



Photo: Eric VanderWerf

## Migratory Birds

### Lesser Scaup

*Aythya affinis*

**SPECIES STATUS:**

State recognized as Indigenous

**SPECIES INFORMATION:** The lesser scaup is a medium-sized black and white diving duck (Family: Anatidae), one of the most abundant and widespread ducks in North America. Lesser scaups winter in the Main Hawaiian Islands (MHI), typically arriving in October and departing for Alaska or Canada as early as February. Lesser scaups feed primarily on aquatic invertebrates such as insects, crustaceans, and mollusks; seeds and vegetative parts of aquatic plants are also important. As with many ducks, lesser scaups are sexually dichromatic in plumage, with breeding males showing a dramatic contrast between their white body and black head, neck, throat, and rump. Female plumage is a more monochromatic dark brown. Nonbreeding male plumage shows less contrast, with the body becoming more brown at the margins. Being gregarious, lesser scaups form pair bonds but remain promiscuous during breeding. They are known to hybridize with four other North American duck species (greater scaup, ring-necked duck, redhead, and canvasback) in the wild, and with four others (tufted duck, European pochard, American wigeon, and wood duck) in captivity.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Common throughout the southern and western United States and Mexico during the winter, shifting to the northernmost central U.S., west central Canada, and Alaska during the breeding season. Lesser scaups are also common through Eurasia. In Hawai'i, lesser scaups have been sighted routinely on all of the MHI, but have not been recorded in the NWHI.

**ABUNDANCE:** Lesser scaup surveys (by USFWS) from 1955 through 1995 yield an average breeding population estimate of  $5,512,445 \pm 147,090$  (SE) in North America (the most abundant diving duck in the region), with winter population estimates declining by about half since the 1960s. A fairly common visitor to the Main Hawaiian Islands, Hawai'i State waterbird surveys of lesser scaups from 1986 to 2003 have averaged  $55.7 \pm 20.4$  (SE) birds.

**LOCATION AND CONDITION OF KEY HABITAT:** Winter diet of lesser scaups varies geographically, but specific dietary habits of Hawaiian migrants have not been documented in the published literature. On the continental U.S., lesser scaups are found along lake coastlines, reservoirs, and fresh to brackish coastal bays and estuaries. During severe weather, they may move to more saline waters, and they are more common in such saline habitats than other diving ducks. In Texas, they are found on hypersaline estuaries, usually close to inland freshwater ponds where individuals go to drink. Unlike other, more herbivorous diving ducks, distribution of lesser scaups during migration and winter is not closely related to distribution of aquatic plant foods.

**THREATS:** Primary threats include the following:

- Loss of wetland habitat to development, pollution, or habitat-modifying invasive plants.
- Avian disease.

**CONSERVATION ACTIONS:** To protect the ability of wintering lesser scaups to survive while in Hawai'i and to return in good condition to breeding grounds in North America, statewide and island-specific conservation actions should include:

- Protection of current habitat.
- Protection and restoration of additional wetland habitat, especially where it can be reclaimed from abandoned urban or agricultural uses.

**MONITORING:** Continue surveys of population and distribution in known and likely habitats.

**RESEARCH PRIORITIES:** Little study of visiting lesser scaups has been undertaken, probably in part because of their annual presence and numbers are uncertain. Research priorities should include the following:

- Better understanding of habitat needs and preferences, including foraging and population limiting factors.
- Increased understanding of movements of individuals that overfly the Hawaiian Islands.
- Better understanding of adaptation to modified wintering habitats and how they affect migration routes.

**References:**

Austin JE, Custer CM, Afton AD. 1998. Lesser scaup (*Aythya affinis*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 338 (Poole A, Gill F, editors). Philadelphia, (PA): The Academy of Natural Sciences; and Washington DC: The American Ornithologists' Union.