



Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

American Black Duck *Anas rubripes*

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

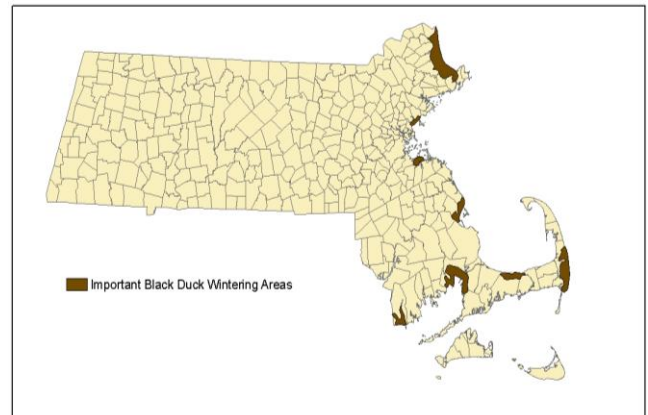
SPECIES DESCRIPTION: American Black Ducks are moderate-size ducks, differing from most ducks in that the sexes are monomorphic with only slight differences in bill and leg color. Both sexes are dark brown with slightly lighter-colored heads, and have white underwings. The males range from 21 to 24 inches in total length, and weigh between 2.5 and 3.4 pounds. Adult females are slightly smaller.



DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: American Black Ducks were formerly much more common as a nesting species in Massachusetts than they currently are. This decline as a breeding species has occurred throughout the Northeast and the reasons behind it are unclear. Breeding Bird Atlas surveys conducted in the 1970s revealed that Black Ducks nested throughout Massachusetts, but more recent Northeastern States Breeding Waterfowl surveys indicate that Black Ducks breeding inland are rare, averaging fewer than 0.20 pairs/km². Densities on Cape Cod were slightly higher, falling in the 0.20-0.49 pairs/km² category. The highest densities were on salt marsh habitat where they exceeded 0.90 pairs/km². The decline in breeding Black Ducks in the Northeast correlates with an increase in Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) populations. Mallards are genetically closely related to Black Ducks and the two species are completely inter-fertile. Hybrids were commonly observed in the 1970s and 1980s, but have

become less common as fewer Black Ducks are available for cross-breeding. Whether the Mallard is displacing the Black Duck or merely occupying habitat vacated by Black Ducks is uncertain. Mallards appear to be more tolerant of human disturbance and development than Black Ducks.

As a wintering species, Black Ducks have remained common along coastal Massachusetts, with little evidence of an overall decline over the past 50 years (though flocks in certain areas have diminished). Over the past decade, an average of 19,855 black ducks have been observed on the annual Midwinter Waterfowl Survey.



Important Black Duck Wintering Areas

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Black Ducks utilize a variety of habitats. Breeding habitat tends to be forested wetlands, though formerly they were commonly found along major rivers and associated marshlands, from wet meadow to deep marsh, as well. Some black ducks also nest in salt marsh areas, but because of tidal conditions, the chances of successfully achieving a successful hatch between astronomical high tides are low. Most Black Ducks winter along coastal salt marsh and bay areas in Massachusetts. Both salt marsh and mussel flats are important sources of winter food, as they allow feeding across the full range of tidal fluctuation.

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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THREATS: The reasons behind the Black Duck's decline in the Northeast remain unclear. Loss of habitat, competition from Mallards, increased human development, over-hunting, acid deposition effects on invertebrate food supplies, and other reasons have been offered. In Massachusetts, the large decline in the number of waterfowl hunters and resulting decline in harvest makes hunting pressure an unlikely culprit. Certainly, increased development and urban sprawl have altered the habitat. Even the recent increase in beaver populations and resultant wetlands (which, in theory, should provide excellent Black Duck habitat) appears unable to reverse the trend of declining breeding populations. More subtle climatic changes may also be involved in the Black Duck's status, as breeding populations in Canada appear to be increasing.

REFERENCES

- Bellrose, F. C. 1976. *Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America*. 2nd ed. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.
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- Petersen, W.R., and W.R. Meservey. 2003. *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas*. Massachusetts Audubon Society and University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts.