



Foothills

Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

Ducks: Feathers and Stars

With the coming of another winter, visitors who steer by the stars are again returning to the foothills. These creatures can be seen any morning in December or January sitting on our lakes. These visitors, with this largely unknown navigational ability, are already very familiar to most of us. They are ducks.

Up to 15 kinds of ducks can be seen in this area. The following is a list of duck species seen to date on Arastradero and Boronda lakes: Mallards, Ruddy, Scaup, Ring-necked, Redhead, Canvasback, Gadwall, Bufflehead, Common Merganser, Surf Scoter, Common Goldeneye, American Widgeon, Northern Shoveler, Green Winged Teal and Wood Duck. Other migratory birds besides ducks are to be found on the lake. Those that might be confused with ducks are Grebes and the American Coot.

All of these ducks are wild birds migrating from their northern breeding grounds in Alaska, Canada and the northwestern United States. Many will stay and winter in the San Francisco Bay Area, while others will continue on to more southerly wintering grounds, returning north again in the spring to complete the cycle.

Fascinating scientific studies have been made to determine how birds find their way during migration. How is it, for instance, that the Lesser Scaup from Eastern Alaska returns year after year, to a place as small as Boronda Lake? Research indicates that migratory birds most often use celestial bodies as means of navigation, using the stars at night and the sun during the day. The celestial bodies enable ducks to reach a general geographic location such as the San Francisco Bay Area. To get to a specific point in the Bay Area like Boronda Lake, they probably use landmarks.

If you are coming to look at the ducks, here are a few hints. The last week in November to the first week in March is the best time for seeing ducks. More ducks are to be seen when human activity is at a minimum at the lake; early mornings are best. Come equipped – you will need field glasses and an identification guide. Good luck with your duck watching and if you see anything unusual, let a ranger know. The updating of Palo Alto Open Space natural history records, in many cases, depends on visitor observations.

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