

ON THE BIRDING TRAIL AT HENRYS LAKE

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Henrys Lake is on the Idaho State Birding Trail and considered an Important Bird Area by Idaho. Henrys is an important stopover spot in spring and fall for many species of migratory waterfowl. Being on the eastern edge of the Pacific Flyway and western edge of the Central Flyway makes for interesting bird watching during spring and fall months. Of course, there are birds that breed here and stay all season, migrating anywhere from short distances to the nearest open water (Trumpeter Swans) to most dabbling ducks that migrate to the Southern United States of Arizona and Texas.

Dabblers are those that tip, feeding on subsurface weeds and insects. Legs are centrally placed so they walk easier and include Teals, Mallards, Scaups, and others. They take off directly from the water. Diving ducks are a diverse group, most often found in deeper water, and dive to feed. Legs are placed further back on bodies, so they walk with difficulty, but can propel themselves to depths. Most need a running start to take off from the water

There are close to a hundred of species of waterfowl that come through the Caldera, and here are a few of the most frequent species you are likely to discover if you are out looking for them, most pictures are of males. Females are much harder to discern, as are birds that have molted out of breeding colors. If you find a male, a female may be close by during breeding season. Do your birding in the morning hours, as they are more active before the heat of the day sets in. You'll need binoculars, a Sibley's guide is best, but any birding book will do, and something to make notes on. Look for the special markings that distinguish the species, what habitat you saw it in, when you saw it, its behavior or flight pattern to help you identify it. A spotting scope helps, especially when the sun is lower in the sky as in fall and spring.

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AMERICAN AVOCET



IDFG Photo

Beautiful shorebirds that are usually found in mud flats of the lake, in flocks, and you can usually hear them come in for a landing before you see them. Usually see them in summer.

BUFFLEHEAD



Bufflehead is one of two species with lots of white (the other being Goldeneye). Note the white on back of head. Seen most months of open water at Henrys.

AMERICAN COOT



Coots are ubiquitous at Henrys, but when they start showing up by the thousands, season change is afoot. Any huge flock on the lake usually contains some of these small, compact birds.

DOUBLE CRESTED CORMORANT



Don't under-estimate these fish eaters. They eat smaller fish such as chubs and you see many cormorants if you look. Seen sunbathing on sandy shores, they are low riders in the water, and because they are dark, hard to notice. There is reportedly a rookery here at Henrys, so they are here all season.

RING-NECKED DUCK



Note the black back. It distinguishes it from the Scaup which has a grey back, but good luck on the females that are both brownish grey birds. Very common bird all season long at Henrys. A diving duck, note the sharpened tip to the bill that is more characteristic of a diving duck, vs. a dabbler. The Ruddy is a notable exception.

RUDDY DUCK



“It’s a Ruddy!”. You can pick them out of a crowd by the blue bill coupled with the tail that stands up tall and straight. Not here in large numbers, but you’ll find them in a large flock of other ducks, just doing their own thing. Seen most months of the open water season.

BARROW’S GOLDENEYE



Note the white “comma” in front of the eye, that’s what distinguishes this bird, and tells you it’s not the Common Goldeneye with a much rounder comma. This bird is also a sign of winter coming, as we see them usually in fall as they move south. This female is pretty easy but others like Scaup or Ring-neck can be tough to identify. Not here in large numbers and usually Aug-Oct.

EARED GREBE



Note the red eye. Grebes are the most fun to watch and listen to. If you are tubing the lake you can hear their constant chatter in the bays, they are even making noise before the ice is off the lake! They are busy birds, scurrying about and chattering always. You often find this guy out in the middle of the lake. Several types of grebes are smallish birds, and this one is too. Their chicks are red fuzz balls, and all grebes carry their chicks on their backs, which may be hard to spot.

RED NECKED GREBE



Ralph Hocken Photo

These Grebes are common on Henrys and fairly easy to spot with their longer neck and distinctive white chin and cheeks, and beautiful red neck. Note the bill, characteristic of a diving grebe, whereas ducks have the flattened bills made for dabbling around in aquatic plants. They nest here and can be found in the marshy bays all around the lake most of the season.

WESTERN GREBE



Usually seen by themselves in open water, note the red eye and how the eye is within the black of the head. This distinguishes it from the Clark's Grebe, also seen at Henrys, where the white of the face curves up to enclose the eye within it. We see it a lot on the north side, but may be seen all around the lake during most of the summer months.

GREAT BLUE HERON



IDFG Photo

The GBH is seen throughout the western United States along rivers and lake shores. Usually standing stone still, you may overlook it until it makes a move. They wait for food to come within striking distance before they make a lightning fast strike. Wait and watch for a while to see them feed. When overhead, herons fly with necks folded in as opposed to Sandhill Cranes who fly with necks outstretched. We'll see one or two on some shoreline usually between June to August.

