

Falcated duck at refuge is truly one in a million

by Tom Stienstra, San Francisco Chronicle

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A beautiful Asian falcated duck that is thousands of miles off course has been wintering for the past month at the Colusa National Wildlife Refuge in the Central Valley east of Williams. Photo by Mike Peters

Of the 1.2 million ducks and geese at the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex, people from across America have been fixated for a month over a single one: a falcated duck, a nomadic teal from Asia or perhaps Russia.

Most days this past week, the little guy positioned himself on an island 60 yards from the viewing deck at Colusa National Wildlife Refuge.

The chance to see it will probably end in the next week.

The falcated duck has captured the affections of thousands who have made the trip to see it, as well as wildlife lovers from across America who have heard of it. It has also inspired many people to get outdoors and visit the refuge who otherwise have had little orientation to birds, wildlife and the outdoor experience.

The duck is called "falcated" because its long wing feathers are curved and then taper to a point at the tail. A beautiful bird, its head is shiny green and bronze, its feathers silvery.

The best show last week was Tuesday, when it hung out at the island most of the day. Then, on Wednesday, he arrived at 3:30 p.m., and Thursday was there at dawn. The weather was clear and calm, warm in the afternoons. Anybody could drive up, park and take in this once-in-a-lifetime moment.

With binoculars, or with a spotting scope mounted on a tripod or clasped to the railing of the deck, you could zoom in. The duck seems to project a personality that touches everybody who sees it.

Opportunity is fleeting

The first procession of winter storms expected this week means the window to see the wayward duck is probably passing.

"I was thinking the same thing, that if you want to see it, you better come this week," said Mike Peters, manager for the Colusa refuge. Storms, he explained, push waterfowl out of their routine and change the locations of where they rest, feed and water.

Of the vast places to land, all the wetlands, refuges, rice fields, sinks, ponds, rivers, sloughs and bypasses in Alaska, Canada and the western United States, the odds of such a rare bird landing on an island in a refuge 60 yards from a viewing deck, and then staying there for more than a month, are practically like seeing Bigfoot.

The location is a short distance off Highway 20, just west of Colusa. You drive into the refuge, park and walk a short distance to the viewing deck. In front of you is a marsh and island-specked pond, where in one sweep of the eye, you can take in 5,000 ducks and geese.

At one point this past week, there were 500 white-fronted geese within 40 yards of the viewing deck. You could go a lifetime and not see that either.

On the refuge driving tour, one marsh had roughly 20,000 snow geese within view. Along a slough, a rookery of night herons had taken posts amid willows. Pintail, wigeon and teal floated around and bobbed for food. A mated pair of mallards occasionally sailed overhead. The inevitable coots looked as happy as I've ever seen them. At dawn, flocks of 5,000 blackbirds flew in waves above the valley floor, where the swarms seemed to be connected by telekinesis as they rose up and down in dramatic dipsy doos. In the background, you could hear owls hooting, trying to entice a mate.

Photographers descend

At the viewing deck and driving tour, a photographer from Petaluma, Andy Lacasse, spotted a bald eagle, yellowlegs, black-necked stilt, Eurasian wigeon and an enigmatic and beautiful cinnamon teal that emerged after hiding in tules for hours.

Many of the onlookers are not bird-watching fanatics with field guides and expensive binoculars and cameras. They are people who are curious that a spectacle that is so much fun is so easily available.

"Most of the people are so warm and friendly, spotting the birds, and they will help each other to identify all of them," Peters said. "We're seeing people who are not outdoors very much, not exposed to this. The rare falcated duck has brought them in."

The falcated duck is off course by thousands of miles. It arrived on Dec. 8, and since then has settled into the Colusa refuge. Previous verified sightings of the species were in Lassen County in the winter of 2002-2003 and in Orange County in 1969.

The word of it spread quickly across America on birder websites. In a week, photographers with \$25,000 in equipment and 600mm zoom lenses had flocked to the site.

On Wednesday, for instance, people lined up shoulder to shoulder said they were from as far away as Massachusetts and Florida, or as close as Petaluma, Berkeley, Placerville and Auburn. They all have one thing in common: many paths, one truth.

If you want to go

Where: Colusa National Wildlife Refuge.

Location: East of Williams (Colusa County), about a 60-mile drive from Sacramento, 120 miles from San Francisco.

Cost: Free to those with \$15 federal duck stamp, which pays for national wildlife refuges, or \$6 per vehicle, honor system.

Waterfowl numbers: Currently 923,000 ducks, 300,000 geese on the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex; includes 421,000 pintail ducks and more than 200,000 white geese (includes snow geese and Ross' geese).

Recent sightings of note: Falcated duck, emperor goose, Eurasian wigeon, mountain plover, peregrine falcon, bald eagle, white pelican, yellow-headed blackbird.

How to get there: In the Sacramento Valley, take Interstate 5 to Williams and the exit for Highway 20 East. Drive east toward Colusa for 6.5 miles (if you see John Deere dealership on your left, you have gone a quarter-mile too far) and look for a dirt road on the right (south). Turn right on this dirt road and look for the sign "Colusa National Wildlife Refuge" on the right. Continue straight ahead for the driving tour, parking area and viewing deck.

Note: On Highway 20, do not turn on Lone Star Road (also signed for the refuge).

Contact: Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge, (530) 934-2801; 24-hour info, (530) 934-7774; fws.gov/sacramentovalleyrefuges.

For a photo gallery from Colusa National Wildlife Refuge, go to sfgate.com. E-mail Tom Stienstra at tstienstra@sfchronicle.com.

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