

Alaska's Wild Wonders: Waterfowl

Duck, duck, goose and swan!

List of Terms

adaptations – specific body parts and behaviors that help animals survive in the environments they live in or migrate through.

artery – blood vessel carrying blood away from the heart to the rest of the body.

band – small metal or plastic rings with numbers that biologists place on bird legs to identify individual birds.

bill – the outer mouth structure of a bird with the upper and lower parts, also called jaws, covered in a tough layer of keratin.

binoculars – a pair of tubes with glass lenses at either end that you look through to see things far away more clearly, usually handheld.

body temperature – the measure of the ability of an animal body to generate, keep, and get rid of heat. Different animals can have different average body temperatures. Example: the average human body temperature is 97°F to 99°F, while the average body temperature of waterfowl is 103°F-109°F.

breeding season – the time in every year when birds pair up, mate, build nests, lay eggs, and raise young; timing varies by species and location.

cavity – hollow spaces or holes that form inside the trunk or large branches of a tree that is either living or dead. Cavity-nesting duck species nest in these holes/hollow spaces.

contour feathers – the outer and visible feathers covering a bird body that create a smooth shape, help it fly, and keep it dry.

covert feathers – small contour feathers specifically located on a bird wing and tail that overlap and cover the shafts of the flight feathers.

dabbling duck – also called a puddle duck. Dabbling ducks are a group of ducks that find food in shallow or surface waters. Their legs are positioned farther forward on their body than diving ducks, allowing them to walk more easily.

dimorphism – when two distinct forms exist of the same species that clearly differ from one another, most often male and female.

dive reflex – a set of natural responses many animals do instinctively when diving under the surface of water.

diving ducks – a group of duck species that find food in deeper water. Their legs are positioned farther back on their body to better use their feet to push them downward in the water, which also makes walking more challenging or impossible for some species.

down feathers – soft, fluffy feathers found beneath the outer feathers of waterfowl and most bird species, concentrated in the chest and belly region for warmth. Waterfowl also pluck their own down feathers to line nests.

drake – a male duck (a male goose is a gander; a male swan is a cob).

duck – the group of the smallest species of waterfowl that are sexually dimorphic, and the waterfowl group with the greatest number of species. Ducks have webbed feet, but shorter necks and smaller bodies than geese and swans.

ecosystem – a community of living things and the non-living thing surrounding them linked together by the flow of energy and by nutrient exchange.

geese – a group of waterfowl with long necks and webbed feet. Geese are generally larger than ducks and smaller than swans.

graze – a feeding method where an animal eats low-to-the-ground plant growth like grasses, shoots, or algae.

harvest – the non-commercial, customary, and traditional use of wild, renewable plant and animal resources for direct personal, family, or community needs.

hen – a female goose or duck (a female swan is a pen).

lamellae – tiny ridges of keratin along the inside of waterfowl bills that help filter water and silt out while keeping in the seeds, invertebrates, and other foods they eat.

migrate/migration/migratory – the regular seasonal movement of animals, and in our case birds, to find the food and conditions they need to survive.

molt – the natural process where birds shed old, worn-out feathers and regrow new ones.

nail – a small bump or plate of thick, tough keratin on the end of waterfowl bills that help birds hook, dig, or tear foods.

nature journal – a book, set of pages, or single entry you make about places you visit and what you notice about your surroundings while outdoors.

observation – an act or instance of noticing, perceiving, regarding attentively, or watching.

perching ducks – a group of duck species that have more prominent claws on their toes for perching on logs and branches, and nest in tree cavities/holes.

plumage – the full set of feathers for any bird. This includes the layering, pattern, color, and arrangement of the feathers on the body.

population – the number of people, animals, or plants of a certain species or kind living in a defined area at a specific time.

preening – a natural behavior where birds use their bill and/or oil from their preening gland (also called the uropygial gland) to clean, arrange, and care for their feathers.

primaries – the long, stiff flight feathers attached to the outermost part of the wing, which is the "hand" in terms of the bones they are attached to.

resight – to see and/or record a previously banded or tagged animal in the wild without recapturing it.

secondaries – stiff flight feathers attached to the ulna (bone) that run from the wrist to the elbow on the bird wing and generate lift. For ducks, the speculum, or distinctive brightly colored wing patch, consists of secondary feathers.

spotting scope – a small telescope (single tube with glass at both ends) used for seeing things clearly from a distance. Spotting scopes usually have higher magnification than binoculars and often require a tripod or mount for stability.

swans – the group of the largest and heaviest species of waterfowl. Swans are long-necked and mostly white waterbirds with webbed feet.

tail feathers – large, strong feathers that grow in the tail region of a bird; used for steering, slowing down, and balancing during flight and landings.

tertials – stiff flight feathers, and technically a specialized set of secondary feathers, that run from the elbow to the armpit of the wing and help smooth and protect the other flight feathers when the wing is folded.

tracking device – a lightweight electronic device attached to a bird to monitor its movement, location, or behavior.

vein – blood vessel carrying blood back toward the heart from the rest of the body.

waterfowl – birds that spend their lives in or near water in the family Anatidae, which is made up of ducks, geese, and swans.

webbed feet – bird feet with the toes joined together by flexible folds of skin. Webbing makes a surface that can push against the water, which helps waterfowl swim and dive.