

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*

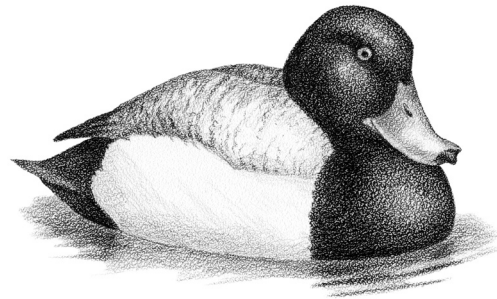


Folk Name: Big Blackhead, Big Bluebill

Status: Migrant, Winter Visitor

Abundance: Rare

Habitat: Lakes, ponds



Our two “Bluebills,” the Greater and Lesser Scaup, look a bit like a Ring-necked Duck, but both lack the white band that the Ring-necked has near the tip of the bill. The Greater Scaup averages about an inch bigger than the Ring-necked Duck, and the Lesser Scaup averages about a half-inch smaller. Scaup prefer coastal regions in both states, but over the past 30 years, they have been found almost annually in the Central Carolinas. Most Scaup are reported from Lake Norman, Lake Hickory, or other large lakes, but they have been sighted on smaller lakes and impoundments.

Differentiating between Greater and Lesser Scaup is one of the more difficult challenges a birder must face each winter in the Carolinas. Even with an excellent spotting scope and great viewing conditions, the call can be a hard one to make. Photographs of a lone scaup posted to the carolinabirds listserv for identification in 2013 elicited the following results: 25% of respondents were sure it was Greater, 25% were certain it was a Lesser, and 50% were uncertain—but 25% of those leaned one way and 25% leaned the other.

Birding expert David Sibley recommends using the shape of the head in “relaxed” birds as one key characteristic to consider. In general, Lesser Scaup appear to have a more “peaked” head than the Greater, whose head appears more rounded. The male’s head can appear green-tinted, while the head of the male Lesser Scaup may often appear purplish in good light. Zoologist Harry LeGrand notes that the Greater Scaup’s bill is somewhat thicker and broader, its forehead slopes gradually down to the bill, and the black nail at the tip of the bill is more easily observed. The forehead of the Lesser Scaup meets the bill at a right angle, and the nail is much harder to see. The females are brown, but both have a white patch behind the base of the bill. Determining the overall status of the Greater Scaup in our region is difficult because of this field identification challenge.

Greater Scaup are a rare find inland and they are usually seen in relatively small numbers, while the Lesser Scaup

is much more common. Even on the coast counts of more than 100 Greater Scaup are rare. In 1982, two Greater Scaup were confirmed in the region in Mecklenburg County after being shot at the McAlpine Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) near the Town of Pineville. David Wright examined the specimens and confirmed the identification; unfortunately, the specimens were not able to be preserved. In 1983, a pair was counted on the Chester Christmas Bird Count. A year later, David Wright found a flock of 14 on Lake Norman on the early date of October 25, 1984, and Heathy Walker reported a group of six on Lake Norman on December 10, 1984. One was found on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count in 1986, and three were recorded on the count in 1989.

Greater Scaup have been reported annually in the region since 1995 (with the possible exception of 2006). Some highlights include: “An excellent total of 94” by Dwayne Martin on Lake Hickory on February 28, 1999. A group of three unexpectedly showed up on the small observation ponds at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge in January 2004. A total of 80 were counted on Lake Hickory along the border of Alexander and Catawba counties on February 4, 2014. Two days later, Kevin Metcalf photographed a flock of Greater Scaup on Mountain Island Lake totaling 103 birds, the largest flock ever recorded in this region. Metcalf later wrote: “A few Lesser Scaup were mixed in with this flock. This has been an unusual winter for Greater Scaup, in that they are now out-numbering Lesser Scaup locally.”

Unfortunately, the North American population of the Greater Scaup is in steep decline. This duck is considered to be both a “game bird below desired condition” and a species of “greatest conservation need.”