

## Canvasback *Aythya valisineria*



**Folk Name:** Bullneck, Cannie  
**Status:** Winter Resident/Visitor  
**Abundance:** Rare to Uncommon  
**Habitat:** Lakes, ponds

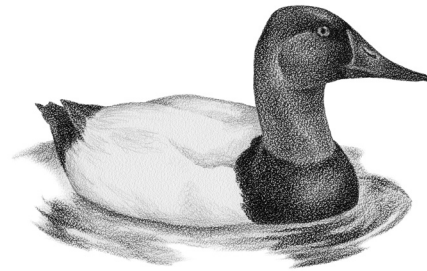
The Canvasback is the first of our five species of diving ducks (sometimes called bay ducks) classified in the genus *Aythya*. These ducks dive for food on larger bodies of water than dabbling ducks, as they need more room to get airborne. Carolina naturalist H.H. Brimley described the difference this way: “It takes more room for a diving duck to get on the wing than for a dabbling duck, for the diving duck has to skitter along the surface using both feet and wings to get up momentum like an airplane taking off, while river ducks can spring off the water into the air in short order.”

At 21 inches in length, the Canvasback is the largest of our bay ducks, and it is the most renowned. The meat of the Canvasback was once considered a superb delicacy at the dinner table, and hunters throughout the eastern states made them a prime target each winter. In 1904, Charlotte’s Gem Restaurant posted this advertisement: “Mallard Duck, Canvas Back Duck, Red-Head Duck, Frog Legs, Western Turkey, Quail on Toast, Oysters in every style. And all these delightful delicacies are served here daily in a manner befitting the most fastidious appetite.”

Regrettably, around the turn of the twentieth century, eastern hunters and market gunners operating along the coast, began to overharvest the Canvasback, Redhead, and many other duck species.

The September 5, 1915, edition of *The Charlotte Observer* carried these words from Henry W. Henshaw, Chief of the U.S. Biological Survey:

The canvas-back, perhaps the most famous of American waterfowl, has purchased its fame at a price. So highly is it prized by the epicure that today he who can afford to dine on canvas-back sets the mark of luxurious living. Not that the canvas-back differs essentially from other ducks, but its exceptional flavor is due to the fact that its favorite food is “wild celery [*Vallisneria americana*],” a long ribbon-like grass which grows in shallow ponds and estuaries. As the plant roots several feet under the surface, only the diving ducks can secure it and the plebian kinds have to be content with such floating fragments as they can pick up or can steal from their more aristocratic relatives. ...Prized alike by sportsmen and epicure the ranks of the canvas-back have been depleted by the relentless pursuit to which it has been subjected.



One hundred years have passed since Henshaw’s words were written. During this time, many laws have been enacted to protect ducks from over harvest, and many conservation plans have been written to help protect and grow duck populations. It is important to note that hunters have been the primary demographic helping to fund modern duck conservation plans. However, the Canvasback was slow to recover. It was added to the conservation “Blue List” in the 1970s and designated a species of Special Concern in the 1980s. The population remained below target goals until 1995 when it began to stabilize. The population of the Canvasback currently hovers around its target goal for recovery, but it remains one of the least populous bay ducks in North America. The 2015 Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey ranked it as having the lowest population of any duck surveyed with a -92% change from the 64-year average. Today, the Canvasback is often a challenge to find in the Carolina Piedmont.

Our earliest arrival date for Canvasback is 27 October in 2002, and our latest Canvasback departure date is 12 March in 2007. However, there is one record of a Canvasback over-summering in the region at Lake Don T. Howell in 2008. The largest Canvasback flock recorded in the region was a group of 30 counted on Concord Lakes on January 2, 1961. Both of Canvasback and Redhead ducks appear to move through the Carolinas in larger numbers in late winter and early spring.



*A flock of Canvasbacks at Twin Lakes in Charlotte. (Phil Fowler)*