

Ducks make their way to Meadows

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I like to think of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission's DeKorte Park as a 110-acre bed and breakfast for birds - with an ever-changing

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guest book of short-term and long-term visitors.

With winter approaching, most of the shorebirds have headed south, and a wonderful array of ducks has been moving in. If you have a good pair of binoculars, you'll be able to see all kinds of nifty waterfowl in the coming weeks.

What's the attraction? "Ducks are incredibly beautiful," says NJMC Naturalist Michael Newhouse. "Some of the feather patterns on these birds are just spectacular—including ducks that many people consider drab. Take gadwalls. If you get them up close, you can see how intricate their feathers are."

According to Newhouse, the influx of waterfowl "is coming from up north—the Saint Lawrence River, Canada and the northern USA. The waters freeze up north, and all the birds move south to find areas to feed."

In the coming weeks, you should be able to see lots of ruddy ducks, northern shovelers, northern pintail, green-winged teal, black ducks, gadwall, canvasbacks and buffleheads.

"Hopefully, we'll get our annual Eurasian green-winged teal that has been coming here for about



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Canvasbacks at DeKorte Park last winter.

15 winters," says Newhouse.

This unusual-for-this-area duck has been showing up in the same tidal impoundment each year, prompting the Meadowlands Commission to dub the impoundment "Teal Pool." It's right across the parking lot from the William D. McDowell Observatory and adjacent science classroom building, with the solar panels on top.

Typically, the teal shows up the last week in December and hangs out in the impoundment at low tide. We think it's the same bird because we only get one, it's a rare bird, and it always winters in the same spot.

Like the more plentiful American green-winged teal, this guy likes to feed in the mud at low tide. Unlike the American green-winged teal, this guy doesn't bolt as readily when people approach—which makes him a lot easier to photograph.

Other ducks have their favorite feeding areas as well. "Dabbling ducks need shallow water," says Newhouse. "They just tip their butts up in the air and see whatever they can get off on the bottom of the impoundment. Diving ducks like deeper water so they can dive under and get their food that way."

Most of the ducks should be staying at the DeKorte B&B for a while, which is good news for us birdwatchers. "The Canvasbacks may leave as early as mid-February," says Newhouse, "but most of them will stay through mid-March."

NJMC Communications Officer Jim Wright maintains the Commission's daily nature blog, meadowblog.net - featuring beautiful photography and the latest info on the region's abundant natural wonders.