*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Outdoor Life*, and more. The Massachusetts Audubon Society dubbed Gaddy’s Pond “the most outstanding wild goose sanctuary in North America.” This small pond in Anson County provided the best close-up viewing of waterfowl in the Central Carolinas for almost 40 years.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, B. Kermit Caldwell, a prominent Charlotte attorney and avid duck hunter, helped lead a regional effort to promote duck conservation in the Central Carolinas. In 1960, he described the decline in the duck population in the region:

Years ago in the marshes of the Catawba River it wasn't uncommon to walk up to 150 to 200 mallards in a single marshy cove. This year a flight of 10 or 15 in the same area could be found on only rare occasions. The Pee Dee and Yadkin River valleys, which formerly provided excellent hunting, have now been reduced to scattered flights of migrating ducks. A drift trip which covered 25 miles of the Yadkin River this year produced a lone wood duck. No mallards were seen. ...These areas are now almost barren of waterfowl of any kind. ...There have been concentrations of ducks in some areas of the Atlantic flyway this year where food and protection are available, however the local number has suffered a drastic decrease which has now approached the critical stage. This has been due to increased hunting pressure, appropriation of winter feeding areas, and loss of breeding grounds. An example of the loss of feeding areas is the area where Lake Norman is now being located. This was one of the few remaining semi-wilderness areas in the Piedmont section which was used by ducks in considerable numbers.

Caldwell, Rufus G. Hoover, Lester C. Todd, and others established Catawba Waterfowl, Inc., in 1958. The organization's stated goal was twofold. First, they wanted to "winter from twenty to forty thousand ducks under controlled shooting, which will allow normal harvest, and yet retain sufficient breeding stock for the northern migration." Second, they wanted to "provide hunting for thousands of sportsmen who can't go to the coast and remote areas." They worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission to successfully establish Cowan's Ford Waterfowl Refuge in 1961 and later to hire Ken Wilson, a retired NC State waterfowl biologist, to oversee management activities there. In 1961, Catawba Waterfowl received the Governor's State Award from the North Carolina Wildlife Federation in recognition of their outstanding contribution to waterfowl conservation efforts. The award was personally presented by Governor Terry Sanford.

Around 1962, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed the establishment of the Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in Anson and Richmond counties to expand waterfowl protection efforts near the site of Gaddy's Goose Pond. The Catawba Waterfowl Association began to publicly advocate for additional managed duck lands in the Yadkin-Pee Dee Valley as well as for the establishment of the Pee Dee refuge. President Rufus Hoover sent the following in a telegram to US Congressman Charles Raper Jonas from North Carolina on February 15, 1963: "Our membership of 482, most of whom are in your district, have met and expressed their desire in favor of the Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge. We hope that when the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission meets Tuesday that you will cast your vote in favor of this worthwhile project for the benefit of all mankind in future years."

Hoover later noted: "With some devoted effort we shall reproduce and surpass what Mrs. Gaddy has on her small farm pond."

These conservation efforts were ultimately successful. Today, almost 9,000 acres of land are protected and managed for waterfowl at the Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge, and over 10,000 ducks and geese are protected there each winter. This site has become the most important area for waterfowl conservation in the Central Carolinas.

Today, hundreds of ducks still use both the Cowan's Ford Waterfowl Refuge and Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge which have been protected along the Catawba River, below the Cowan's Ford Dam. In 1997, staff with the MCPRD used waterfowl census data, collected around Cowan's Ford, in the application to nominate Mountain Island Lake as an Important Bird Area. In a ceremony at Cowan's Ford held on October 27, 1999, it became the first site to receive official designation as an Important Bird Area in the state of North Carolina.

Twenty-eight species of waterfowl are regularly found in the Central Carolinas. They are described below. Five additional species of waterfowl are described in the Supplementary Bird List. Most historical references presented in the waterfowl species accounts reference hunting. This should be no surprise as waterfowl and hunters have been inextricably linked for generations.

Only four species of ducks and geese have been documented nesting in this region. The remaining 24 species of waterfowl are found here during migration and the winter. Each spring, these birds leave the Carolina Piedmont and fly to their nesting grounds far to the north. In general, waterfowl arrive here in late October and leave by early April. Waterfowl numbers often peak in the region around mid-January.

Note: Recent census data and population estimates presented in the waterfowl species accounts are derived from the following sources:

- Waterfowl Population Status, 2016: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, August 10, 2016
- Trends in Duck Breeding Populations 1955–2012: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, June 29, 2012
- 2015 Mid-winter Waterfowl Survey: conducted each January by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.
- Includes Yadkin–Pee Dee survey data collected in Anson, Stanly, and Rowan counties.
- South Carolina Wildlife Management Area: Harvest Reports winter 2004–2005 through winter 2015–2016. Summary of 12 years of data from the Broad River region.
- Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge Waterfowl Survey annual count data sheets
- Greater Mecklenburg Winter Waterfowl Survey: a decade of monthly winter waterfowl counts conducted by staff with the MCPRD on lakes in Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, Union, Gaston, and Rowan counties.

It is important to recognize that national, regional, and local waterfowl census data can vary greatly from year to year due to a variety of factors. Therefore, data indicating changes and trends over long periods (change from long-term average) is more important than annual census information. For example, in 1990, North American duck populations were estimated at an all-time low of about 25.1 million ducks. By 2012, the population had increased to an all-time high of almost double that: 48.6 million. However, the trend of the long-term population average since 1955 is just slightly increasing.