

Soft Parts: Female Dabbling Ducks, the Answers

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In the previous issue, *Colorado Birds* winter 2015, *In The Scope* dealt with the topic of “soft parts” and included a quiz testing readers’ abilities to identify some female dabbling ducks solely by the color of their beaks and legs. Following are the answers to that quiz along with brief explanations, and if you are curious, have a look at the back cover to see images of the entire ducks whose parts were presented as the homework assignment (Fig. 1). All of the species presented occur regularly in Colorado.

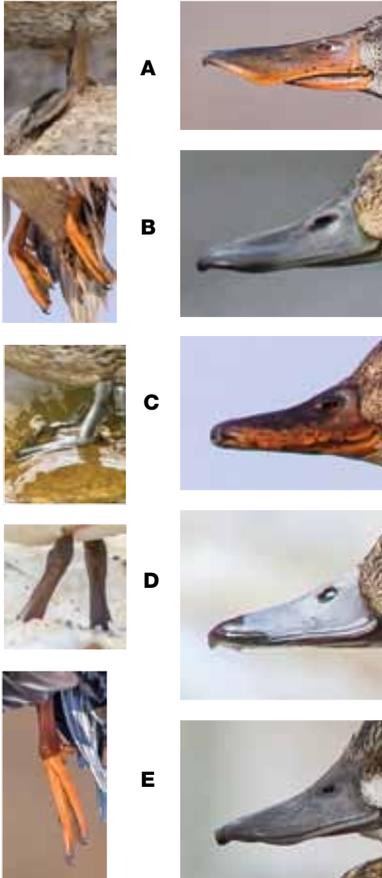


Fig. 1. Legs in the left column and beaks in the right column of females of five species of dabbling ducks that occur regularly in Colorado.

Before getting to the answers, I wanted to point out that the plumages of female dabbling ducks differ dramatically from those of Colorado-occurring female diving ducks, which can be helpful in field identification. Except for the four eider species and Masked Duck, none of which have been found in Colorado, females of the diving ducks species that occur regularly in the ABA area have solid-colored body feathering, while such female dabbling ducks have body feathers that are either dark with pale markings or pale with dark markings. Although the subject of that article was soft-parts coloration, pay attention to the differences in length and thickness of the legs as well as the length and shape of the bill in these species. And in particular, note that no two species of regularly occurring Colorado dabbling ducks share the same bill shape. Finally, unless otherwise noted, all comparisons are to females of regularly occurring Colorado dabbling-duck species.

Gadwall: item **B** from legs column, item **C** from beak column (Fig. 1; top-left figure on back cover). While Gadwall, Mallard and Northern Shoveler females share the orange-and-black color scheme for their beaks, the patterns are quite different. In female Mallards, the dark area is part of a blotch crossing the beak about midway between base and tip (a “saddle”). In female Gadwall and Northern Shovelers, the orange runs down both sides of the otherwise black maxilla (“upper mandible”). Gadwall is one of the three species with bright orange legs. If you confused the **B** legs with the **E** legs, you are probably not alone. However, other clues in the legs pictures provide the important differentiating factor: Gadwall has extensively pale underparts.



American Wigeon: item **D** from legs column, item **D** from beak column (Fig. 2; top-right figure on back cover). While one might think of the leg color of female American Wigeon as blah and uninformative, the color is actually fairly distinctive. The blue bill, with a wide black tip that invites comparison with scaup bills, is similar to the bill of just one other North American dabbling duck species: Eurasian Wigeon.



Blue-winged Teal: item **A** from legs column, item **E** from beak column (Fig. 3; middle-left figure on back cover). The leg color of female Blue-winged Teal is somewhat variable, but always includes an aspect of yellow—from the dull yellow-gray legs of the bird pictured here, to a fairly bright yellow with an orange cast. The range of leg color is similar to that of Cinnamon Teal, but different from all others. The black bill color is also fairly similar to that of Cinnamon Teal, but the latter species tends to have vague orange edges to the bill, similar to that of Northern Shoveler, but not nearly as distinct. Many birders find differentiating female



Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal very difficult. However, close examination reveals that bill shape, particularly bill length, typically is different, though there is some overlap. The obvious and large white subloral area, a feature that Cinnamon Teal lack, confirm our bird's identification as a Blue-winged Teal. Northern Pintail and Green-winged Teal also have dark bills, but these species both sport dark legs.



Northern Shoveler: item **E** from legs column, item **A** from beak column (Fig. 4; middle-right figure on back cover). The bill selection was fairly obvious for this species, with its very long and spatulate shape. Selecting the correct legs may have been a bit more problematic given that two other species also have orange legs.



Northern Pintail: item **C** from legs column, item **B** from beak column (Fig. 5; bottom figure on back cover). The combination of dark legs and dark bill is matched only by Green-winged Teal. The key here is to note that a Northern

Pintail's legs have a strong blue aspect, and the bill has a vague, gray basal area.

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