COMMON LOON



Riding fairly low in the water, loons are very distinctive with their beautiful calls and their checkered backs. Most commonly heard on the north side, their presence here is spotty during summer. If you are on the lookout, you may see them bays on the north side. There is no documented nesting at Henrys, but a nesting pair has been found at IP Reservoir. Loons in Eastern Idaho can be seen more commonly at Grays Lake NWR east of Blackfoot.

COMMON MERGANSER



There are three merganser species seen at Henrys. Common, Hooded and Red Breasted. True to its name, we see common most often. Wild Rose and State Park areas are the most likely places to find them. Note the hook on the bill, they are divers for food. Mergansers carry their clutches of chicks on their backs. These birds nest in tree cavities and are year round in northern latitudes, tips of eastern and northern Idaho included.

BLACK CROWNED NIGHT HERON



IDFG Photo

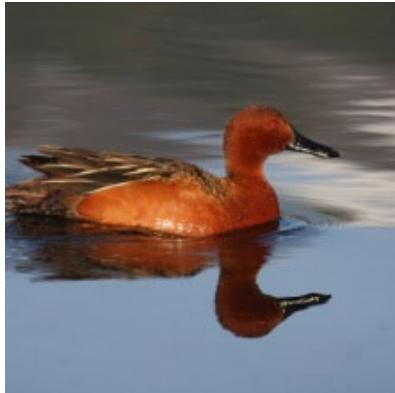
This very elusive bird is most always spotted perching within the branches of large willow. We see them in ponds at Goose Bay, in willows on south shore and along the southwest corner. Look for an out-of-place buff blob in a large willow and get out your scope or binocs. It's likely to be a Black Crowned Night Heron. Now look for the mate, usually close by. We usually see at least one pair each summer season in June-August.

LESSER SCAUP



Lesser Scaup are one of the most frequently seen species seen at Henrys. They breed here, and we see them almost every month of open water season. Compare them with Ring-neck Ducks. In full breeding colors you may think they are easy to tell. In males, look for the definite black back on the Ring neck, or is it gray? Then it's a Scaup. Females are another story, but when side-by side (usually never!), the female Ring-neck will have a darker back than the female Scaup. Unfortunately, you don't always have the benefit of perfect lighting.

CINNAMON TEAL



IDFG Photo

There are three Teal species: Cinnamon, Blue Winged and Green Wing. We most commonly see the cinnamon but have seen the other two pictured below. Teal are small ducks, often seen in marshy bays in the summer months of June-August. Beautiful, it's a prize for the day to see one. The Cinnamon is identified by its bright cinnamon color and small size, and all Teal are dabblers, so a butt in the air helps seal the identification. Females of Cinnamon and Blue Winged look very much alike.

BLUE WINGED TEAL



As you can see, it's just a dab of blue. Females are similar in coloration to female mallards: spotty brown ducks. The blue dab may or not be seen in the females, and a mallard has a blue dab too! But the smaller size and dark bill of the teal is different than you find in a Mallard. Mallards are much more common than teal at Henrys.

GREEN WINGED TEAL



If you are lucky enough to see a male, then there is little trouble identifying it. The green dab on the female may show, or if swimming on the water, maybe not. So, is it a Cinnamon, Blue Winged or a Green Winged? Look for the buff patch on the underside of the female's tail, or the smaller bill than the other two. If you aren't turning the pages of your guiding book by now, it may be hard to make a call! Look for teal during the summer months, the smallest species of dabbling ducks on Henrys.

AMERICAN WIDGEON



Again, it's so easy when it's a male. Look for the buff patch above the bill, the blue bill and the iridescent green head. Also note the shape of the head, the prominent tail, and the white patch on the hip. They are common ducks at Henrys, use your guidebook to learn the differences in head shape and tails from Mallards or other dabbling ducks of the same size (teal are smaller), and you will soon learn the "widgeony" look. We see them on all sides of the lake.

REDHEAD DUCK



The Redhead is a duck we usually see in fall as it migrates through. It looks somewhat like a Scaup, but without the “scaupy” taller head and it has the distinctive red head. Note the blue bill with the distinctive black tip.

NORTHERN PINTAIL



The Pintail is also an occasional sight at Henrys, usually in early fall months as it migrates south. Note the long neck and beautiful long tail. The tail is a give-away. It is a slender and elegant bird.

These are just a few of the waterfowl we see at Henrys. We see many species such as Canvasback, Dowitchers, Marbled Godwits, Snow and Canada geese, Pie-billed Grebe, gulls and terns, American White Pelicans, Tundra and Trumpeter Swans, Northern Shovelers, Wilson's Snipe, and Mallards.

A birding guidebook is essential. Sibleys shows all the females of dabblers and divers so it is easier to compare one species to another for identification. Some best places to see a variety of birds is the marsh below the new State Park expansion, the corner waters of the southside access, and Frome County Park- looking both up the north shore from the docks and looking south. Pintail Point fishing access point can be good too. In early and late season, migrant birds will be present, mid-summer has more summer resident birds. Have fun out there!