



## Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

## Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*

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

**SPECIES DESCRIPTION:** The Long-tailed Duck is a moderate-sized duck, differing from other ducks in that it has distinct winter and spring plumages as compared to the nuptial and eclipse plumages of other species. The males possess a long, attenuated tail in both plumages, while the females' tails are more "duck-like." Both sexes are more streamlined than other sea ducks. Males appear primarily white in their winter plumage, with a dark chest, back, wings and tail. The face is tan with darker cheeks and throat. The color pattern is almost reversed in the summer, with the white head and neck changing to the dark brown color of the chest, and the tan of the face changing to white. The white plumage on the back also changes to a lighter brown. The contrast between the two plumages in the female is not as pronounced. The hen has a white chest and belly in the winter plumage and a mostly white head with light brown throat, back and wings. In the summer, the brown darkens and the white face feathers are replaced by more shades of brown with smaller white patches. The males range from 19 to 22 inches in length and weigh about two pounds. Adult females range from about 15 to 17 inches in length and typically weigh less than two pounds.

**DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE:** Long-tailed Ducks are found in Massachusetts only during the winter, and then only along the coast. A few birds may be seen anywhere on coastal waters, but the largest concentrations winter in Nantucket Sound. Huge flocks numbering in the tens of thousands roost in the sound overnight, then fly out to sea at dawn, returning at dusk. Because of this flight pattern, only a small portion of these ducks are counted on the annual Midwinter Waterfowl Survey conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. They are detected on Audubon's Christmas Bird Counts.

**HABITAT DESCRIPTION:** Long-tailed Ducks feed offshore during the winter months spent in Massachusetts. They feed primarily on animal matter, including crustaceans, fishes, and mollusks. They are among the deepest diving ducks, reaching depths of 100 meters. Offshore shoals are important feeding sites.

**THREATS:** The open ocean habitats utilized by Long-tailed Ducks have previously made them immune to the hazards of development. The proposed Cape Wind windmill complex sited in Nantucket Sound presents a potentially disrupting development. Preliminary studies suggest Long-tailed Ducks roost primarily outside the proposed wind park. Oil spills also present a threat as the birds are so concentrated at night. Disease outbreaks pose another hazard. Long-tailed Ducks were the primary victims of a disease outbreak in Maryland in the 1980s. Because of their tendency to dive deep for food, many Long-tailed Ducks have been killed when entrapped in commercial gill netting operations. The offshore habitat used by these ducks means scant hunting pressure is directed toward the species and only a few hundred are harvested each year in Massachusetts.

While no immediate monitoring or other actions are required at this time, tracking the diurnal activities of Long-tailed Ducks while wintering in Massachusetts, and determining the timing of their migration to and from Massachusetts coastal waters is advised.

### **REFERENCE:**

Bellrose, F. C. 1976. *Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America*. 2nd ed. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

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

**Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife**

1 Rabbit Hill Rd., Westborough, MA; tel: 508-389-6300; fax: 508-389-7890; [www.mass.gov/dfw](http://www.mass.gov/dfw)