

# TASL News October 1993



Take a Second Look  
42 Baker Avenue  
Lexington, MA 02173

**TASL Harbor Census coming up: November 14  
For 1994: January 9 • February 13 • March 13**

## Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*)

They are here again, now that it is winter. From the far north, from as far west as western Alaska, even Siberia, they pour across the continent into our bays and coves and harbors. They come so far; perhaps that is why scaup always seem to rest when we watch them.

A medium-sized, compact, broad-bodied diving duck with a large wide bill and large round head, Greater Scaup is known simply as Scaup in the Old World. The New World boasts Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*), a bird slightly smaller and not so northerly in its year-round distribution. Hunters call both species "Bluebill" and let it go at that. Birders, though, try to distinguish the Lesser from the Greater by the gloss on the head (purple in the Lesser, green in the Greater); by the greyness of the sides (Lesser is greyer); by the length of the white wing-stripe in flight (longer in Greater); and--a risky proposition--by habitat preference (Lesser in fresh water, Greater in salt). ~~Adult males of both species have black heads and necks~~ (with appropriate gloss), bright blue-grey bills, and golden-yellow eyes. The mantle, back and scapulars are vermiculated white, giving a pale grey effect. Females are mainly brownish-black with a broad band of white around the base of the bill. Juveniles closely resemble females, but the white band around the base of the bill is narrower, and often absent on the forehead. Perhaps the cleverest field mark for distinguishing the two species in any plumage is that, in profile, the head of Greater Scaup appears rounded and bulbous, whereas Lesser has a sharp little peak at back of the head, giving it the angular look of a Ring-necked Duck.

Both species nest in northern prairie and tundra habitats near fresh-water lakes; in migration and winter both can be found on fresh water as well as the ocean. Fresh Pond in Cambridge sports both in the fall, where they can be studied at close range. And in winter flocks of several hundred Lesser Scaup have been found in Nantucket Harbor. Yet it is safe to assume that the large flocks of scaup seen in Boston Harbor are mostly Greaters.

Over 6000 Greater Scaup were counted on the February 1981 TASL count--certainly an all time high for these censuses. Through the early Eighties, a typical winter census of the Harbor would produce concentrations of one to five hundred scattered in Lynn Harbor, off Winthrop, around Snake Island (Winthrop), in Dorchester Bay off the L Street Beach, in Squantum Cove, along Wollaston Beach, and off World's End (Hingham). In recent years the numbers have dropped significantly. (See "Compiler's Note" on this page.)

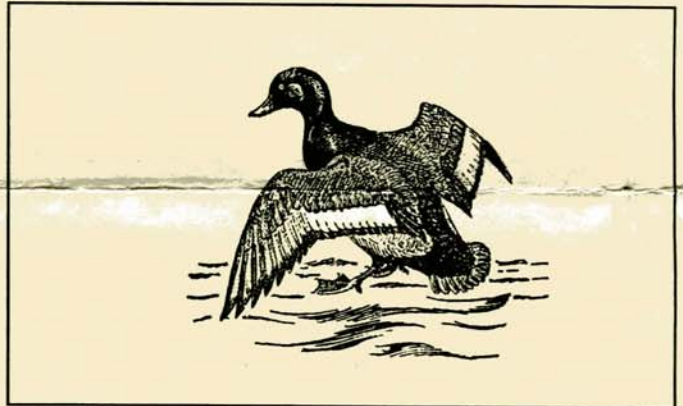
Greater Scaup are said to be nocturnal in their feeding preference, flying in tight flocks from their day roosts to favorite feeding areas. Their food while here seems to be mostly bivalve mollusks, especially the blue mussel (*Mytilus edulis*).

Although I complain about their relative inertness most of the time, there have been times when I've watched their incessant dives after food for hours, enjoying their

rapid, powerful swoop forward and down, followed half a minute later by their bobbing reappearance. One such time I watched a most amusing performance, as a submerged male repeatedly came up directly underneath another male, who would literally run out of the way. I assume this to have been a display of male sexual rivalry, as the season was late March.

*Sobeil Zende*

[This article originally appeared in the January 1981 TASL News. The author wishes to thank Mr. Robert Stymeist for providing background material.]



## Compiler's Note

Here is some annotation for the 1992-93 census results. What I've done is to compare the results of last seasons' counts against the long-term averages. The comparison is for the more common species and is stated as percent change.

In the case of the loons and grebes, the actual numbers seen in the Harbor are relatively low; a 400% increase, for example, may indicate only a few additional birds.

*Maury Hall*

SPECIES	November 1992	January 1993
	vs early winter average	vs mid-winter average
R-throated Loon	-39	+400
Common Loon	-25%	+450%
Horned Grebe	+59	+268
R-necked Grebe	+830	100
Great Cormorant	-86	-95
D-crested Cormorant	-31	-91
Brant	+15	-37
Canada Goose	+171	+75
A Black Duck	-15	-27
Greater Scaup	-45	-74
Common Eider	+13	+136
Scoter (sp)	+211	+139
Common Goldeneye	+121	-25
Bufflehead	+62	+9
R-breasted Merganser	+76	+7
Purple Sandpiper	-86	+155
Bonaparte's Gull	+39	+137

