

Aythya hybrids – a puzzle on the pond



Scaup type hybrid, with Tufted duck, by Terry Laws

Ducks evoke mixed emotions among birders, many are openly dismissive of them for a variety of reasons. These range from the general ubiquity of ducks in general, to the relative ease of identification and the question mark over the origins of some individuals of rarer species. The ever-present thought that your 'first for Britain' might be a fence-jumper from a wildfowl collection nearby leaves some keen birders somewhat nervous!

Personally, I like ducks. I have kept some species in captivity over the years and found them to be fascinating. As a younger man that fascination manifested itself down the barrel of a shotgun, but I grew out of that phase nearly 30 years ago and never looked back. I like the boldness of the drake's plumage, the subtlety of the females and the challenge of finding their nests. They are great travellers, many of our winter visitors crossing from the Far-east of Siberia to winter in western Europe.

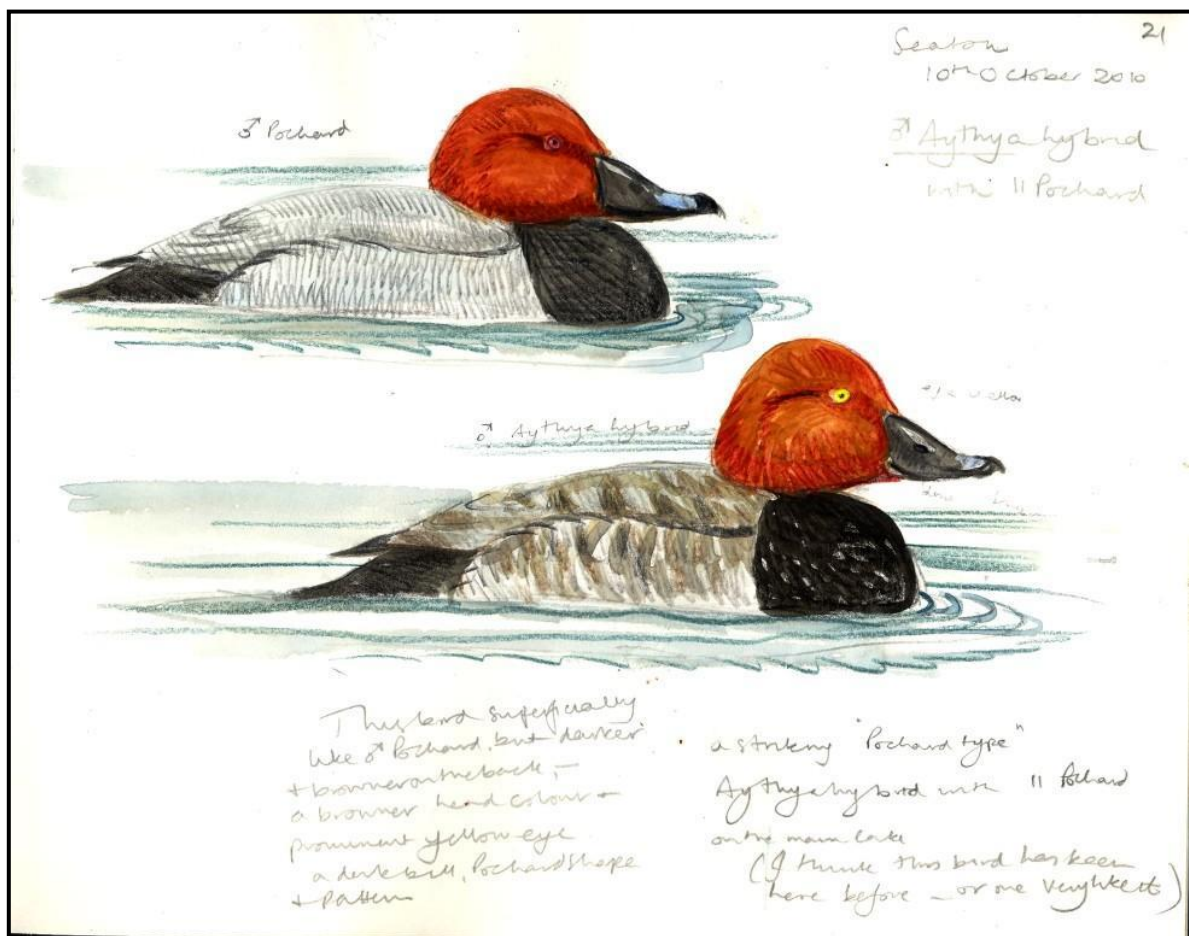
A further consideration which counts against them in many birders minds is the tendency for hybridisation, the very fact that the duck you are looking at might not be totally the duck you expect it to be! I understand the somewhat unsatisfactory aspect of this, especially if you want to put a name to every bird and your year list is crying out for expansion, but biologically hybrids intrigue me. I have spent many years making notes and sketches of any that cross my path and have to admit that quite a few have not been convincingly identified, although with access to the internet and some good books it is often possible to get pretty close to the parentage. One thing that makes the problem more difficult is that a good many hybrids originate in captive collections, so effectively any duck could be a parent, even species unknown in the Western Palearctic. To my peculiar mind that all adds to the challenge, but not everyone is so inclined.

