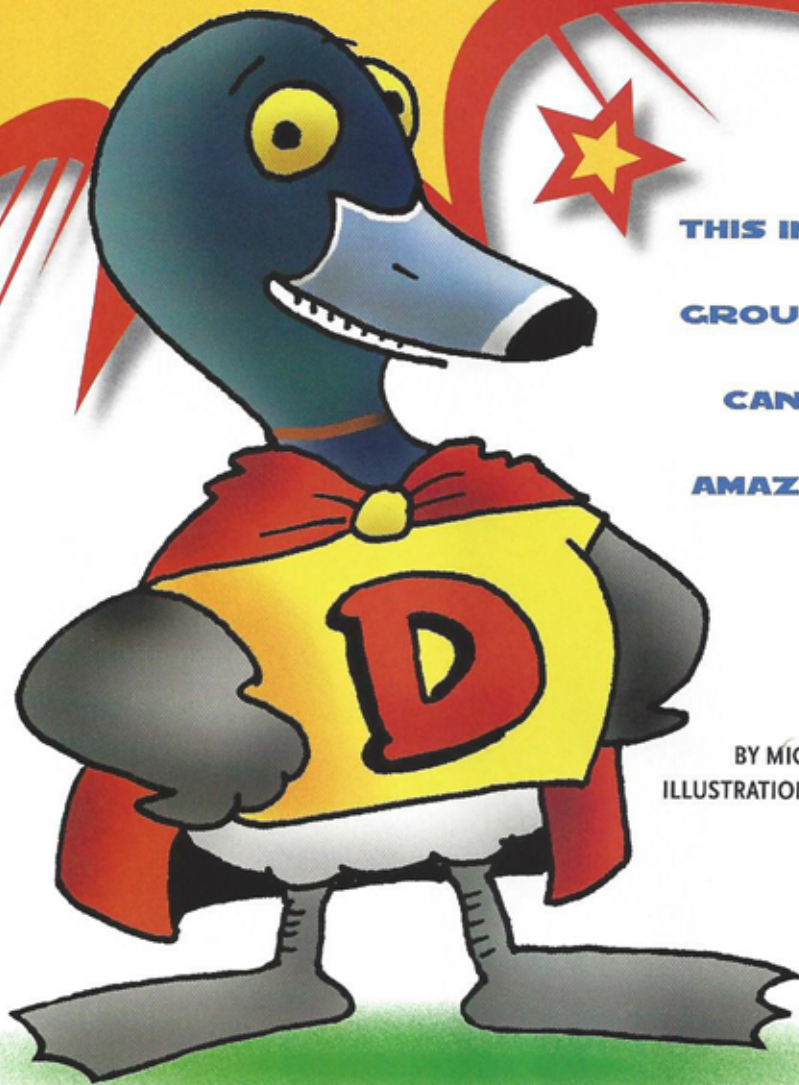


SUPER-DUPER DIVING DUCKS



**THIS INTERESTING
GROUP OF DUCKS
CAN DO SOME
AMAZING THINGS**

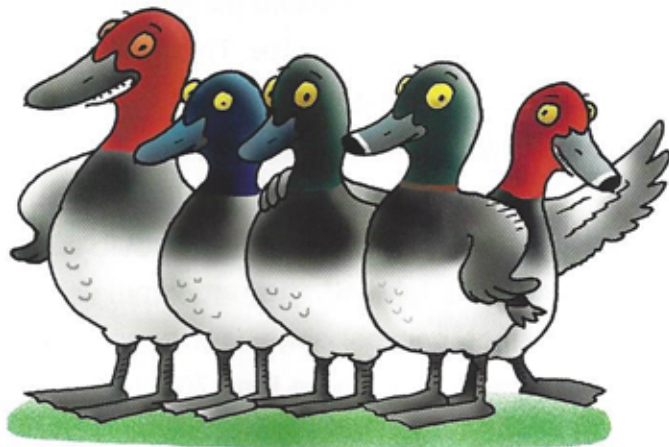
**BY MICHAEL FURTMAN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRUCE COCHRAN**

WHAT CAN RUN ACROSS THE WATER, FLY LIKE A JET, AND DIVE LIKE A SUBMARINE? A SUPERHERO? A TOP-SECRET NEW MACHINE? MAYBE. OR IT JUST MIGHT BE A DIVING DUCK!

