



▲ Tufted Ducks are late breeders and can be seen with young throughout the summer.

## FIELD CRAFT

# How to distinguish ducklings

**Breeding ducks are notoriously under-recorded by birdwatchers, influencing the records of breeding birds for surveys and atlases. Dawn Balmer and Simon Gillings explain how, by paying more attention to ducklings, you can make an important contribution to our understanding of breeding ducks.**

It's a beautiful afternoon in June, and you're looking out over the Ouse Washes in Cambridgeshire. It's been a good breeding season so far, and it's wonderful to see young Lapwing and Redshank in the vegetation along the water's edge. Hopefully some Snipe bred too, but they are impossible to see! There are lots of ducks too, many in eclipse plumage, but a male Garganey catches your eye. It's always great to see a Garganey, and a record in mid-June is interesting. Could it have bred here? There are broods of ducklings dotted

about, and after patient scanning, you spot a brood of ducklings with very stripy heads, and a good look at the female in attendance reveals a female Garganey, and her brood of four ducklings.

It's easy to quickly pass over ducklings, looking for something more interesting, but what are you missing? Mallard, Eider, Tufted Duck and Shelduck are by far the most common breeding duck in the UK, but many of the other species of breeding

duck are scarcer and often under-recorded. The first broods of Mallard appear in March, if not before, and new broods of late-breeding species such as Pochard, Tufted Duck and Eider can be seen as late as August or September.

### DISTINGUISHING DUCKLINGS

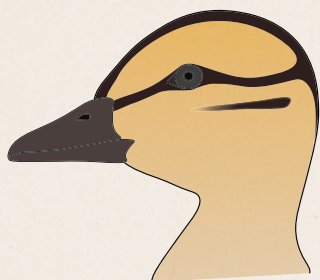
Faced with a brood of ducklings, what features do you look for? Check to see if a parent is around – that could give a quick answer! Have a good look at the base colour of the plumage of the ducklings: are they all dark, black-and-white or brown with pale patches? Make a note of where the pale patches are, the base colour of the face, and if there are any distinctive stripes or patterns on the head.

The habitat and your location can also be a big clue, though it's good to have an open mind with ducks; Goldeneye regularly breeds at Chew Valley Lake

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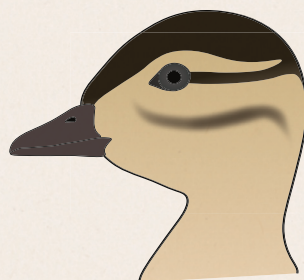
## Knowing your ducklings

Some of these facial features are a little variable, especially the length of the cheek spot, but in combination they're a good guide. The calendars indicate when ducklings may be seen (light) and when they are likely to be seen (dark).



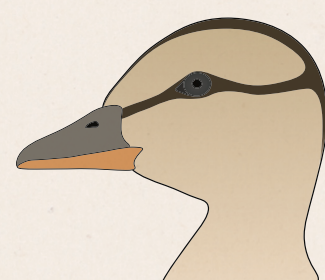
### TEAL

- ▶ moderately rich yellow face
- ▶ dark bill
- ▶ cheek spot extends forwards as prominent stripe



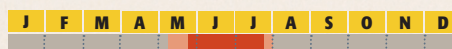
### MANDARIN DUCK

- ▶ very small bill
- ▶ honey-yellow face
- ▶ only species with pale lores, giving a big eye appearance
- ▶ prominent cheek stripe



### GADWALL

- ▶ pale silver-yellow face
- ▶ cheek spot reduced or absent
- ▶ orange-pink bill base
- ▶ dark on forehead narrow or absent



## Ones to watch

Red-breasted Merganser has just been added to the list of species covered by RBBP, as the population is estimated to be under 2,000 pairs. Please make a special effort to record breeding birds this year. Have we lost Scaup as a breeding species? RBBP records show they last bred in 2014, so any records of Scaup in the summer months should also be recorded.



◀ Goosander (left) and Red-breasted Merganser ducklings are very similar, sharing a black and white body, ginger head and long, thin bill. Goosander ducklings have a bold white line from bill to below eye; this is often indistinct in Red-breasted Merganser.

TUFTED DUCK: JOHN HARDING/BTO, GOOSANDER: DENNIS ATHERTON/BTO, INFOGRAPHIC: FAYE VOGELY

in Avon, far outside its usual range! It's worth being aware of young Moorhen and Coot too, as they often mix in with ducklings on the water's edge and could cause confusion. In two species, the young regularly form crèches: Eider and Shelduck. The young from a number of broods join together into a single flock, and are 'guarded' by adults, which in the case of Eider may not necessarily be related to them.

Species vary in the timing of breeding, with Mallard being the earliest and with the longest breeding season, compared to Tufted Duck being one of the latest.

### BREEDING NON-NATIVE DUCKS

Small populations of Muscovy Duck can be found in a few counties, with breeding confirmed in Cambridgeshire and Derbyshire in 2015. Their ducklings are variable in appearance depending

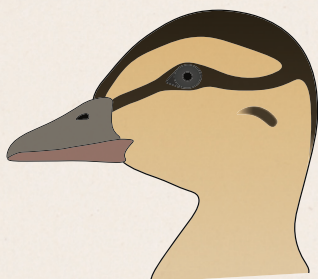
on the purity of the adult population, and single broods can contain all-yellow individuals, all-dark individuals and everything in between. Bills range from pink to blue-grey. During the data collection for *Bird Atlas 2007-11*, there was breeding evidence for Wood Duck from 30 10-km squares, including 10 with confirmed breeding. It's very likely that breeding Wood Duck are under-recorded; the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP) last reported them breeding in 2012. Young Wood Ducks are very similar to Mandarin Duck ducklings, except the face colour lacks rich yellow tones, instead being a pale, silvery yellow. Ruddy Duck may still hang on as a breeding species, with a pair in Cheshire and Wirral in 2015, and a small number of summering birds. Ducklings are mostly dark with two bold, white stripes on the face, plus the distinctive wedge-

shaped bill typical of adults.

You can help us learn more by sending your records to your County Bird Recorder ([www.bto.org/county-recorders](http://www.bto.org/county-recorders)) and via BirdTrack ([www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net)), which offers an excellent 'Pinpoint' feature which allows you to pinpoint the grid reference where you recorded the breeding evidence. Accurate grid references are really important – especially for the rarer species – for a full assessment of pairs to be made, and also for providing valuable data for site protection work. It's also very useful to record the brood size; you can do so via the 'optional data' section in BirdTrack. ■

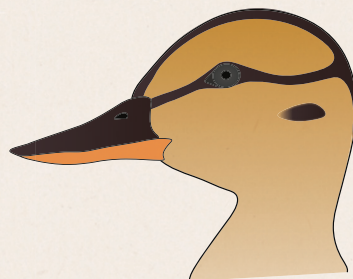
### Get involved

For detailed tips on nesting behaviour and duckling identification, see BTO's *A Field Guide to Monitoring Nests*, available at [www.bto.org/shop](http://www.bto.org/shop).



#### MALLARD

- ▶ rich honey-yellow face
- ▶ bold rear cheek spot
- ▶ dark bill
- ▶ broods variable dependent on parentage



#### SHOVELER

- ▶ large bill with orange cutting edges
- ▶ thicker eye stripe between bill and eye
- ▶ cheek spot prominent



#### WIGEON

- ▶ small, dark bill
- ▶ rich orange-buff face
- ▶ cheek spot extends forwards as stripe

