

Urban Wildlife Issues  
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried  
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## The Bufflehead

You have to admire an animal that stores a quarter of its body weight in fat and still manages to look gorgeous. The Bufflehead, Canada's smallest diving duck, is a real eye-catcher in snappy black and white feathering and bright pink feet.



Buffleheads are poster-children for hyper activity. They are unashamedly active, which tends to attract a fair amount of attention, even though their numbers are not huge. They hang around in groups of around ten, pairing off for the spring mating season.

Courtship begins in winter and you may have the good fortune to see some of the male displays at local ponds. It's an intriguing sight with the male bobbing his head and then flying over the female, keeping his wings below the level of his body, with the head and tail lowered. He then water-skis to a stop displaying his feet and plumage; the female incidentally does not have the bright pink feet. Like me, she has to go to her local shoe store for brightly coloured footwear.

The female may not be as glamorous as the male but she sure can be picky. She can afford to be – like most diving ducks there are always more male Buffleheads than females. Year-old drakes, who do not yet have their adult plumage, don't even merit a glance from the females.

The Buffleheads you are seeing in the Lower Mainland right now are very likely from Alberta. They fly to the coast over winter for a spot of warmth and abundant food. It is somewhat like an all-inclusive for ducks. No money back on this trip I'm afraid – if it's cold then the Bufflehead is out of luck.

When temperatures are low and birds are unwell, they expend precious energy keeping warm, rather than healing their bodies. We have just treated such a case here at Wildlife Rescue Association of BC (WRA).

He was a young male Bufflehead who crash-landed in Tsawwassen on a wet road, mistaking it for the water. This is not uncommon, and once on ground water fowl often find it very difficult to take off again.

This fellow was not too badly hurt. He had some cuts on his feet, a sore on his right eye and his feathers were a little dirty. However, when we did some tests on him we discovered he was lacking iron and very emaciated. The time he had spent on the ground without proper nutrition had exhausted his resources.

One of the key issues was to provide just the right environment where the bird could successfully gain the weight he had lost. This meant he had to be kept in a warm pool 24 hours a day so that he wouldn't use his energy trying to keep warm.

This was no easy feat. During the day staff took turns running to the gas station to refill the propane tanks for his pool heater. At night a home aquarium heater was used to maintain a constant temperature.

By the time the Bufflehead left us he had regained 30 percent of his body weight. Right now he's probably out there trying to catch some "gals" attention before the long spring flight back to Alberta.

It's always happy news when we release a bird or animal back to the wild. Unfortunately, WRA also received some sad news today. Our weekly segment, "Wildlife Weekly" on Shaw Cable's **The Express** has been cancelled. However we understand there will be opportunities for continuing wildlife stories on Shaw TV. The show, which has been running for almost four years, was a valuable tool in educating viewers in how to coexist with wildlife. It also helped WRA to raise funds for wildlife rehabilitation and education programs.

Thank you for caring for the wild world around you. Keep an eye open for the Bufflehead mating ritual, a wonderful display in the never-ending cycle that is our marvelous natural world.

Nicky Fried writes for the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC located at 5216 Glencarin Drive on Burnaby Lake. The Wildlife Rescue Association cares for injured, orphaned and pollution damaged wildlife. If you have an animal in distress call the WRA at 604.526.7275.