In the last issue of *Puddler* we learned about one group of ducks called “dabblers” or “puddlers.” Those ducks like shallow water, where they feed by “dabbling” just under the surface. But there’s another group of ducks that is almost as well known as the dabblers: the diving ducks—or “divers” for short. Just like dabbling ducks, diving ducks are named for the way they feed, which is by diving underwater.

FIVE OF A KIND

North America is home to five species of diving ducks. First, there’s the canvasback, the largest of the divers. Old-time hunters called the canvasback the “king of the ducks” because of its size. Drakes have rusty red heads, and the feathers on their backs have a fine pattern that looks a lot like canvas material. Second, there’s the redhead. Can you guess what color its head might be? Redheads are the second-largest diving ducks after canvasbacks. Next, we have two species of scaup—greater and lesser scaup. Hunters call them “bluebills” because of the color of their bills. Drakes of both species have very dark heads, which look almost black from a distance. Greater scaup, as you might guess, are slightly larger than lesser scaup. Last, but not least, is the ring-necked duck, the smallest of the diving ducks. The ring-necked duck is named for the rusty brown ring around the drake’s neck. Ring-necked ducks also have a white ring near the tip of their bills. That’s why many hunters simply call them “ringbills.”



WHAT MAKES A DUCK A DIVER?

All diving ducks have certain things in common. Their bodies are stocky and their necks are short. Their legs are set farther back on their bodies than those of dabbling ducks. This is great for diving but makes it difficult for them to walk on land. Diving ducks have big webbed feet that work like flippers in the water. Divers also have small, narrow wings for their body size. That's why they have to run across the surface of the water to gain flight speed. This takes some room, so diving ducks are usually found on large lakes, bays, marshes, and rivers. Once diving ducks take off, they are very fast fliers. In fact, canvasbacks have been clocked at airspeeds of more than 70 miles per hour!

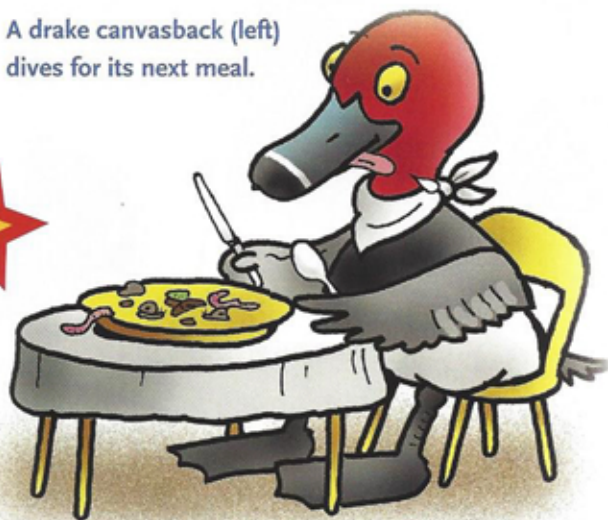
SPLASH!



Sea ducks, like these harlequin ducks, also dive deep underwater to find food.



A drake canvasback (left) dives for its next meal.



DINING IN DEEP WATER

Because they can dive deep underwater, diving ducks can eat many foods that dabbling ducks can't reach. These deepwater foods include snails, clams, small fish, and a variety of aquatic plants. Most diving ducks feed in two to 10 feet of water, but in deep lakes and along the coast, scaup sometimes dive to depths of 40 feet or more to reach clams and mussels. Diving ducks usually stay underwater for only 10 to 30 seconds while diving for food. After a successful dive, the birds return to the surface with their meal held tightly in their bills and swallow their food whole in one big gulp. Then they take a deep breath and dive again for another snack.

THE OTHER "DIVING" DUCKS



Diving ducks aren't the only members of the waterfowl family that can dive. In fact, all ducks, geese, and swans can dive to some degree. The best divers in the waterfowl world are sea ducks and mergansers. Mergansers specialize in eating small fish. They have razor-sharp bills that help them grab and hold slippery minnows, and they can swim very fast underwater to catch their speedy prey. As you might have guessed, sea ducks spend most of their lives on the open ocean. These tough birds often dive for clams, crabs, and other small animals in deep ocean waters. The deepest diver of them all is the long-tailed duck. These sea ducks have been caught in fishermen's nets at depths of more than 200 feet. That's a long way down, even for a scuba diver!