

= Northern pintail =

The pintail or northern pintail (*Anas acuta*) is a duck with wide geographic distribution that breeds in the northern areas of Europe , Asia and North America . It is migratory and winters south of its breeding range to the equator . Unusually for a bird with such a large range , it has no geographical subspecies if the possibly conspecific duck Eaton 's pintail is considered to be a separate species .

This is a large duck , and the male 's long central tail feathers give rise to the species ' English and scientific names . Both sexes have blue @-@ grey bills and grey legs and feet . The drake is more striking , having a thin white stripe running from the back of its chocolate @-@ coloured head down its neck to its mostly white undercarriage . The drake also has attractive grey , brown , and black patterning on its back and sides . The hen 's plumage is more subtle and subdued , with drab brown feathers similar to those of other female dabbling ducks . Hens make a coarse quack and the drakes a flute @-@ like whistle .

The northern pintail is a bird of open wetlands which nests on the ground , often some distance from water . It feeds by dabbling for plant food and adds small invertebrates to its diet during the nesting season . It is highly gregarious when not breeding , forming large mixed flocks with other species of duck . This duck 's population is affected by predators , parasites and avian diseases . Human activities , such as agriculture , hunting and fishing , have also had a significant impact on numbers . Nevertheless , owed to the huge range and large population of this species , it is not threatened globally .

= = Taxonomy = =

This species was first described by Linnaeus in his *Systema naturae* in 1758 as *Anas acuta* . The scientific name comes from two Latin words : *anas* , meaning " duck " , and *acuta* , which comes from the verb *acuere* , " to sharpen " ; the species term , like the English name , refers to the pointed tail of the male in breeding plumage . Within the large dabbling duck genus *Anas* , the northern pintail 's closest relatives are other pintails , such as the yellow @-@ billed pintail (*A. georgica*) and Eaton 's pintail (*A. eatoni*) . The pintails are sometimes separated in the genus *Dafila* (described by Stephens , 1824) , an arrangement supported by morphological , molecular and behavioural data . The famous British ornithologist Sir Peter Scott gave this name to his daughter , the artist *Dafila Scott* .

Eaton 's pintail has two subspecies , *A. e. eatoni* (the Kerguelen pintail) of Kerguelen Islands , and *A. e. drygalskyi* (the Crozet pintail) of Crozet Islands , and was formerly considered conspecific with the northern hemisphere 's northern pintail . Sexual dimorphism is much less marked in the southern pintails , with the male 's breeding appearance being similar to the female plumage . Unusually for a species with such a large range , northern pintail has no geographical subspecies if Eaton 's pintail is treated as a separate species . A claimed extinct subspecies from Manra Island , Tristram 's pintail , *A. a. modesta* , appears to be indistinguishable from the nominate form .

= = Description = =

The northern pintail is a fairly large duck with a wing chord of 23 @. @ 6 ? 28 @. @ 2 cm (9 @. @ 3 ? 11 @. @ 1 in) and wingspan of 80 ? 95 cm (31 ? 37 in) . The male is 59 ? 76 cm (23 ? 30 in) in length and weighs 450 ? 1 @, @ 360 g (0 @. @ 99 ? 3 @. @ 00 lb) , and therefore is considerably larger than the female , which is 51 ? 64 cm (20 ? 25 in) long and weighs 454 ? 1 @, @ 135 g (1 @. @ 001 ? 2 @. @ 502 lb) . The northern pintail broadly overlaps in size with the similarly @-@ widespread mallard , but is more slender , elongated and gracile , with a relatively longer neck and (in males) a longer tail . The unmistakable breeding plumaged male has a chocolate @-@ brown head and white breast with a white stripe extending up the side of the neck . Its upperparts and sides are grey , but elongated grey feathers with black central stripes are draped across the back from the shoulder area . The vent area is yellow , contrasting with the black underside of the tail , which has the central feathers elongated to as much as 10 cm (3 @. @ 9 in) . The bill is bluish and

the legs are blue @-@ grey .

The adult female is mainly scalloped and mottled in light brown with a more uniformly grey @-@ brown head , and its pointed tail is shorter than the male 's ; it is still easily identified by its shape , long neck , and long grey bill . In non @-@ breeding (eclipse) plumage , the drake pintail looks similar to the female , but retains the male upperwing pattern and long grey shoulder feathers . Juvenile birds resemble the female , but are less neatly scalloped and have a duller brown speculum with a narrower trailing edge .

The pintail walks well on land , and swims well . It has a very fast flight , with its wings slightly swept @-@ back , rather than straight out from the body like other ducks . In flight , the male shows a black speculum bordered white at the rear and pale rufous at the front , whereas the female 's speculum is dark brown bordered with white , narrowly at the front edge but very prominently at the rear , being visible at a distance of 1 @,@ 600 m (0 @.@ 99 mi) .

The male 's call is a soft proop @-@ proop whistle , similar to that of the common teal , whereas the female has a mallard @-@ like descending quack , and a low croak when flushed .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

This dabbling duck breeds across northern areas of Eurasia south to about Poland and Mongolia , and in Canada , Alaska and the Midwestern United States . It winters mainly south of its breeding range , reaching almost to the equator in Panama , northern sub @-@ Saharan Africa and tropical South Asia . Small numbers migrate to Pacific islands , particularly Hawaii , where a few hundred birds winter on the main islands in shallow wetlands and flooded agricultural habitats . Transoceanic journeys also occur : a bird that was caught and ringed in Labrador , Canada , was shot by a hunter in England nine days later , and Japanese @-@ ringed birds have been recovered from six US states east to Utah and Mississippi . In parts of the range , such as Great Britain and the northwestern United States , the pintail may be present all year .

