

Anas americana (American Wigeon)

Family: Anatidae (Ducks and Geese)

Order: Anseriformes (Waterfowl)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. American wigeon, *Anas americana*.

[<http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/american-wigeon>, downloaded 8 March 2017]

TRAITS. *Anas americana*, commonly referred to as the American wigeon is a large dabbling duck which normally grows to a length of 43-55cm with a wingspan of 72-86cm (BeautyofBirds, 2011). These birds have a bluish grey bill with a black tip and base, a white belly, and a green speculum and white secondary coverts on the wings. Males can be identified by their white crown and green stripe behind the eye, cream face and neck, with a dark brown back, black under-tail coverts and white patches at the rear portion of their flanks (Fig. 1). Females have a mottled dark brown body and pale speckled head and neck, with darker eye patches (Fig. 2).

DISTRIBUTION. Widespread across the majority of North America from Alaska to Colombia, including Trinidad (as migrants) (Fig. 3). Migrates to Canada and northwestern U.S. to breed, while spending its non-breeding periods in the lower U.S. States, Central America and the Caribbean (Fig. 4).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. Diurnal in activity. Found in areas such as lakes, ponds, freshwater marshes, rivers, estuaries, saltwater bays or any other lacustrine or intertidal area with ample plant material during the winter (Kaufman, 2017). Prefers areas with vegetative cover near lakes or marshy sloughs during breeding; preferably mixed grass or short grass prairies. During the breeding season, they contentiously guard their usually scattered territories. Extremely social once the breeding season is over, and begin to form large flocks during migration or at rich feeding sites.

FOOD AND FEEDING. The American wigeon is morphologically and physiologically adapted for aquatic grazing and foraging (Taylor, 2002). They often feed on land and in shallow water where there are plants and insect availability is high. They feed on the surface of the water by submerging their bill into the water as opposed to diving, hence the name dabbling duck (BeautyofBirds, 2011). Although omnivorous, the diet consists mainly of the stems, roots and leaves of submerged aquatic plants. Since they are poor divers, they feed opportunistically; often by snatching food from diving ducks as they surface. Their short, sturdy bill allows them to pluck vegetation on land while the lamellae (plates) present on their upper bill allows them to filter feed in water. On land, they consume young grass shoots, seeds, nuts, fruits, and waste grains. Consumes insects, crustaceans and molluscs during the breeding season; young ducklings require high levels of protein and so also consume many insects (BeautyofBirds, 2011).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. Average lifespans for males and females are 2.3 years and 1.7 years respectively, however there are reports of *Anas americana* living for up to 21 years. Being most vulnerable when young, 69% of chicks born in a given year die before they are one year old (BeautyofBirds, 2011). Harsh weather, hunting, human-related accidents, and predation of eggs and nestlings are usual reasons for death in the young. Known predators include striped skunks, red foxes, short-tailed weasels, northern harriers and American badgers. There are conflicting reports for population size. According to Mowbray (2014), the population size has been unstable since 1955, with a population count of 3.8 million in 1959 and a 1.7 million count in 1986. In 2012, the population was reported to be 2.1 ± 0.1 million. Another source reports that the population has been stable since the 1930's, with the breeding range being expanded to eastern Canada and northeast United States (Kaufman, 2017).

REPRODUCTION. *Anas americana* are monogamous and reach sexual maturity at the age of 1 year. They nest farther north than most dabbling ducks. Males compete for females using various mating rituals, they display using their white wing patches (Kaufman, 2017). Males may also make high-pitched calls in an erect posture with stiffened upper head feathers. This ritual is usually completed by February and by spring, breeding begins. Females select the nest site, favouring dry ground areas enclosed by tall grass and bush cover fairly close to water. They nest in a shallow depression of grass and weed stems lined with down and leaf litter (BeautyofBirds, 2011). 3-12 creamy white eggs are usually laid, with incubation usually lasting 23-25 days. The female solely incubates the eggs while the male searches for food. If the female senses a predator, she flies away to distract the predator while pretending to be injured. If necessary, she aggressively attacks intruders.

BEHAVIOUR. Most active on water, spending its day swimming and feeding. They only form large groups during migration or where food availability is high, occasionally with small flocks of gadwalls, mallards and other diving ducks during the fall migration. They are territorial during the breeding season, the breeding ground normally contains one pair per pond. Hatchlings are ready to leave the nest within 24 hours of being hatched and become fully independent after 37-48 days, achieving flight after 45-63 days. They consume mainly insects from birth, but switch to a more vegetative diet with age. Males have a distinctive high pitched whistle, while females have low growling quacks (BeautyofBirds, 2011). They exhibit increased vigilance behaviour the further away they feed from water, grazing with a head-up scanning behavior, and males tend to be more vigilant than females.

APPLIED ECOLOGY. Listed as Least Concern as it is common through much of its territorial range, with sightings even occurring as far as Europe (IUCN, 2016). The American wigeon makes up a small percentage of the US duck sport harvest; there is no major hunting market for this species. Habitat loss due to land use and climate change has however impacted the species' population on Canadian prairie parklands, with several initiatives being put in place to restore lost land. *Anas americana* is currently protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (Taylor, 2002).

REFERENCES

- BeautyOfBirds. (2011). American Wigeons or Baldpates (*Anas americana*).
<https://www.beautyofbirds.com/americanwigeon.html#distribution>.
- Kaufman, K. (2017). American Wigeon. Audubon Field Guide. <http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/american-wigeon>.
- Mowbray, T. B. (2014). American Wigeon. Birds of North America Online. <https://birdsna.org/Species-Account/bna/species/amewig/introduction>.
- Taylor, S. (2002). *Anas americana*. Animal Diversity Web. http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Anas_american/

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Fig. 2. Female American wigeon, *Anas americana*.

[<http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/american-wigeon>, downloaded 8 March 2017]



Fig. 3. World distribution of *Anas americana*.

[<http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/map/?cn=American%20Wigeon&sn=Anas%20americana&species=69191>, downloaded 8 March 2017]



Fig. 4. Caribbean distribution of *Anas americana*.

[<http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/map/?cn=American%20Wigeon&sn=Anas%20americana&species=69191>, downloaded 8 March 2017]

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