

RING-NECKS ARE MYSTERIOUS

DONALD D. FOLEY
Supervising Wildlife Biologist

This does *not* mean ringnecked pheasants, even though they may have their own enigmas! The bird I mean is not so gaudy, but he may be even more neatly dressed; he is not so much sought after by hunters, but he is eagerly noted by bird-watchers. He is the secretive but not too shy diving duck which has only recently "invaded" the East as a breeder — the Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*), also known as ringbill, blackjack or swamp bluebill.

Many things give him an aura of mystery — a tinge of something of the unknown. First of all, he has only been officially noted as living in New York since 1946, when broods were identified on Jones Pond (Figure 1), although he has probably been here since at least the early thirties. The range now occupied in the State is fairly well circumscribed (Figure 2), but we are also learning more each year. The actual habitat the ring-neck has selected here in the East — the wild, boggy ponds and sloughs of Maine, New Brunswick and New York — also excites our interest and amazement. And of their migrations, what do we know? We know little of the birds' movements beyond it's home range and wintering ground, since so few have ever been banded — pitifully few in New York — and because it is one of our two native breeding diving duck species. But all this just adds to the glamour and mystery of the bird.

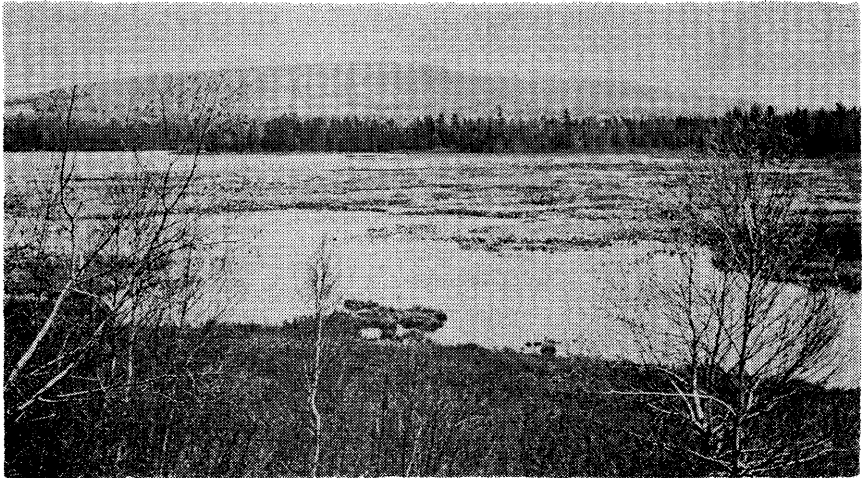


Figure 1. Jones Pond near Gabriels in Franklin County, where Ring-necks were First Found Breeding in New York, in 1946.

While many small, scattered tidbits of ring-neck lore are given in the several standard ornithological texts and manuals, the most authoritative as well as the most entertaining to me is Howard Mendall's "The Ring-necked Duck in the Northeast." It is technically a monograph, and specifically

Bulletin #16, vol. LX, 1958, in the University of Maine series, but let this not frighten you off from the enjoyment of reading it. While I may be partial to anything connected with waterfowl, I know I am not being biased with praise in this case because hardly had I happily savored it when others did too. It was awarded The Wildlife Society Award for Best Publication of the Year. The result of some thirteen years' research, it is at once a discriminating blend of fine investigation, accurate and piquant writing, understanding approach and delightful style and presentation. The most amazing overall effect to me, however, is that with all the new information packed into its pages it still succeeds in maintaining the air of novelty and secrecy around the ringneck.

