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Age Duck Tails

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Ducks, geese and swans in the fall can be aged by the shape of the tip of their tail feathers. The growing first generation of juvenile tail feathers is tipped with down (Figure 1), which breaks off leaving square-ended, notched or V-shaped feather tips, depending on the species (Figures 2 and 3). The tail tip of a juvenile duck, goose or swan shows a ragged (versus smooth) appearance in the hand and at close range in the field. To see the difference in the field requires considerable practice and a close view with binoculars and/or a telescope. In young that have molted their tail feathers, a bird of the year can be told only if it still has at least one notched juvenile feather remaining, indicating that it is less than one year old (Figures 2 and 3). Older young that have replaced their tails and adults have smoothly pointed or slightly rounded tail feathers (Figure 4).

Using the tail feather method for aging is limited to before the first generation of juvenile feathers has been shed and

replaced by the second generation adult-like ones. The time the tail feathers are molted varies with the species and even within the same species, depending on if they are early or late hatched birds. The earliest dates of tail molt are poorly known. The references listed below are the best sources of information. Northern Pintails and Wood Ducks probably retain their juvenile tails until late August, Mallards and American Black Ducks to early September, while most other ducks keep their juvenile tail at least to mid-September or early October. Geese and swans molt their juvenile tails in late fall and early winter.

References

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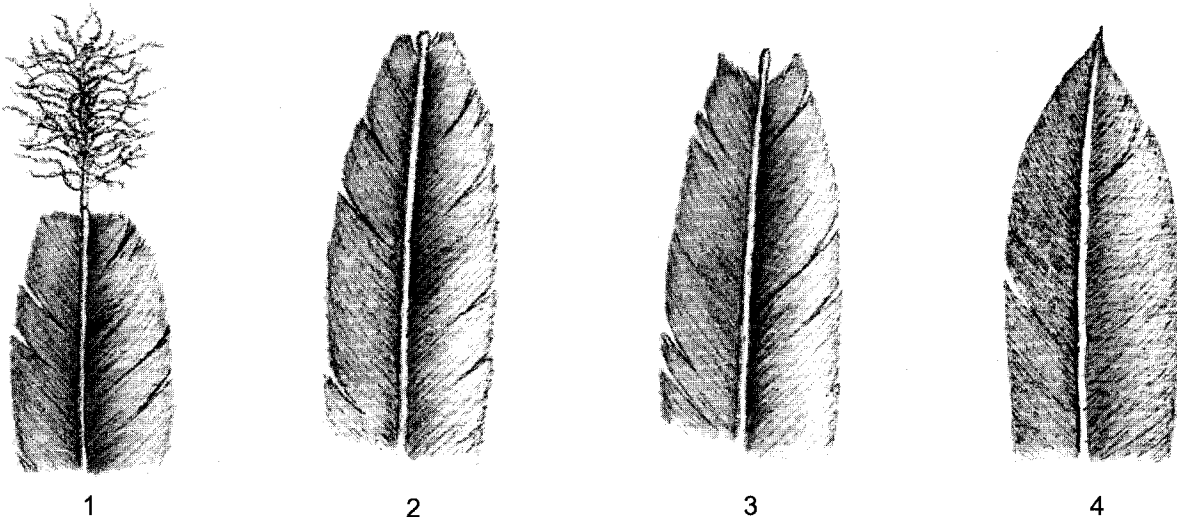


Figure 1: Newly grown juvenile tail feather with down tip still attached. **Figures 2 and 3:** Two variations of juvenile tail feathers after the down breaks off producing a notched or V-shaped tip. **Figure 4:** If no notches are present and the feathers are smoothly pointed or rounded, then the bird is an adult or a bird that has replaced its juvenile tail feathers. Drawings by Peter Lorimer.