

Watchable Wildlife – Bufflehead

By Bob Garrison

Watch for the brightly marked bufflehead on your travels to lakes, marshes, and coastal bays and estuaries this month. The male bufflehead's striking black and white color pattern can't be confused with any other duck on the water. They are generally found on open water in small groups of five to ten birds.

Buffleheads are related to a group of ducks called the sea ducks which includes the eiders, Harlequin, oldsquaw, goldeneyes, mergansers, and scoters. The smallest member of the group, buffleheads dive underwater in search of aquatic insects, clams or shrimp. What starts as a quick dive underwater ends as abruptly when they pop to the surface like a cork. They must feed day and night throughout the winter to maintain their body temperatures and build fat reserves for their migration back to the Pacific Northwest, Canada and Alaska in the spring to nest. While the majority of the buffleheads on the Pacific Flyway leave the state to nest, a small population nests in the forests of northeast California.

Buffleheads nest in the cavities of trees. They almost exclusively nest in the abandoned holes of the northern flicker, a medium-sized woodpecker common throughout California. The next time you see a flicker, consider that this tiny duck is almost the same size. Female buffleheads often return to the same nest tree year after year. While the nest tree can be over 200 meters from water, the downy ducklings face a perilous journey overland to reach the safety of the water. Females prefer to nest in trees near small, shallow ponds rich with aquatic insects and devoid of predatory fish such as the northern pike. The hen vigorously defends her section of the pond against other bufflehead families to ensure her young have adequate food to grow and prepare for their migration south in October.

Bufflehead populations have been on the rise since early in the century when over shooting severely reduced its numbers. Ongoing research on waterfowl biology and conservation, and carefully monitored bag limits and hunting seasons have led to the bufflehead's recovery. This research and monitoring is funded from revenues generated through the sale of hunting licenses, and federal and state duck stamps. Thanks to hunters, all outdoor recreationists, hunter and viewer alike, can enjoy the bufflehead.

Where to Watch Buffleheads

Head to the coast to see the largest concentrations of buffleheads. Sheltered bays and estuaries are the preferred habitats, but you will also find the birds in smaller numbers in fresh water marshes and ponds at most of the Department's Wildlife Areas or federal Wildlife Refuges. Follow the brown and white binoculars road signs to these watchable wildlife viewing locations:

Bays and Estuaries

Lake Earl Wildlife Area -- Del Norte Co.
Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge -- Humboldt Co.
Bodega Bay State Park -- Sonoma Co.
San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge -- Sonoma/Napa Co.
Elkhorn Slough Ecological Reserve -- Monterey Co.
Morro Bay State Park -- San Luis Obispo Co.
Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve -- Orange Co.
Mission Bay Park -- San Diego Co.
Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge -- San Diego Co.

Freshwater Marshes

Gray Lodge Wildlife Area -- Sutter/Butte Co.
Vic Fazio Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area -- Yolo Co.
Valley Grasslands of Merced Co. -- Merced Co.
Kern National Wildlife Refuge -- Kern Co.
Salton Sea Wildlife Areas and Refuges -- Imperial Co.

You can purchase a *California Wildlife Viewing Guide* which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

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