



**Take a Second Look**  
**42 Baker Avenue**  
**Lexington, MA 02173**

*1995-96 TASL Winter Census Dates:*  
**November 19**  
**January 7 (raindate: January 21)**  
**February 4**  
*for more information, call (617) 863-2392 or (617) 268-7571*

## Touching Sight

Seen year round on open fresh water, in our parks, on our ponds and along our river banks, our resident American Black Ducks might better be described as Sallow Puddlebirds—pallid counterfeits, after years of interbreeding with the Mallard, of the gleaming, dark migrants from the north that nest in Atlantic Canada and winter in our salt marshes and along the shores of our sheltered harbors and bays. The rich dark tones and overtones of the migrant Blacks recall the dark, moist soil that you first turn with a shovel in spring when the frost is gone but the ground is still very cold. The resident Blacks recall the pale, dull browns of dry leaves.

Descended from a common mallard ancestor, the American Black Duck, *Anas rubripes*, and the modern Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*, remain sufficiently closely related for ornithologists to fear that the sexually more aggressive Mallard may swamp the Black Duck genetically. Among the most successful of birds, the Mallard has worldwide distribution in the Northern Hemisphere while the American Black Duck is largely limited to northeastern Canada and the northeastern Atlantic seaboard. More than 40 types of Mallard hybrid have been documented in the wild. Mallard drakes enjoy significant success in courting Black Duck

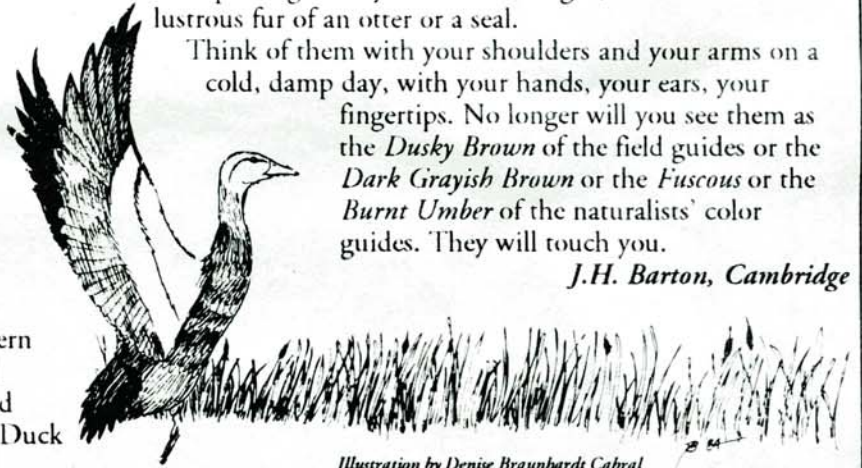
hens.

This year, hopes are high for the migrants, for the real Black Ducks, the authentic, the genuine Black Ducks of the north. In June, Ducks Unlimited field biologists reported very good habitat conditions throughout the “breeding heartland” of the species in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Start looking for them soon along Adams Shore, in the creeks of Belle Isle, on the mudflats at Lynn.

Try to get a good close look at them, no matter how cold the day—so close you can sense the dark, soft warmth of their plumage as if you were wearing it, as if it were the lustrous fur of an otter or a seal.

Think of them with your shoulders and your arms on a cold, damp day, with your hands, your ears, your fingertips. No longer will you see them as the *Dusky Brown* of the field guides or the *Dark Grayish Brown* or the *Fuscous* or the *Burnt Umber* of the naturalists’ color guides. They will touch you.

*J.H. Barton, Cambridge*



*Illustration by Denise Braunhardt Cabral*

## Are They Disappearing? (Part I)

Ever since I started birding seriously in 1975 I have been hearing dire predictions of the imminent demise of the American Black Duck at the hands (or gonads) of the Mallard. You see, the male Mallard is reputedly a killer lover, able to make it with the likes of Common Goldeneye females, to say nothing of its near-sister, the black duck.

