

Canvasbacks and Redheads

Birds of different feather sometimes flock together.

These two types of duck are similar in superficial ways but distinctly different upon close examination and study. Both are native North American species although a few Canvasbacks, the largest American diving duck, have crossed the Atlantic and appeared in England. The Canvasback--*Aythya valisineria*--owes its Latin name in part to a wild celery plant which is a preferred food. The drake (male) is recognizable by its rusty red head, sloping bill, red iris, white body and black breast and tail feathers. The female, mostly brown, presents the same silhouette and is seen often in the company of the male.

Canvasbacks feed in shallow water mostly by diving and dabbling (up-ended bottom feeding), reaching for seeds, leaves, roots, tubers, snails and insect larvae. Seen in January on Lake Junaluska, these are migratory birds whose summer breeding grounds reach as far north as Alaska and Western Canada and winter in the lower 48 around coastal bays and interior lakes.

The Redhead (*Aythya americana*) drake has a rounded head, short neck that is bright cinnamon and a black and gray body. The female is brown and, like the male, has a black-tipped blue-gray bill. Redheads sometimes gather in large rafts of 50,000 or more in the winter on the U.S. Gulf Coast and large inland lakes. Their diet consists of water vegetation and, on salt water, shoal grass, small snails and clams. They are highly social creatures.

Like other birds, female Redheads are sometimes brood parasites that lay their eggs in the nests of other waterfowl to be incubated, feed and fledged by females of other species. Canvasback nests are often chosen by Redheads for such "drop in adoptions." Mallard, Gadwall and several other species of waterfowl are also parasitized by opportunistic Redheads who spend less time raising their own young and more time producing eggs for other adoptive nests.

Visit a local lake like nearby Lake Junaluska to experience the grace and beauty of our native American waterfowl.

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