In the field in Kent, most of the hybrids we encounter are likely to be from the genus *Aythya*. There are a number of reasons for this, not least as the genus appears to be fairly recent in origin, with a good deal of genetic similarity between the different taxa. A further consideration is that two of the key suspects in *Aythya* hybridization, Pochard and Ferruginous Duck, are both species which breed in similar habitats on eutrophic lakes and both also have rather localised distributions. This can lead to situations where there is a shortage of mates for one species or another at some sites, leading to

mixed pairings. The possibilities are endless, and this is not the place to consider all the various factors, but there are some excellent books available which help to put tentative parentages to hybrids found in the wild.

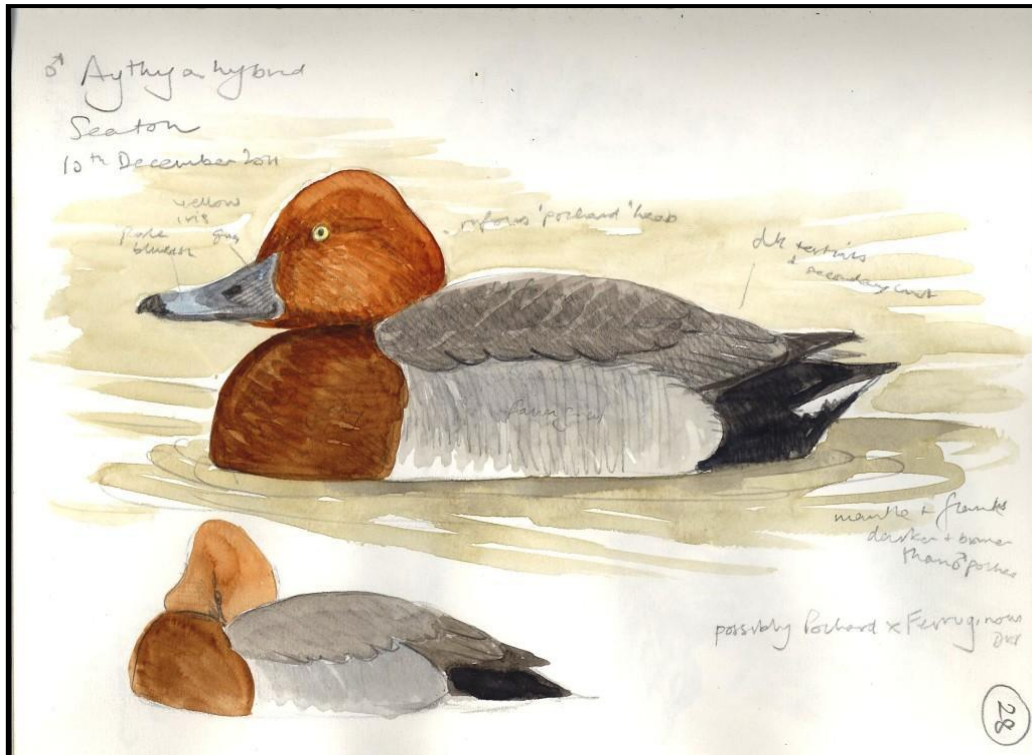
Rather few birders photograph hybrids, but I have collected field sketches of several encountered in Kent over the years. Probably the most frequent are 'Pochard -type', followed by the 'Ferruginous-type'. Less frequent is the 'Lesser Scaup-type'. There, of course, a whole range of other possibilities, not to mention the wider complications of dabbling ducks and even geese!

Below are some field sketches of three of the commonest types and a puzzling individual on partially resolved in my mind.



Number 1: Pochard type hybrid, Seaton Lakes October 2010

This bird, drawn next to a normal drake Pochard, might at first glance be passed over in a flock as a first-winter Pochard, but a key anomaly is the prominent yellow eye and the rather vague bill pattern. This bird demonstrates another aspect of the hybrid problem as it might be a 'back-cross', where a hybrid bird (e.g. Pochard X Ferruginous) breeds with a pure drake Pochard. On the other hand, it could be a Pochard X Tufted duck. These types of hybrids can be very subtle and require good views and careful observations.