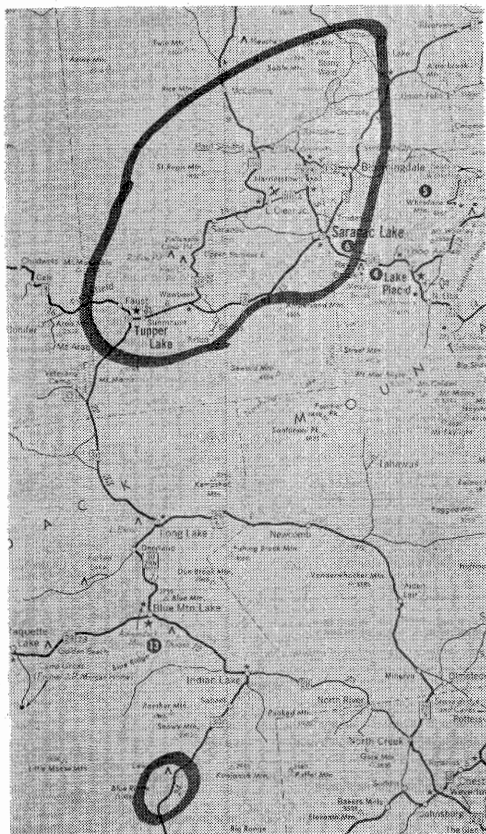
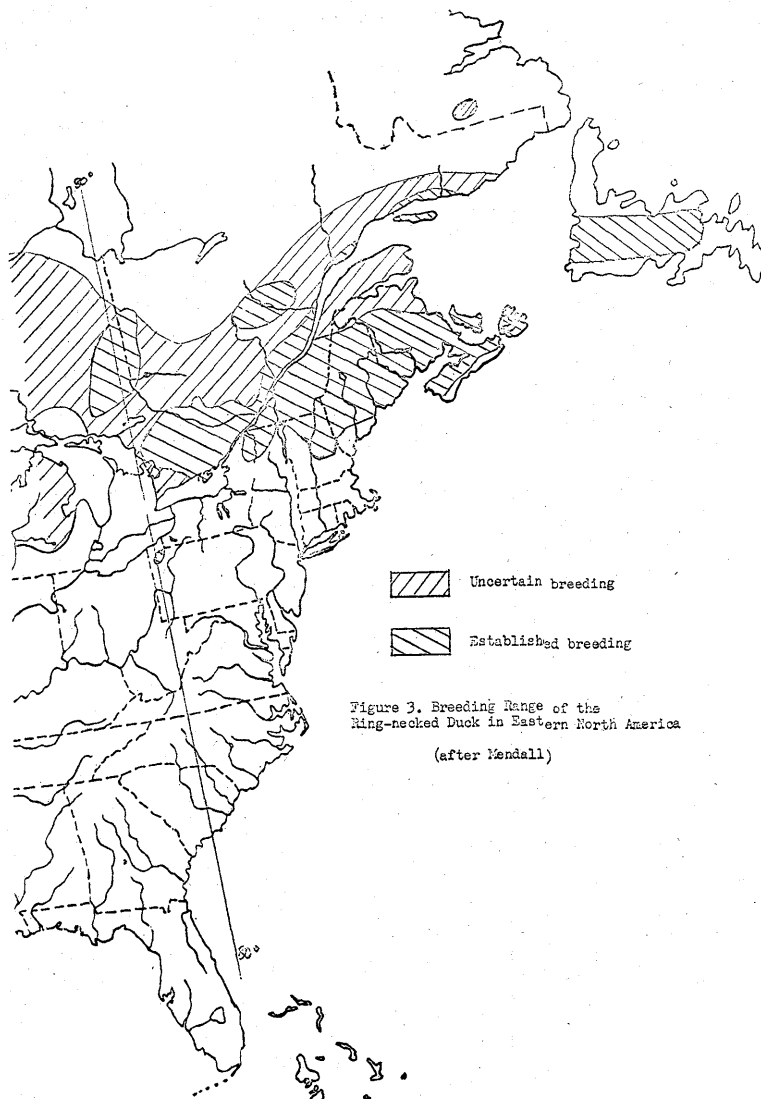


Figure 2. Known Breeding Range of the Ring-necked Duck in New York, 1962

Breeding Range. Here in the East, or at least from about longitude 80° eastward, ringnecks breed rather discontinuously, as shown in Figure 3, which is taken from Mendall (op. cit.). As can be seen from the map, there is plenty of opportunity to fill in gaps in uncertain breeding territory. Large areas in Quebec between Lakes Abitibi and St. John need further exploration, as does most of the north shore of the St. Lawrence from the Saguenay

