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Ducks of Arlington Reservoir

By John Andrews

On a crisp November day the Arlington Res pulses with life. Mallards and Green-winged Teal rest on the shoreline as graceful Mute Swans glide by. The honks of an incoming flock of Canada Geese resonates across the water as they glide in and splash down. Further out, an elegantly-plumaged Hooded Merganser disappears under the choppy waves, only to emerge a minute later with a tiny silvery fish in its beak. These scenes are played out in a body of water that brings a spirit of wilderness into a tamed suburban environment.

The Arlington Reservoir is a natural treasure that spans the Arlington/Lexington border. In conjunction with the Lexington Community Farm that abuts it, it harbors the richest diversity of birdlife in the area.

Arlington manages the 65 acre central pond for swimming, fishing, and passive recreation. The mile-long walking trail that runs around the pond is heavily used by walkers, joggers, dog-walkers, and nature photographers. Despite the heavy human use, the reservoir attracts migrants in good numbers. Visiting early in the morning before human traffic becomes too intense offers the most surprises and can result in spotting such unusual visitors as Bald Eagle and Osprey.

For the moment, let's concentrate on the waterfowl. You can find ducks and geese at the Arlington Res at almost any time of year. But it is during the fall migration, October-December, that the waterfowl diversity peaks. According to eBird, the birding database of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology [1], some 31 species of waterfowl have been sighted at the Arlington Res over the past three decades. On any given day, a careful check of the shores and waves can easily record over 10 different species of ducks and geese.

It's helpful to divide the waterfowl into three general groups: dabblers, divers, and Geese/Swans.

The **dabblers** are predominantly vegetarian feeders who spend their time in shallow water, sometimes eating floating weeds, sometimes pulling weeds from the bottom and grabbing an occasional insect or crustacean. They almost never go completely underwater, but tip up with their tails in the air. The males are often quite colorful while the females tend toward mottled brownish camouflage. Most dabblers are found in the muddy, shallow northern part of the Res or on the sandbars in the southwest area.

The **divers** are ducks that spend time in deeper water and dive down to the bottom searching for food. The mergansers are fish-eaters but other divers are looking for weeds growing in the deeper reaches. Divers prefer the deeper waters in the southern half of the Res and almost never come ashore.

Geese and swans are larger birds who pair for life. They feed on emerging vegetation in grassy areas and in shallow water. Sexes are similar. They can be found on sand spits or resting in deeper water. Often they come to the Res during the day just to pass the time before flying away to other feeding areas. It's not uncommon to find a flock of over 200 Canada Geese at the Res.

Table 1 lists the Reservoir waterfowl species in decreasing probability of appearance. If you make regular visits to the Res, you should be able to see the species above the dashed line every year. In any given year it takes some good luck to log the species below the dashed line.

Table 1 Waterfowl Species at the Arlington Res

Dabblers	Divers	Geese and Swans
Mallard	Hooded Merganser	Canada Goose
Wood Duck	Bufflehead	Mute Swan
Green-winged Teal	Ring-necked Duck	-----
Black Duck	Ruddy Duck	Snow Goose
Blue-winged Teal	Common Goldeneye	Greater White-
Northern Shoveler	Common Merganser	fronted Goose
American Wigeon	-----	Cackling Goose
Gadwall	Lesser Scaup	Ross's Goose
-----	Redhead	Brant
Canvasback	Greater Scaup	
Northern Pintail	White-winged Scoter	
Eurasian Wigeon	Black Scoter	

Conservation Issues

Because the Arlington Reservoir is heavily used, wildlife and people sometimes clash . Off-leash dogs can be a problem for waterfowl trying to use the shores and sand spits as resting places. The water management policies adopted by the Town of Arlington impacts the availability of the mud flats favored by ducks and shorebirds. Hopefully a balance can be maintained that allows people to enjoy the Res while maintaining its extraordinary value for wildlife.

John Andrews is a Lexington resident who has been birding at the Arlington Reservoir for over 40 years.

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