The northern pintail 's breeding habitat is open unwooded wetlands , such as wet grassland , lakesides or tundra . In winter , it will utilise a wider range of open habitats , such as sheltered estuaries , brackish marshes and coastal lagoons . It is highly gregarious outside the breeding season and forms very large mixed flocks with other ducks .

= = Behaviour = =

= = = Breeding = = =

Both sexes reach sexual maturity at one year of age . The male mates with the female by swimming close to her with his head lowered and tail raised , continually whistling . If there is a group of males , they will chase the female in flight until only one drake is left . The female prepares for copulation , which takes place in the water , by lowering her body ; the male then bobs his head up and down and mounts the female , taking the feathers on the back of her head in his mouth . After mating , he raises his head and back and whistles .

Breeding takes place between April and June , with the nest being constructed on the ground and hidden amongst vegetation in a dry location , often some distance from water . It is a shallow scrape on the ground lined with plant material and down . The female lays seven to nine cream @-@ coloured eggs at the rate of one per day ; the eggs are 55 mm x 38 mm (2 @.@ 2 in x 1 @.@ 5 in) in size and weigh 45 g (1 @.@ 6 oz) , of which 7 % is shell . If predators destroy the first clutch , the female can produce a replacement clutch as late as the end of July . The hen alone incubates the eggs for 22 to 24 days before they hatch . The precocial downy chicks are then led by the female to the nearest body of water , where they feed on dead insects on the water surface . The chicks fledge in 46 to 47 days after hatching , but stay with the female until she has completed moulting .

Around three @-@ quarters of chicks live long enough to fledge , but not more than half of those

survive long enough to reproduce . The maximum recorded age is 27 years and 5 months for a Dutch bird .

= = = Feeding = = =

The pintail feeds by dabbling and upending in shallow water for plant food mainly in the evening or at night , and therefore spends much of the day resting . Its long neck enables it to take food items from the bottom of water bodies up to 30 cm (12 in) deep , which are beyond the reach of other dabbling ducks like the Mallard .

The winter diet is mainly plant material including seeds and rhizomes of aquatic plants , but the pintail sometimes feeds on roots , grain and other seeds in fields , though less frequently than other *Anas* ducks . During the nesting season , this bird eats mainly invertebrate animals , including aquatic insects , molluscs and crustaceans .

= = Health = =

Pintail nests and chicks are vulnerable to predation by mammals , such as foxes and badgers , and birds like gulls , crows and magpies . The adults can take flight to escape terrestrial predators , but nesting females in particular may be surprised by large carnivores such as bobcats . Large birds of prey , such as northern goshawks , will take ducks from the ground , and some falcons , including the gyrfalcon , have the speed and power to catch flying birds .

It is susceptible to a range of parasites including *Cryptosporidium* , *Giardia* , tapeworms , blood parasites and external feather lice , and is also affected by other avian diseases . It is often the dominant species in major mortality events from avian botulism and avian cholera , and can also contract avian influenza , the H5N1 strain of which is highly pathogenic and occasionally infects humans .

The northern pintail is a popular species for game shooting because of its speed , agility , and excellent eating qualities , and is hunted across its range . Although one of the world 's most numerous ducks , the combination of hunting with other factors has led to population declines , and local restrictions on hunting have been introduced at times to help conserve numbers .

This species ' preferred habitat of shallow water is naturally susceptible to problems such as drought or the encroachment of vegetation , but this duck 's habitat might be increasingly threatened by climate change . Populations are also affected by the conversion of wetlands and grassland to arable crops , depriving the duck of feeding and nesting areas . Spring planting means that many nests of this early breeding duck are destroyed by farming activities , and a Canadian study showed that more than half of the surveyed nests were destroyed by agricultural work such as ploughing and harrowing .

Hunting with lead shot , along with the use of lead sinkers in angling , has been identified as a major cause of lead poisoning in waterfowl , which often feed off the bottom of lakes and wetlands where the shot collects . A Spanish study showed that northern pintail and common pochard were the species with the highest levels of lead shot ingestion , higher than in northern countries of the western Palearctic flyway , where lead shot has been banned . In the United States , Canada , and many western European countries , all shot used for waterfowl must now be non @-@ toxic , and therefore may not contain any lead .

= = Status = =

The northern pintail has a large range , estimated at 28 @, @ 400 @, @ 000 km² (11 @, @ 000 @, @ 000 sq mi) , and a population estimated at 5 @. @ 3 ? 5 @. @ 4 million individuals . It is therefore not believed to meet the IUCN Red List threshold criterion of a population decline of more than 30 % in ten years or three generations , and is evaluated as Least Concern .

In the Palaeartic , breeding populations are declining in much of the range , including its stronghold in Russia . In other regions , populations are stable or fluctuating .

Pintails in North America at least have been badly affected by avian diseases , with the breeding population falling from more than 10 million in 1957 to 3 @. @ 5 million by 1964 . Although the species has recovered from that low point , the breeding population in 1999 was 30 % below the long @-@ term average , despite years of major efforts focused on restoring the species . In 1997 , an estimated 1 @. @ 5 million water birds , the majority being northern pintails , died from avian botulism during two outbreaks in Canada and Utah .

The northern pintail is one of the species to which the Agreement on the Conservation of African @-@ Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) applies , but it has no special status under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) , which regulates international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants .