

General Field Notes

General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in The Chat.

A Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*) in Forsyth County: First Record for North Carolina

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The Archie Elledge Wastewater Treatment Plant is one of Winston-Salem's best birdwatching sites. In spring and fall, two settling ponds at the plant have historically provided excellent habitat for migrating shorebirds. Recent changes in wastewater processing have produced cleaner and deeper water in the ponds, resulting in their greater utilization by waterfowl. Cold weather in the Northeast during January 2009 brought a greater number and variety of waterfowl than usual for the site.

On 30 January 2009, the presence of a White-winged Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*), Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*), Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*), and Lesser Scaup (*A. affinis*) enticed Hopkins to scrutinize all of the waterfowl. He noted a male diving duck with white flanks and a black back surfacing near three female scaup. When compared to nearby Ring-necked Ducks (*A. collaris*), its head was a different shape and a small tuft of feathers protruded from the back of the head. The bird fit the description and illustration of a Tufted Duck (*A. fuligula*) in the Sibley guide (2000).

Because Tufted Duck is not an expected bird for Forsyth County, Hopkins contacted David and Susan Disher, asking them to bring a camera with telephoto lens and additional bird reference books. John Haire happened to come by to examine the duck flock, and he agreed that the bird could be a Tufted Duck. Haire and Hopkins took digiscope photographs while David Disher took photographs with his telephoto setup. After examining photographs, comparing them with Tufted Duck photographs on European websites, and studying the literature, all agreed that the bird was a Tufted Duck.

Haire posted a note on the Carolinabirds listserve that evening so that other North Carolina birders could look for the bird the next day. The duck stayed at the same location for two weeks and was last seen on 14 February 2009. Security personnel at the treatment plant documented the visits of over 700 birders who came to see the duck.

Observations

The Tufted Duck at Archie Elledge Wastewater Plant had a black head and a solid black back without vermiculations. The flanks were solid white without gray. The head shape was generally round with a steep forehead, but without a posterior peak like that of nearby Ring-necked Ducks. There was a small tuft of feathers on the back of the head (Fig. 1), and the head occasionally reflected a greenish or purplish iridescent sheen. The eyes were bright yellow. The bill was bluish-gray with a prominent black tip and a pale area of white adjacent to the black tip. The bill had no white at the base or along the edge. The wings had dark coverts and an extensive white stripe across the secondaries and primaries (Fig. 2). The legs, visible when the bird preened, were dark in color, and no metal bands were seen on the legs. The bird did not show aberrant feather wear that would indicate the duck was a captive bird. Compared to nearby waterfowl, the Tufted Duck was slightly smaller than the Ring-necked Ducks and about the same size as the female Lesser Scaup.



Figure 1. Tufted Duck found at Archie Elledge Wastewater Treatment Plant, Winston-Salem on January 30, 2009. Note the white flank, solid black back, and small tuft on the head. Photo by Marbry Hopkins.

This bird behaved in the same manner as the other waterfowl in the pond, feeding regularly with several female scaup and the Ring-necked Ducks. Most of the birds would feed on the far side of the pond from the common

viewing area, but if approached from the far side, the mixed flock would drift to the center of the water. Close approach was not possible despite multiple attempts over the two weeks.



Figure 2. Tufted Duck stretching its wings showing white secondaries and primaries. Photo by David Disher.

The authors considered the possibility of Tufted Duck hybrids, which are well described in Mullarney et al. (2000). We ruled out hybrids with Greater and Lesser Scaup because of the lack of vermiculations on the back. We also ruled out hybrids with Ring-necked Duck because they maintain gray flanks and a peaked head, which we did not see on this bird. Tufted Duck and Common Pochard (*A. ferina*) hybrids are seen in Europe, but those birds have a dark eye and darker flanks than the Winston-Salem duck.



Figure 3. Tufted Duck before departure, with tuft more prominent. Photo by John Haire.

The weather during the first several days of viewing was sunny but cold, with bright light making observation ideal. Many observers took good quality photographs (Fig. 3) documenting the key field marks and posted them online for others to review.

Provenance

Provenance of waterfowl is always in question because of numerous waterfowl collections in the eastern states. Hopkins contacted a local aviculturist who wished to remain anonymous. His private collection of waterfowl is located on the western edge of Forsyth County about seven miles from the wastewater plant. He raised Tufted Ducks approximately 10 years ago but has not kept that species since then. He did not know of others in the area who raise Tufted Ducks.

Christian Newton of the Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park in Scotland Neck, NC, indicated (e-mail to Carolinabirds listserve) that Tufted Ducks were kept at the facility but that none were missing. He also stated (e-mail to John Haire) that the facility had not sold Tufted Ducks to collectors on the East Coast in the previous year.

Tufted Ducks are native to Eurasia, breeding from Iceland to the Kamchatka Peninsula. Tufted Ducks from central and northwest Europe are mostly sedentary, but the northern Eurasian population winters in the Mediterranean Basin, sub-Saharan and North Africa, the Middle East, Central India, and Southeast Asia (del Hoyo et al. 1992).

Tufted Duck is a Code-3 species of the American Birding Association, indicating that individuals occur in very low numbers but annually in the ABA Checklist Area (ABA 2008). Tufted Ducks are most commonly reported in winter in Alaska and the West Coast of North America (del Hoyo et al. 1992). All northeast and mid-Atlantic states north of North Carolina have accepted records of Tufted Duck. Virginia, the southernmost state on the Atlantic coast with a record of Tufted Duck, has three accepted records: two from the piedmont and one from the coast (Rottenborn and Brinkley 2007).

Other reports of Tufted Duck along the Atlantic coast were documented during the winter of 2008–2009. Over the 13–15 February 2009 weekend, the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) sponsored by the National Audubon Society and Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology reported five Tufted Ducks at St. John's, Newfoundland; two at Saint John, New Brunswick; and one at Cambridge, MD, that was present for many weeks. The Rare Bird Alerts of Westport, ME, and Providence, RI, also each reported a single bird in early 2009.

Lee (2000) commented on extralimital waterfowl and the problem of provenance. He recommended a conservative approach to the acceptance of new records but favored an open mind in decisions. He did not specifically discuss Tufted Duck, but the presence of the Winston-Salem bird in the winter season, its behavior when approached, the lack of cage wear on

feathers, and the occurrence of many other records of the species in early 2009 are consistent with a wild origin.

The Avendex database (Redshank Software 2008) lists no records of Tufted Duck in North Carolina. If accepted by the NC Bird Records Committee, both in terms of identification and provenance, this sighting will be the first for the state, and acceptance of photos will place the species directly onto the Official List.

Acknowledgments

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