

Winter Birding in Canandaigua

By ECB member, Saralinda Hooker

Looking for a winter pastime that keeps you in touch with nature? The winter months in the Finger Lakes offer great opportunities to hone your bird identification skills. Setting up a feeder is one way, but watching the water birds on the lake is another great method. While many species of birds are on a long-term decline in numbers as development trends reduce the amount of suitable woodland and grassland habitat, the numbers of waterfowl are actually on the rise, and it's not just the Canada Geese.

Together with several other Finger Lakes, Canandaigua Lake has been named an Important Bird Area (IBA) by the Audubon Society, especially for providing a winter home for waterfowl. The IBA listing, made over 10 years ago, mentions mallards and redheads in particular, but the diversity of winter waterfowl on the lake is remarkable, and unlike spring and summer birds, waterfowl can be quite cooperative for identification purposes.

- Being out in open water, they are easy to spot, especially with binoculars.
- As long as you observe them from inside your car, they don't get spooked and move away.
- The City and Town have a number of sites where you can get a good look at the water birds from a lakeside parking spot.
- With the help of the eBird Hotspot system, you can often get great hints about what you are likely to see from a particular vantage point, helping to narrow down your identification choices.

Developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, eBird is an online database of bird observation linking scientists, researchers and amateur observers worldwide to share information about bird distribution and abundance. It offers amateurs a free digital tool for saving your bird sighting lists privately, and/or for sharing your data for scientific research. The Hotspot network allows you to see what species other birders have observed at a particular site over the past days, months and years. Anyone can join at eBird.com.

There are waterside Hotspots to be found throughout the City and Town: the City Pier, Lagoon Park, Muar Lakes, Butler Road Schoolhouse Park, the Water Plant, and Onanda Park. Inland Hotspots include Miller Park, Outhouse Park,

the Risser Road swamp, Blue Heron Park, and the north end of Woolhouse Road, as well as Sonnenberg Gardens and Woodlawn Cemetery.

Here are some of the easy-to-spot waterfowl that will soon become familiar to you if they are not already. Images are courtesy of Audubon Field Guide to American Birds.



American Coot - These small duck-like birds are the only ones that are all black except for a white bill. They gather in a group of up to 100 off the City Pier during the fall months, and gradually move down the west side of the lake as the ice sets in around the Pier. By early winter you can see them off the Yacht Club, Butler Road Park, the Water Plant, or in between.



Mallards are familiar because they stay around all year. The distinctive green heads of the males and the brown speckled females are easy to spot in a crowd of waterfowl.



Redheads - These medium sized diving ducks are return to Canandaigua Lake each winter in the thousands, and make such dense raft formations in the lake

that they can seem like a floating island. The males have rusty chestnut rounded heads with a dark chest and light gray back, while the females are a lighter brown and grey. Redheads churn the water into a froth with their repeated diving for aquatic plants.



Mergansers - Another year-round resident, the merganser has several different looks depending on gender and type. The Common Merganser male is distinctive for its large mostly white body, dark green head and orange bill. The female is mostly grey with a lighter breast and a reddish crested head.



Buffleheads - These cute little guys are hard to miss, with their bright black and white bodies. Females are brown, with white patches on the side of the face.



Swans - The large white swans are easy to pick out in a crowd of waterfowl in the water or on the ice, and more often than not they are Mute Swans, identified by their large white bodies, long necks, red-orange bills and black facial markings. Mute Swans often move in pairs or small family groups. Trumpeter and Tundra Swans, with subtle differences in their bill color and facial marks, also migrate through the area.



Snow Geese - Like the Redheads, snow geese move around in an impressive crowd, and often pass through the area by the thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, in the later winter months. As the ice is receding, if you see a great white floating object in the middle of the lake, it is likely to be a raft of snow geese. Seen in the air, they are distinctive for their black wing tips and for their flight pattern, which looks like a loosely knitted coverlet across the sky.

Birding is a very flexible pastime that you can enjoy on your own or with companions. You will find a pair of binoculars and a birding guide very useful. There are several free phone apps that can assist you in identification - try Cornell Lab's Merlin app at merlin.allaboutbirds.org or Audubon's guide at [Audubon.org/app](https://audubon.org/app). Two area bird clubs offer field trips, lectures and abundant advice and support for new birders - see eatonbirds.webs.com and rochesterbirding.com.

This summary only scratches the surface of the diversity of waterfowl you can find if you frequent our waterways and lakeshore in winter. Soon you will be able to distinguish a scaup from a scoter, a canvasback from a goldeneye and a gadwall from a wigeon. As winter rolls into spring with the return migration of

the warblers and other bright and musical species, you may find yourself hooked on birding!

Local History Notes

Squaw Island

New York's Smallest State Park

By Local History Team member Donna West



Have you ever looked out just southwest from the Canandaigua City Pier, or read the historic marker at the end of the Pier, and wondered about the small island a short distance away? Or perhaps you've been curious enough to have paddled around it in a canoe or kayak. The island is located within the Town of Canandaigua boundary lines even though it is only about 600 feet from City Pier, which is in the City of Canandaigua.¹

Currently under DEC's Bureau of Wildlife jurisdiction, Squaw Island is designated a Unique Area even though it's listed as the smallest State Park and smallest Wildlife Management Area in the state. Since it's so small, they don't perform any management activities on the island.² However, in 1977 DEC did install a cedar log buffer to help protect it from continued erosion. The