



Wet, Wild, and Wonderful



Alabama's Winter Waterfowl

The Tennessee River Valley is the winter home for thousands of waterfowl. These birds migrate from across the northern US and Canada down through the center of the continent to the Tennessee River.

Careful management practices have created more wetland areas. Regular planting of food crops such as millets, oats, and wheat has increased food sources for these winter visitors—helping to bring their numbers to record highs. Though everyone enjoys the benefit of more waterfowl, much of the work has been done through the support of waterfowl hunters paying license fees, stamps, and excise taxes on hunting arms and ammunition.

Ducks and geese are a very diverse group of birds. Over thirty species are found in Alabama and the Tennessee River Valley. Look for differences in their plumage and bill shape to see how many species you can find and identify. Though often seen rafting with other ducks, the dark gray American Coot is not a duck at all, but is a member of the Rail family.



Canada Geese/USFWS

Geese

Geese tend to stand out from the pack because of their large size and long neck. The most familiar goose in the Tennessee Valley is the Canada Goose with its dark head and white cheek. Many Canada Geese released as juveniles in the state, now live year-round in the area. Winter geese include the white and blue forms of Snow Geese and its smaller cousin the Ross' Goose.



Male Hooded Merganser, foreground/Quincey Banks

Mergansers

Mergansers are also known as 'Sawbills' because the bill has serrations giving it a toothed appearance. These birds are especially made to chase and catch fish underwater. Hooded Mergansers and Red-breasted Mergansers are often seen in large groups and can be joined by small numbers of the Common Merganser.



Northern Shoveler/Bob Sargent

Dabbling Ducks

Dabbling ducks are our best-known ducks. These species have rounded, often flat bills used for filtering seeds, aquatic plants, and other organic material from fine mud just below the water's surface. Dabbling Ducks to look for include Northern Shovelers, which have a pronounced "shovel-shaped" bill and can be seen actively filtering water through their bills as they swim.



Ring-necked Duck/John Findlay, III

Diving Ducks

Diving ducks prefer to stay in deeper water where they dive for food. Although they use a different feeding technique, diving ducks also hunt for seeds, aquatic plants, and some aquatic insects. Diving ducks can usually be seen in mixed species flocks including Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Canvasback, and Redhead.

Other Similar Species

Open waters in the Tennessee River Valley attract other species that are not closely related to ducks and geese, but have very similar habits.

- Three species of loon regularly winter in northern Alabama. Common Loon is the most numerous and is joined by a smaller number of Red-throated and Pacific Loons.
- Horned Grebes and the uncommon Eared Grebe join resident Pied-billed Grebes each winter.
- During very cold winters further north, Red-necked Grebes are also pushed south to the Tennessee River Valley.
- Double-crested Cormorants are the most common duck look-alikes but are quickly told apart by their long necks and thin bills. These birds nest on some of the islands along the river and can be seen diving for fish almost anywhere.