

The Salt Lake Tribune

Bird sightings: Northern pintail

By Bill Fenimore

Special to The Tribune

September 24, 2010 03:46PM

Anas acuta

The northern pintail have begun their fall migration into Utah marshes. They have a unique profile that readily separates them from other ducks whether on the water or in the air. When sitting on the water, the pintail holds its head erect and its long pointed tail at an upward angle. When flying, the pintail shows a long and slender profile with a white trailing edge on the inner wing.

Pintail belong to the dabbling duck family of puddle ducks. These are ducks that will tip over and pick up food from the bottom of ponds, lakes and streams.

They prefer shallow water. Puddle ducks also have the ability to jump out of the water into flight. Diving ducks must run across the top of the water to gain sufficient air speed to create lift.

The male pintail is an elegant-looking duck. Its head is a chocolate brown with a blue-gray bill. There is a long white neck with a white stripe extending along the neck behind the face. The upper parts are a brownish gray. The wing has a greenish brown speculum with a white line on the trailing edge, visible in flight. The tail is black. Its breast and under parts are white. The flanks are gray.

Female pintail have a long neck and are a mottled brown with gray bill, legs and feet.

The range of the pintail extends into northern Canada and Alaska, across the prairie pot hole region of the Dakotas to both U.S. coasts. The nesting region continues south to the southwest and mid-Atlantic states. The wintering range is along the Gulf Coast states into Mexico.

The female builds the nest on dry ground near water. She incubates 3-12 olive green eggs for 25 days. The young are born with their eyes open, covered with down feathers, and can leave the nest a few hours after hatching.

Bill Fenimore is owner of the Layton Wild Bird Center, www.wildbird.com/layton, author of *The Backyard Bird of Utah* and a member of the Utah Wildlife Board.



Northern pintail by Bill Fenimore.

© 2010 The Salt Lake Tribune