The question of “sibling species” is brought up by J. Barton (in *Touching Sight*, this issue). Mallard and

American Black Duck, as well as a number of other closely related “species” such as Mottled and Mexican Ducks, diverged evolutionarily not that long ago, and may still be genetically and morphologically close enough for ornithologists (and the birds themselves) to consider them one species. In fact, Mexican Duck is already considered merely a race of Mallard, and has disappeared without a trace from current Texas bird checklists!

And so a serious worry has grown up in birder circles that the species American Black Duck will be swamped by the worldwide success of the Mallard.

With this worry in mind and a handful of US Fish & Wildlife Service (USF&WS) Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey reports for the years 1979 to 1995 in my possession, I decided to look at the actual numbers reported and compare them. The reports are from the “Atlantic Flyway,” which spans the states Maine to Florida, and does not include Maritime Canada or Gulf Coast states. Each state is censused in early to mid-January by a local state fish and wildlife biologist and the results are tabulated by the USF&WS. This tabulation, in addition to similar ones for the other continental flyways, as well as summer breeding reports from central Canadian provinces and US states (“the duck factory”), are used by the feds and state regulators to set hunters’ bag limits for different duck species. Purchasers of the “Duck Stamp” subsidize a lot of this research, and most of them are hunters.

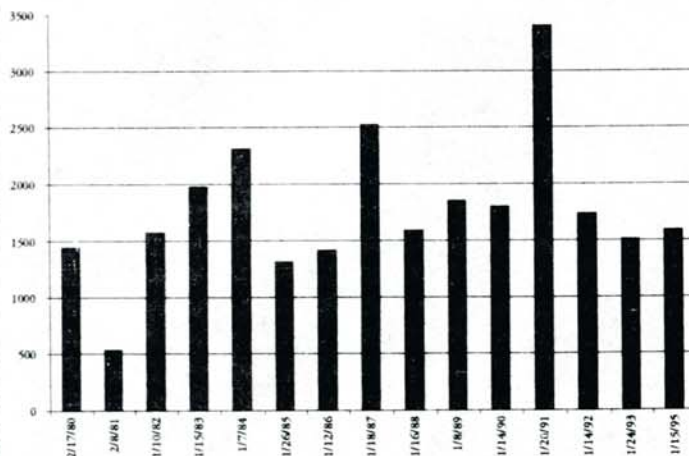


Table 1. TASL data on American Black Duck in Boston Harbor

*Continued on page 2*

## 1994-95 Boston Harbor TASL Censuses: Winter Totals

SPECIES	11/20/94	1/15/95	2/12/95	3/19/95
RED-THROATED LOON	23			10
COMMON LOON	4	7		5
PIED-BILLED GREBE	1			
HORNED GREBE	195	47	8	81
RED-NECKED GREBE	11	99	19	82
GREAT CORMORANT	25	7	2	13
DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT	341	35	2	4
CORMORANT (SP)	194	2		2
GREAT BLUE HERON	23	5	1	3
MUTE SWAN	2	6	2	4
SNOW GOOSE	1	2	2	
BRANT	1454	1146	635	3449
CANADA GOOSE	332	567	642	136
GREEN-WINGED TEAL				5
AMERICAN BLACK DUCK	1145	1589	1112	1240
MALLARD	140	361	339	110
AMERICAN WIGEON		5		4
GREATER SCAUP	95	802	364	610
COMMON EIDER	5908	8118	5514	8230
HARLEQUIN DUCK			2	
OLDSQUAW		1		
BLACK SCOTER			1	12
SURF SCOTER	20	206	32	29
WHITE-WINGED SCOTER	660	736	410	279
SCOTER (SP)	109	140		10
COMMON GOLDENEYE	325	646	469	816
BARROW'S GOLDENEYE				1
BUFFLEHEAD	2089	1083	858	1459
HOODED MERGANSER	16	3	3	
COMMON MERGANSER	1			
RED-BREASTED MERGANSER	1950	726	341	1752
RUDDY DUCK	3			
NORTHERN HARRIER			1	
SHARP-SHINNED HAWK	3			
COOPER'S HAWK	1			
RED-TAILED HAWK	2	1		2
TURKEY VULTURE				1
AMERICAN KESTREL	1	2		
PEREGRINE	2	1		
BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER	2	24		
SEMIPALMATED PLOVER		1		
KILLDEER		4		4
GREATER YELLOWLEGS	7			
SANDERLING	4	408	133	272
PURPLE SANDPIPER	4	2	2	
DUNLIN	37	106	1	48
SANDPIPER (SP)				20
LAUGHING GULL	11			
COMMON BLACK-HEADED GULL	1	5	7	3
BONAPARTE'S GULL	1112	101	1	1
MEW (COMMON) GULL		1		1
ICELAND GULL		1		1
THICK-BILLED MURRE	1	1	1	
GREAT HORNED OWL	1	1		
BELTED KINGFISHER	2	2		
NORTHERN FLICKER		1		
HORNED LARK	1			
PALM WARBLER	1			
FIELD SPARROW		4		
SNOW BUNTING	20			20
HARBOR SEAL	15	3	1	6
WEATHER	Sunny	Drizzle/fog AM	Sunny	Sunny
WIND	NW 20-25 mph	WSW 10-25 mph	NW 15-25 mph	NE 10-15 mph
TEMP	40-50°F	50-64°F	10-20°F	33-40°F
HI TIDE	12:11 PM	10:06 AM	8:51 AM	12:45 AM