# Early Winter TASL Totals 1988-92

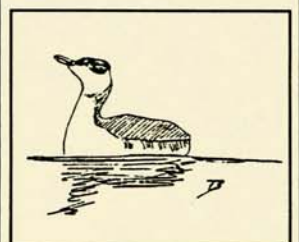
SPECIES	11/13/88	12/10/89	11/18/90	11/24/91	11/22/92
RED-THROATED LOON	2		1	23	11
COMMON LOON	1	4	10	5	6
HORNED GREBE	68	58	64	164	243
RED-NECKED GREBE		6	1	5	28
NORTHERN GANNET			6	1	
GREAT CORMORANT		39	37	71	36
D-CRESTED CORMORANT	170	31	120	90	57
CORMORANT (SP.)	5	1	49	22	9
GREAT BLUE HERON	28	4	20	31	28
B-C NIGHT-HERON				1	
MUTE SWAN		6		12	9
SNOW GOOSE				1	
BRANT	1182	1090	1387	1959	1516
CANADA GOOSE	7	205	1	67	141
GREEN-WINGED TEAL			3		
AMERICAN BLACK DUCK	1194	2874	1502	1282	1376
MALLARD	119	406	103	117	155
NORTHERN PINTAIL				1	
AMERICAN WIGEON	40				2
CANVASBACK		2			
GREATER SCAUP	326	796	176	1059	448
COMMON EIDER	294	3658	2419	9497	5438
OLDSQUAW		18	35	23	36
BLACK SCOTER	1		6	14	3
SURF SCOTER		11	2	8	159
WHITE-WINGED SCOTER	312	456	389	421	440
SCOTER (SP.)		1			1250
COMMON GOLDENEYE	391	1316	317	618	998
BARROW'S GOLDENEYE		2			
BUFFLEHEAD	2141	2552	2924	1916	3164
HOODED MERGANSER	23	7	16	15	
COMMON MERGANSER				5	
R-BREASTED MERGANSER	764	1235	2634	2378	2981
DUCK (SP)	350				
NORTHERN HARRIER	1	2			
COOPER'S HAWK	1	1			2
RED-TAILED HAWK	4	3		3	1
ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK			1		
AMERICAN KESTREL	0		2	2	
MERLIN	1				
BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER	11	2	47	27	13
KILLDEER					1
RUDDY TURNSTONE	12		4	13	
RED KNOT	1				
SANDERLING	10		206	100	324
WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER				1	
PURPLE SANDPIPER	8	68	1	25	13
DUNLIN	87	45	95	313	272
DOWITCHER (SP)	1	153			
LAUGHING GULL	93		30		
LITTLE GULL				1	
C BLACK-HEADED GULL	5	3	15	4	4
BONAPARTE'S GULL	712	26	859	1497	863
ICELAND GULL				1	
SMALL ALCID (SP)			1		
SNOWY OWL			1	3	5
HARBOR SEAL	2	16	4	4	12
WEATHER	<i>Cldy</i>	<i>Pily cldy</i>	<i>Cldy</i>	<i>Cldy, rain</i>	<i>Cldy, rain PM</i>
WIND	<i>15-30 SW</i>	<i>Calm</i>	<i>20-35 NE</i>	<i>7-10 E</i>	<i>5-10 SW</i>
TEMP	<i>50F, 10C</i>	<i>Mild</i>	<i>40F, 5C</i>	<i>65F, 18C</i>	<i>60F, 15C</i>
HI TIDE	<i>1:00 PM</i>	<i>8:15 AM</i>	<i>11:30 AM</i>	<i>12:30 PM</i>	<i>9:00 AM</i>

## REMINISCING:

"During the November census, my friend Chris and I, while driving around that urban wasteland called Columbia Point, came upon a small band of Horned Grebes floating not fifteen feet from shore. Reflected in the calm waters of Dorchester Bay, totally dominating the little black-and-white birds, was a giant, anonymous, rectangular apartment building. A rat scurried about in the junk lying on the shore. Those grebes and the Brant, scaup and other birds of the Harbor travel thousands of miles from the interior of the continent and arctic Canada to spend a few months at our doorstep: our guests, so to speak. They seem to put up with the rats and apartment buildings, but oil spills, heavy metal pollution and destruction of wetlands will destroy them. TASL and other coastal survey projects are first steps in acknowledging our stewardship over so much life on this continent."

*Soheil Zende*

[Reprinted from TASL News, January 1981.]



*Denise Cabral*

## What is TASL?

Take a Second Look (TASL) was started in the winter of 1980 by a local group of environmentally concerned birdwatchers; our primary focus has been to survey and census the bird population of Boston Harbor throughout the year, although the winter water bird censuses have been our major activity.

The 1993-94 TASL Harbor Census dates are listed on the reverse. Please mark them in your calendars. These dates are chosen to coincide with high or incoming tide during the morning. We will start each census at 8:30 AM and go until early afternoon. We are now censusing in nine separate parties: this means we really need at least 16 volunteers per census date. Unfortunately we have been losing more volunteers than gaining. Can you drag

along a friend or two and break them in?

Please remember: this is an excellent opportunity to learn—and teach—about the common water birds of the Harbor. You do not have to be an expert to participate. Each area will be led by at least one competent birder. That person will need help with navigation, driving and record-keeping. So make yourselves useful and learn something in the process.

For more information call Maury Hall (268-7571) or Soheil Zende (863-2392H, 923-0941W).

Please mail census results to Maury Hall, 849 East 3rd St. #2, South Boston, MA 02127.

*TASL (Take Second Look) is organized and staffed entirely by volunteers. TASL data is compiled by Maury Hall. This newsletter is produced by Soheil Zende.*