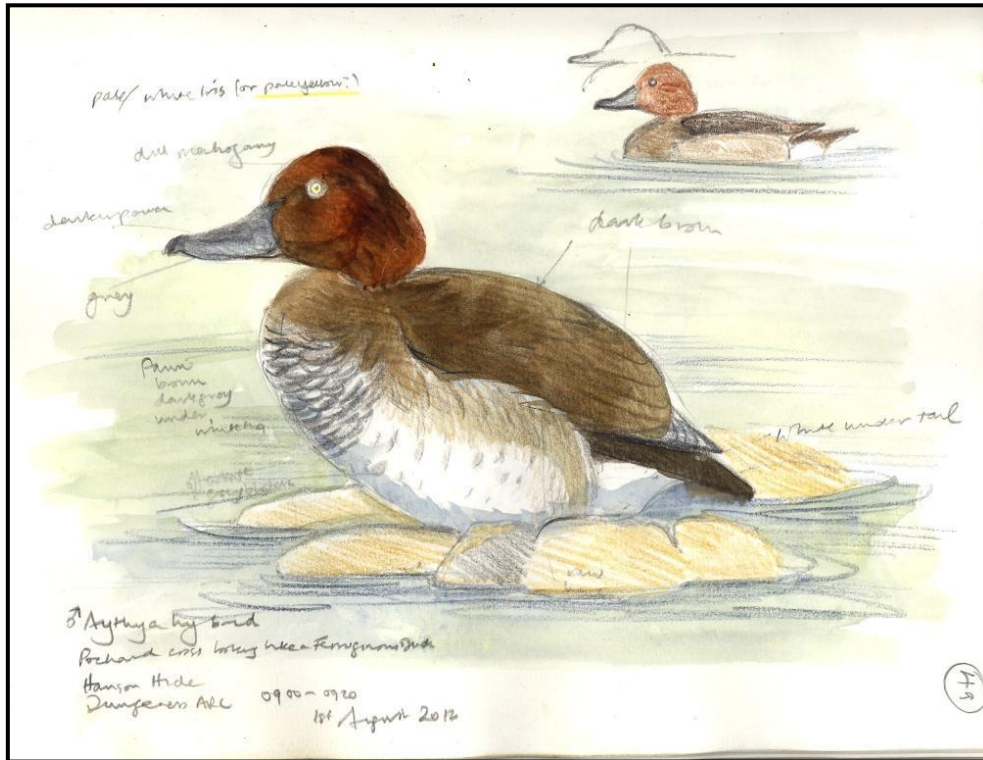
Number 2: Ferruginous X Pochard, Seaton Lakes December 2011

This is a typical 'Ferruginous-type' hybrid, a surprisingly frequent form in the field in Kent. The head end looks superficially like a Ferruginous Duck, the back half like a Pochard. This bird exhibited another feature of recognisable hybrids as it returned to Seaton in subsequent years and gave further opportunities for study. It is very important to observe potential Ferruginous ducks in the county as many hybrids can look very like pure-bred birds, a potential trap for the unwary or less-experienced!



Number 3: Tufted Duck X Pochard, Westbere Lakes February 2012

A strikingly different type of hybrid is superficially similar to a Lesser Scaup, indeed the potential first Lesser Scaup for Britain proved to be just this form of hybrid when it was finally collected under licence. These birds can be easily overlooked in flocks of Tufted ducks, but can be recognised by the uniform grey mantle which on close inspection shows very fine vermiculations similar to its Pochard parent. It is also the case that the head gloss can appear either purple of bronze depending on the angle of the light during observation.



Number 4: Possible Ferruginous X Pochard, Dungeness August 2012

This bird shows the challenges hybrids can pose, especially in this case where the bird is in eclipse plumage. The mahogany head colour suggests a Ferruginous duck, but the eye is pale yellow and the lower breast shows blackish bases to the feathers which might indicate a pochard parentage. Sadly, in spite of looking for this bird on subsequent visits, I never saw it again.

An enduring problem for hybrid watchers is the enigma of female hybrids; very few of these are easily recognisable outside of captivity and they pose a real challenge to birders. That said, the fine photo of a female Scaup-type hybrid by Terry Laws which graces the title of this piece is a good example of one form which is fairly recognisable. In this case although the basic face pattern seems correct for scaup, the head shape is wrong, the tiny crest recalling a female Tufted Duck.

A good place to start with recognising hybrids is to check eye colour and bill pattern, then take a critical look at the plumage features. There are a number of useful publications to assist, although the Handbook of Avian Hybrids by Eugene McCarthy, while extremely comprehensive, is probably the most tedious bird book in existence!

Suggested bibliography

Heinzel, Fitter & Parslow (1995) **Collins Pocket Guide: Birds of Britain & Europe**
 Vinicombe, Harris & Tucker ((2014) **The Helm Guide to Bird Identification**
 Sebastian Reeber (2015) **Wildfowl of Europe, Asia and North America**

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