

## Highlights from Feb 15 Bird Walk to the South Platte – Adams County

Chuck Aid February 16, 2020 :

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We spent the morning visiting two areas along the South Platte River between 82<sup>nd</sup> and 64<sup>th</sup> Avenues. Things got exciting pretty quickly as we scoped one of the Thornton Gravel Ponds just north of Steele Street Park. There were at least six Bald Eagles flying around, from an all-brown first-year bird to full-on adults. So, let's talk just a bit about these guys. It takes Bald Eagles five years to obtain their full adult plumage with the white head and tail. During their first year they have dark brown eyes, a dark bill, and are mostly brownish overall. During subsequent years the eyes become light brown and eventually yellow, the bill too becomes increasingly yellow. The plumage during the intermediate years can be quite variable but tends toward a brown and white mish-mash. For example, a first-year bird tends to have a brown belly with white underwing coverts (your field guide should have a picture showing the underwing coverts somewhere in the front of the book); most second-year birds develop a white belly with extensive white underwing coverts and some white in the underwing secondaries and tail; third-year birds (see photo above) tend to have darker bellies than second-year birds and the underwings, while still having some white blotchiness, are darker; fourth-year birds are tending towards full adulthood with a blackish-brown belly having some white flecking, and the hood and tail are mostly white but not completely. Our birds on Saturday encompassed the full range of possibilities, and it was great to see that variability.



Common Merganser (c) Bill Schmoker

For the day we had fourteen species of ducks, which included all three species of mergansers, certainly among the most eye-pleasing group of ducks there is. This same first pond had well over 200 Common Mergansers, and we got great looks! Northern Shovelers were everywhere, and we had to pick through them to find some of the less plentiful species such as American Wigeon and Lesser Scaup. Fortunately, we were able to entertain ourselves by listening to the slew of various duck vocalizations. Check these out (courtesy of Xeno-Canto) – calls of Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, and Common Goldeneye, and then there's also a recording of the wings of a Common Goldeneye in flight (you'll understand why one of the colloquial names for them is Whistling Duck).

Gadwall

Green-winged Teal

Common Goldeneye

Common Goldeneye – wings



Barrow's Goldeneye (c) Mick Thompson

Last, but not least, we had great, close looks at a nice group of Wood Ducks. Outstanding! And then to top it all off we had wonderful views of a single male Barrow's Goldeneye. This is a great bird to see here in Colorado! They breed very rarely on mountain lakes and ponds (in recent years at Echo Lake), and they are a rare winter resident at lower elevations on reservoirs and rivers near the mountains. For some time now it has generally been possible to see one or two along the Platte north of Denver, and it was one of my target-species for the morning.



My other target bird was the Black-crowned Night-Heron which tends to be readily seen where the effluent from the metro wastewater plant comes into the river. As many as 23 have been reported here recently, and we saw nine. Black-crowned Night-Herons are opportunistic, night-feeding foragers, eating a wide variety of foods including earthworms, aquatic and terrestrial insects, crayfish, clams, mussels, fish, amphibians, lizards, snakes, turtles, small mammals, birds, eggs, carrion, plant materials, and garbage/refuse from landfills. It seems quite evident that there is plentiful food for them on this section of the Platte.

So, despite the whiffiness of the air in that particular part of town, we had a great morning!

Best,

Chuck

Species Name	Species Count
Canada Goose	85
Wood Duck	7
Northern Shoveler	1,880
Gadwall	132
American Wigeon	11
Mallard	130

Northern Pintail	30
Green-winged Teal	78
Lesser Scaup	20
Bufflehead	54
Common Goldeneye	171
Barrow's Goldeneye	1
Hooded Merganser	12
Common Merganser	230
Red-breasted Merganser	3
Rock Pigeon	16
Eurasian Collared-Dove	4
American Coot	150
Killdeer	2
Ring-billed Gull	45
Herring Gull	2
Double-crested Cormorant	1
Black-crowned Night-Heron	9
Bald Eagle	6
Red-tailed Hawk	5
Belted Kingfisher	2
Northern Flicker	1
American Kestrel	1
Black-billed Magpie	5
Black-capped Chickadee	8
European Starling	2
House Finch	2
Dark-eyed Junco	1
Song Sparrow	1
Red-winged Blackbird	4
Brewer's Blackbird	13