## 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.

The 1995-96 winter TASL Harbor Census dates are listed on page 1; 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 need at least 18 volunteers per census date. 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.

If you would like to write for or illustrate this publication, we need you. 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.*

## Disappearing (continued)

Table 1 shows the January TASL counts of American Black Duck for 1980-1995. It shows a relatively stable number of these birds in the Harbor, with an average of about 1800, occasional peaks up to 3300, and dips as low as 500. Certainly there are times when shallow sections of the Harbor freeze over sufficiently to force some of the birds further south; at other times, if coastal Maine and New Hampshire are milder than average, the birds might stay further north.

In Table 2, based on the USF&WS data for 1979-1995, the annual fluctuations smooth out a bit. For Massachusetts the midwinter count averages just around 21,000 birds, with fluctuations down to 13000 and up to 26000 in some years. For the Atlantic Flyway the average is 221,500 with a peak of 240,000 and a low of 194,000.

It seems clear to me that in

this sixteen year period there has not been much of a trend, either up or down, in black duck counts.

So what exactly is the panic?

(To be continued...)

Soheil Zende

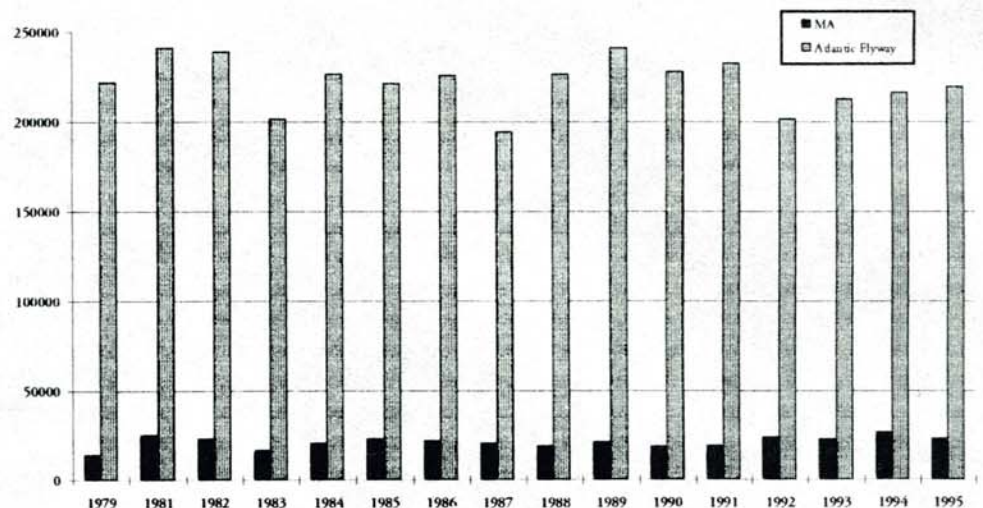


Table 2: USF&WS counts of American Black Ducks in Massachusetts and the Atlantic Flyway