River downstream. The entire Gaspé Peninsula and much of northern New Brunswick is also suspect. And new areas may certainly be expected south of the known breeding range. Here in New York we might well search in the vicinity of the present Adirondack range, particularly to its west and south. The dot outside the more circumscribed range in New York indicates a brood seen just last summer on Lewey Lake. We should also keep a sharp watch on all the larger wetland areas elsewhere in the State, especially the Conservation Department's Game Management Areas and others



where developments or changes have taken place. On canoe trips in the Adirondacks I would keep a sharp eye out almost anywhere along the Raquette south of their present range, as well as around the Fulton Chain, or on any boggy pond or river slough west of these. Any cattail edge or stand of pickerel-weed, or even the floating mats of lily pads, watershield or *Potamogeton*, may yield a surprise.

It is especially enchanting at sunset, while the trout are again on the rise or the pike striking viciously at the spoon cast through the weeds, to be interrupted for a while by a displaying pair (early May) or a hen and brood (mid July). Ringnecks seem generally more trusting than most ducks, and on the breeding ground are especially so. Remain real quiet in the canoe, and the watchful female and her 8 or 9 fuzzies may feed past, snapping right and left among the lilies, within 80 or 90 feet.

That delightful family began after the pair was formed out of the group of courting birds which returned northward to the natal area. Almost as soon as the ice went out on April 20, a band of ring-necks appeared on the big marshy lake nearby, and within a week of active feeding, chasing, courting and displaying, our hen chose her mate and retired to a nearby boggy pond where she had learned to fly two years before. (She returned there with another drake last year, too, but her nest was destroyed by a mink during the late stages of incubation, and she did not re-nest.) This year she selected a marshy island of cattail and bulrush, a tight mat of vegetation, just off a boggy point on the north side of the pond. There in a little pocket about 4 inches above water level, where several old cattail leaves leaned together, she flattened a few stems and laid her first eggs. Within 12 days, the clutch of 10 was complete, and the nest was better formed and deeply lined with down. The nest completion proceeded daily about as fast as eggs were laid, but plant weaving, ramp construction and down plucking took far more effort on the part of the female. The nest was only about a foot from swimmable water, and during incubation the "ramp" (which could be seen only as a sort of tunnel while the observer was in a canoe) was both an entrance into which the hen would quickly disappear as if by magic and a launching pad from which she would flush when danger was imminent. Luckily, this year the pair's secret was not found out, either by avian or four-footed predator, and on June 8, after the drake had begun to believe he would never see his mate again, there she was!

But what is this coming along beside her? Nine small balls of fluffy yellow. And such care she devotes to these tiny things! A day or two of trailing along ignored, while the female gives all her attention to the brood, and the male gives up, flies off to find others like himself and go into the final stages of his eclipse plumage. We should note this successful brood was a real early first hatch, and that most of them we have seen in the Adirondacks (which may reflect re-nests) have been a month or more later.

Where do these molting males go? Even for the Adirondack population, which is very small — perhaps only 50 or 60 pairs — and very localized, we do not know for sure. They may merely join up in small groups of 3 or 4 on some of the larger lakes (the Saranacs, Tupper, Cranberry or others) or perhaps travel farther, to Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence or Lake Champlain. At any rate, by July 20, adult male ringnecks are a rarity on the breeding grounds.

Mortality. And what of the brood that we left the hen so jealously guarding. Our surveys tell us that she is an excellent mother — much better than the wood ducks, mergansers and goldeneyes — and by the time her young are flying at seven to $7\frac{1}{2}$ weeks she still will have five or six on the average. Snappers and pike take a few to be sure, and even large bullfrogs when the fuzzies are tiny, but ringnecks seem to lose more ground through nest destruction than in duckling mortality. Of course, as mid-October rolls around, many of these locally-reared birds are still in the vicinity, and if it is a favored hunting ground then there is loss to the sportsman too. This happens on Oseetah Lake, Jones Pond and near Tupper, and sometimes the local populations are hit hard. But even more often most of the local birds have moved, sometimes quite a bit north of where they were reared, so that by the time hunting seasons begin their numbers are diluted with other migrants heading southward.

