

SPECIES OF THE MONTH**LONG-TAILED DUCK****DECEMBER 2025**

Female (l) and male (r) Long-tailed Duck in alternate plumage, 23 January 2025, Salt River, Granite Reef Recreation Area. Photo by Gordon Karre

The Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) is the world's deepest diving duck. In the pursuit of crustaceans, mollusks, and fish eggs, it is known to dive as deep as 66 m. This hardy arctic species breeds in far northern tundra and taiga habitat around the globe. It frequently nests in small groups on islands or peninsulas in lakes, often in association with Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*). After breeding, it migrates to cold water coasts and lakes of North America, western Greenland, western Iceland, eastern Asia, and the Great Lakes.

Most large Arizona lakes have open water all winter. Because of this there have been more than 100 reports of Long-tailed Duck throughout the state, 73% of which are from November through February. The earliest fall report is 10 October 2006, and the latest spring report is 8 May 1989. Most reports are of single birds, although 5 were reported together at Lake Mohave on 13 January 1976.

Long-tailed Ducks have an unusual plumage sequence. Instead of most waterfowls' 2 annual plumages these ducks have 3—basic, supplemental, and alternate. As a result, plumage is changing nearly continuously between spring and fall. Strangely, the alternate plumage is worn only in winter, while the basic plumage is acquired in spring and worn for the breeding season. The most distinctive feature, one that gives this species its name, is the male's 2 long, dark tail feathers seen in all plumages. Sometimes, however, these feathers are underwater and not visible. The alternate male plumage is primarily white with a gray patch around the eye and a black loreal patch that extends down the neck. It has a large dark band across the lower breast that extends to the belly. The back, rump, and upper tail are blackish brown, and the lower belly is white to the tail. In the spring, the white feathers on the male's head are replaced with black. Its face remains gray with a white ring around the eye and a white supercilium. In all plumages it has some pink on the bill.

The female in alternate plumage has a white head and neck with a large dark-brown patch on the lower cheek. The crown and back of the neck varies from brown to gray. Its back ranges from chestnut to dark gray and its breast is brown to gray. In basic plumage, the female's back and head are blackish brown with white around the eye. The breast and flanks are dark brown or gray, and the belly is white.

Many aspects of the Long-tailed Duck's biology are unknown, particularly regarding its breeding success and its attraction to varied breeding, staging, and wintering grounds. Additional research is needed.