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Country diary: A local rarity, a mug of hot chocolate in bird form

Tooting, London: The ferruginous duck at my local-ish pond is likely an escapee, meaning hardcore birders might not bother with it. But not I



'A ferruginous duck - "fudge duck" for short, the nickname felicitously combining abbreviation and a succinct description of the bird's colour.' Photograph: David Chapman/Alamy

Lev Parikian

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A day of incipient winter, sun bright in sharp blue sky. Hat and gloves weather. Tooting Common pond is home to ducks and geese and swans (oh my!) - what a birding friend dismissively calls "the usual rubbish". But for a few weeks now there has been a glamorous addition, a rarity, flown in from wherever to bestow a hint of the exotic on these everyday urban surroundings.

A ferruginous duck - "fudge duck" for short, the nickname felicitously combining abbreviation and a succinct description of the bird's colour. Reports say that it's a first-winter female "of unknown origin". This is code for "probably escaped from a wildfowl collection but without a leg ring we can't be certain". Hardcore birders, valuing the truly wild above all else, might sniff at an escapee, but a bird is a bird. Besides, I have never seen a ferruginous duck, and while I wouldn't usually make a special journey for a sighting, this is merely a short extension of my daily walk. It would be rude not to.



All is quiet. A female mallard - easily overlooked, but an embodiment of the attractions of subtle brown streakiness - dabbles unobtrusively by the island. A mute swan sails by, magically combining bulk and elegance. A coot, in an orgy of furious splashing, picks a gratuitous fight with another coot, rearing up with the energy of its flapping. For a moment I fear I'm witnessing a murder. But it ends almost instantly, the combatants losing interest by mutual agreement. Whatever, mate. All good? All good.

And there it is. Small, dainty, the colour of expensive chocolate, the pert dome of its head betraying its relationship to the larger, more familiar pochard. Bold and curious - "confiding" and "obliging" in birding parlance - it seems content with its lot. Whatever its provenance, it has found itself in a place of comfort and plenty. I study it, enjoying the rich brown of its plumage, wondering where it's come from, whether it will overwinter here. In the interests of balance, I turn my attention to "the usual rubbish" - beautiful, elegant, belligerent rubbish, without which my days would be immeasurably poorer.

The sun calls it a day, and so do I. As darkness steals in and the chill bites, I take my leave, overtaken by a sudden craving for hot chocolate.

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