Of the few ringnecks banded in New York (perhaps 650 up to April 1963) and of the fewer recoveries received (about 130), we have found out remarkably little. Birds on migration were those chiefly caught (March, April, October and November), and most recoveries were eventually reported from Ontario, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Quebec and Florida. There must be a wintering population of at least several hundred birds on Long Island (Nissequogue, Carmans, Connetquot and Peconic Rivers, some small ponds and Jamaica Bay Refuge), although we know our aerial survey does not do them justice. Where these birds originate we are not sure, although it could be from the northernmost part of the range in eastern Canada.

The big ringneck wintering states are Florida, Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina — and these are also the big ringneck harvest states — but most of these birds are the product of the “duck factory” range in prairie Canada. We are used to seeing the black duck as the king pin in the waterfowler's harvest, with mallards, wood ducks and sometimes the teal (or the scaups on big waters) also being important. But it was a real surprise to me to recently learn that fully 40 per cent of Florida's annual duck kill is normally composed of ringnecks. This had been reported for several years earlier by the hunters in that state, who call this bird blackjack, but it was verified with a vengeance upon the institution of the Federal wing survey, when thousands of waterfowl wings were mailed in randomly from all across the Flyway. Those of us who worked on this survey soon learned almost automatically to assign ringneck wings to the three southeastern states which seemingly have “cornered the market.”

What else do we need to know of this fine little bird? — how best to go about it? — and what can we do to help him if he needs it, as apparently some ducks do? Well, the question marks have to do with (1) what other places in the State does he breed, and in what numbers, and (2) the problem of banding every ringneck we can catch, both on the breeding grounds and wintering. If we can assign wintering areas and annual mortalities to the birds we know breed here, and breeding areas and mortalities to those we know winter here (besides charting in more detail the ringneck migration and hunting areas in New York), we shall be a long way toward more management of this fascinating “resource”. This will also in-

clude the part ringnecks play in the hunter's bag when mistaken for illegal redheads, or vice versa.

The Conservation Department has a few new tricks it will try in attempting to band more ringnecks, and there is every hope they will work. A few birds were caught on Long Island this past winter (January-March 1963), and a new night-lighting technique for catching hens with broods will be tried this summer.

Even though we cannot all take part in the more exciting work, what should we do as bird-watchers? Here is that important part of running down reports of possible nesting pairs, of broods seen, and so on, that is nearly impossible for just one or two persons to do. But with everyone interested in birds keeping a special eye out for ringnecks, the job becomes easy. So schedule one or more Adirondack trips this year — birding, fishing, camping, or call them what you will — but try to check out some rumors on, or new territories for, the ringneck. Let a little of the lure of the unknown permeate your rambles, drift silently down a lily-spattered outlet, or wade through leatherleaf to explore that little pond “that’s in there somewhere” — and maybe a new page on this neat little diver may be written. We may find out a few more facts about him, but never fear — he’ll always remain very mysterious!

REFERENCES

Foley, Don and Dirck Benson. Ring-necks in the Adirondacks. N.Y.S. “*Conservationist*”, Dec. Jan. 1959-60.

Recent changes in waterfowl populations in New York.

1960

“*The Kingbird*”, Oct. 1960.

Mendall, Howard L. The ring-necked duck in the Northeast. Univ. of 1958
Maine Bull., Vol. XL., No. 16.

Severinghaus, C. W. and Dirck Benson

1947

Ring-necked duck broods in New York State
Auk, 64: 626-627.

State of New York Conservation Department, Division of Fish and Game, Albany 1



Available at: A. & P., Wegmans, Quality Cash, Service Stores, Grand Union, Chicago Markets, Chanatry Markets, Bohacks, Daitch Shopwell, Gristede Bros., Waldbaum — no doubt there is one of these fine markets near your residence.

Recommended by Roger Tory Peterson