

If It Looks Like a Duck...

NOT ALL WATERBIRDS ARE WATERFOWL



By Michael Furtman

There's an old saying that goes, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck . . . it's a duck." But what if it looks like a duck, but can't walk on land? Or if it yodels instead of quacking? Is it still a duck?

When you visit a wetland, chances are you'll see lots of wildlife besides ducks. Some might be birds that are about the size of a duck. They might swim like a duck, and may even be mistaken for a duck. In fact, you've probably seen one or two of these waterbirds already but didn't know what they were. Let's take a look at some of the cool birds that share duck habitats!

Deep Divers

You already know there are ducks that dive down deep in the water to find food. Some of these diving ducks, like scaup and ring-necked ducks, have black and white feathers. So, if you see a black-and-white bird swimming and diving underwater, you might think it is a diving duck. But it could also be a loon.



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Loons aren't related to ducks, but they look a lot like them. There are several kinds of loons, but the one you're most likely to see is a common loon. These birds are bigger than most ducks. Both male and female loons are covered in black and white speckles and have dark heads that may look black or even dark green like the head of a drake mallard.

Loons feed mostly on fish, which they catch using their spear-shaped bill. Like ducks, they have big flippered feet that help them move quickly through the water. Loons can also hold their breath for almost five minutes and dive 200 feet underwater!

A loon's legs are set so far back on its body that these birds can't walk on land, so they build their nests on the shorelines of wetlands. Like ducklings, loon chicks leave the nest almost right away and swim alongside their parents.

Loons don't quack like ducks, but they do have a beautiful yodel. Just like most ducks, loons nest in the north and migrate south in the fall. So wherever you live, you just might see one of these big, beautiful birds.



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Loons sometimes carry their chicks on their backs.



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Chicken of the Marsh

AMERICAN COOT



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One of the strangest birds you're likely to find on a wetland is the American coot. Often called the "marsh hen," these odd-looking birds have chickenlike features and belong to a family known as gallinules. You'll almost always find them with ducks, because they like to eat the same kinds of foods, but coots are more closely related to rails and cranes.

Although they look like ducks from a distance, coots look very different up close. If you see a coot nearby, you'll quickly spot its

pointed bill, which looks similar to a chicken's. Coots are usually solid black except for their white bills. If you ever see a coot on land, you can't miss its long green legs and big gray toes. Their feet aren't webbed like a duck's, but those big toes have flaps along the edges. These lobes, as they're called, push water out of the way when the coot kicks its foot back and then fold flat when the bird pulls it forward.

Coots are mostly quiet birds, but when they do make noise, one of their calls sounds a lot like when you let the air out of a balloon. They also sometimes make a sound like two pieces of wood being clapped together.

Coots are known for having strange-looking babies as well. Coot chicks have a red bill and face, tufts of curly orange feathers on their chest, and a red head that almost looks bald. Female coots build a floating nest in the marsh, usually in the cattails near the shore. Like ducklings, coot chicks are covered in fuzzy down feathers when they hatch, and they leave the nest almost right away.

Coots live and nest almost everywhere in North America, except in the far north. Those in the south do not migrate but are joined in winter by their cousins from up north.

A mother coot and her chick.



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HORNED GREBE



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Great Grebes

There's one more family of ducklike birds that you're likely to see in the marsh. They are called grebes, and there are seven types of these birds in North America. Some, like

the western grebe, are about the same size as a mallard, but with much longer necks. Others, like the horned grebe, are a lot smaller—similar in size to an American green-winged teal.

All grebes feed underwater, which means they are skilled swimmers. They usually eat minnows and other small water creatures, but the bigger the grebe, the bigger its dinner. Some larger grebes dine on crustaceans such as crayfish.

Grebes are truly amazing birds. During courtship, a pair of western grebes will run across the water with their necks stretched way out, and then dive forward and disappear underwater together. And if you see a pied-billed grebe in the marsh, don't take your eyes off it! When these sneaky birds realize there are people around, they don't panic or make a fuss. Instead, they just sink out of sight into the water, barely leaving a ripple behind. How? They can actually squeeze air out of their feathers and internal air sacs to disappear without a trace. What a trick!

Grebes nest in the same types of places as the loon and the coot, right at the water's edge or on a floating nest. Grebe chicks leave the nest almost as soon as their feathers dry after hatching.

These western grebes are doing a courtship dance.



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While loons, coots, and grebes aren't the same as ducks, all these waterbirds have one important thing in common: they all need healthy wetlands and other habitats. By being a member of Ducks Unlimited, you're not only helping ducks, but also giving all these special birds and other wildlife a healthy home!

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