

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*



Folk Name: Spoonbill, Broad-bill, Spoon Bill Teal

Status: Migrant, Winter Resident/Visitor

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Lakes, ponds

Take one good look at a Northern Shoveler and you will quickly realize how it acquired its various common names. Its large, conspicuous, spoon-shaped bill is unlike the bill of any other duck in the Carolinas. When viewed from above, the bill appears a bit like a shoe horn, narrow at the base and flaring out widely towards its rounded end, which can be a tad wider than the duck's head. The shoveler is a heavy-bodied dabbling duck related to our teal ducks, but at 19 inches long, it is 3 ½ inches bigger than the Blue-winged and 5 inches bigger than the Green-winged Teal. Like our other dabbling ducks, it prefers shallow waters for foraging but any size pond will do.

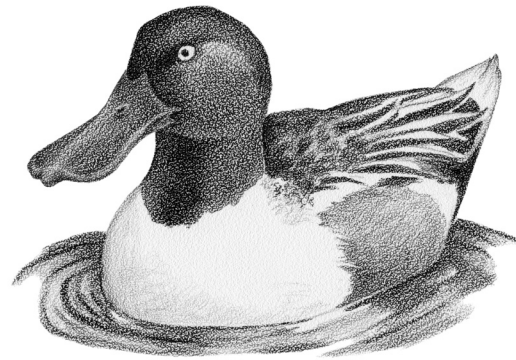
In 1909, T.G. Pearson shared this assessment of the Northern Shoveler with readers of the *Greensboro Daily News*:

The male shoveler is a striking bird and the green of his head often leads the hasty observer at a distance to believe that he is looking at a mallard, the similarity also being heightened in part by the large size of the bird. This species is more common in the Mississippi Valley and the west. In North Carolina, however, they appear in limited numbers usually frequenting fresh and brackish waters. ... The shoveler, while fairly good for food, is not rated high among ducks.

A few years later, North Carolina naturalist H.H. Brimley described watching this duck's unique "shoveling" technique:

They were feeding in very shallow water, with muddy bottom, and their actions were noticeably different from those of any other duck of which I am familiar. ... The noticeable feature of the appearance of these Shovellers was the absence of any erect heads. Every head was down on the water and every bill submerged. The effect was more that of a lot of muskrats wading in about four inches of water than of feeding ducks. Finally, I left the blind and waded out towards them. Even then not a head was raised until I was almost in range. Then every bill came up at once and the flock took flight.

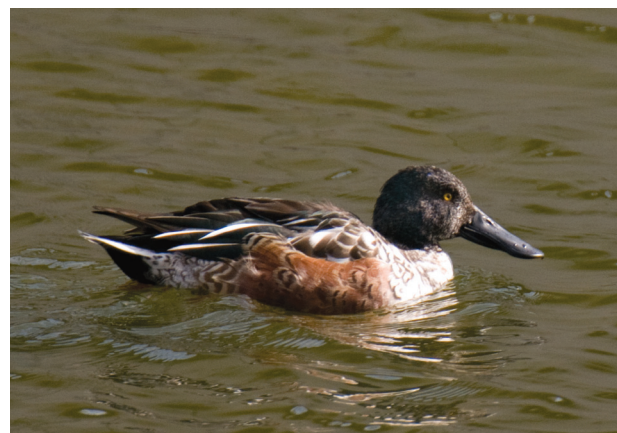
Northern Shovelers are found each year in our region from September to about mid-April. Bruce Neville



reported one at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on the very early date of 7 August in 1988, and one was reported lingering in Charlotte on April 28, 2012. Usually fewer than 10 birds are seen at a time; however, an impressive total of 948 was counted at Pee Dee NWR on January 2, 2010. Historically, this duck was more common in the region during migration, but many mid-winter reports have been received since the turn of the twenty-first century.

Mary Akers, a 12-year-old bird watcher in Charlotte, shared this story of a weekend encounter with a "Spoon Bill Teal," in 1940:

After three days of hard driving rain, Friday afternoon, November 15th, the sun peeped from the gray clouds. It was an invitation for a walk. I put on my coat and overshoes and started out. Down the long wooded drive I went. Being suddenly startled by a flapping of wings, I paused and saw what seemed to be a quail at first glance but as I got closer I saw to my great surprise that it was a duck. It fought nobly as I tried to catch it. Flapping



Male Northern Shoveler. (Jeff Lemons)

its wings and hissing at me, it was finally exhausted and then I gently picked it up. It seemed content to lie in my arms but I knew it was frightened. I felt its heart beating very fast. I carried it back to the house stroking its feathers all the way. It seemed to like that. Once in the warm house, I examined it but found no broken wings. The duck seemed only very tired. Knowing it must be hungry, I offered it corn, sardines, and even oysters but all to no avail. It ate nothing. Then it occurred to me that ducks like water. I filled a bowl of cool water, picked it up, and held it so it could drink. To my amazement it jumped with a splash into the bowl. From then on I knew it would only be content when near water.

Saturday morning I took the duck to a veterinarian. He said it was a Spoon Bill Teal

flying South from New York and Canada. It must have fresh sea food, such as shrimp to eat. When I brought the duck home it was very thirsty, so I got a big pan and put several shrimp on the bottom. The duck would dive down to the bottom of the pan for the shrimp.

Sunday dawned bright and warm. I put the duck on the sunny terrace thinking that it was too weak to fly away as yet. While I was at church, the bright sun and the falling brown leaves must have brought back memories of other Spoon Bills flying South. With one great pull of the wings, the duck was once more in the great blue sky. After seeing his box empty I looked South and said, "I hope you have had a pleasant week-end."