

Mallard



Environment
Canada

Environnement
Canada

Canadian Wildlife
Service

Service canadien
de la faune

A member of the Environmental Conservation family

Canada

Cover photo: A Mallard pair
(male on the right)
(G.W. Beyersbergen)

The handsome Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* is the best known wild duck in the world. It is distributed throughout North America, Europe, and Asia and has been introduced to many other parts of the globe. Even in the heart of many major cities, half-tame Mallards waddle ashore from park lakes to take food from the hands of visitors.

The Mallard is found across Canada, but is most numerous in the Prairie Provinces. Mallards have recently been spreading eastwards and are firmly established in New Brunswick along the St. John River. Mallards are rare in Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, being replaced there by the closely related American Black Duck. Mallards have also spread north into boreal forest zones in eastern Canada and along the James Bay and Hudson Bay lowlands.

Description

The male Mallard in breeding dress is unmistakable. The glossy head and upper neck are brilliant green, separated from the rich chestnut of the breast by a white collar. The rest of the underparts and the sides are light grey.

The back and wings of the bird are greyish brown, with a purplish-blue speculum on the wing. The whitish tail has black above and below it. Two central black feathers that curve back above the tail give the breeding male its characteristic curly-tailed appearance. The male has a yellow bill and orange legs and feet.

The female Mallard is a much less colourful bird. Its back is mottled brown, its breast heavily streaked with buff and darker brown. It is best recognized by the white-bordered speculum on the wing, which is similar to that of the male. The female has an orange bill, sometimes blotched with black, and its legs and feet are orange. Its call is a loud "quack-quack" similar to that given by farmyard ducks. The call of the male is a softer, low-pitched "rhab-rhab."

The Mallard is a typical member of the surface-feeding group of ducks, known as the dabblers (see drawing on next page). It is often seen in the tipped-up position with its tail held

vertical. Although the bird can dive in an emergency, it rarely does so.

Food

The food of the Mallard depends on seasonal requirements for egg-laying, moulting, or putting on body fat for migration and winter. Most food material is vegetation or invertebrates procured in the water or on the land. The bird feeds on emergent weeds, roots of plants that grow in shallows, and small swimming invertebrate animals or larval stages of insects that occur in a muddy bottom. On land it often turns to grain, and large flights of Mallards can be seen feeding in harvested grain fields in fall.

Life history

Mallards are hardy ducks, wintering regularly in southern Ontario and southern British Columbia. Some will remain as far north as they can find open water. Even in Alaska, some birds are found throughout the colder months, and in Alberta, Mallards stay on the open waters of the North Saskatchewan River as far north as Edmonton.

The great majority, however, migrate to the central and southern United States, where lakes and ponds are ice-free throughout the year. The Mallards are essentially freshwater ducks, although some may winter on coastal bays.

Mallards are one of the first ducks to arrive back on the breeding grounds in spring. They are adaptable and may nest near a lake, pond, river, or even woodland pool. Their preferred habitats, however, are the natural grasslands that surround little reed-ringed sloughs and potholes on the prairies.

By late March or early April, the first of the Mallards are back on the prairies. At this time, lakes and ponds are usually frozen, and only meltwater fills the hollows of pasture lands and fields. The early arrivals are usually mated pairs.

The female, accompanied by the male, now searches for a territory. Most often, she will choose a territory close to where she was born. Some females return year after year to the same site.

The female chooses the nesting site. It may be close by a pond, but is frequently at some distance and may be far from water. Normally on the ground, the nest is little more than a depression lined with bits of rushes, grass, weeds, or other material close at hand. It is usually in good cover such as thick grass, or under a buckbrush, brier rose, or other prairie shrub. The eggs, which with different birds may vary in colour from dull green to almost white, are laid daily. Up to 15 may be deposited, but the usual number is between 8 and 12.

Incubation does not start until the last egg has been laid. This ensures that all the ducklings will hatch at approximately the same time. During the laying period, and particularly in the early stages of incubation, the female sheds down from her belly to line the nest. This grey down, with white centres, is pulled over the eggs when the duck is off to feed. It not only supplies warmth but hides the eggs from marauding crows, magpies, and

Silhouette of a Mallard on the water in spring



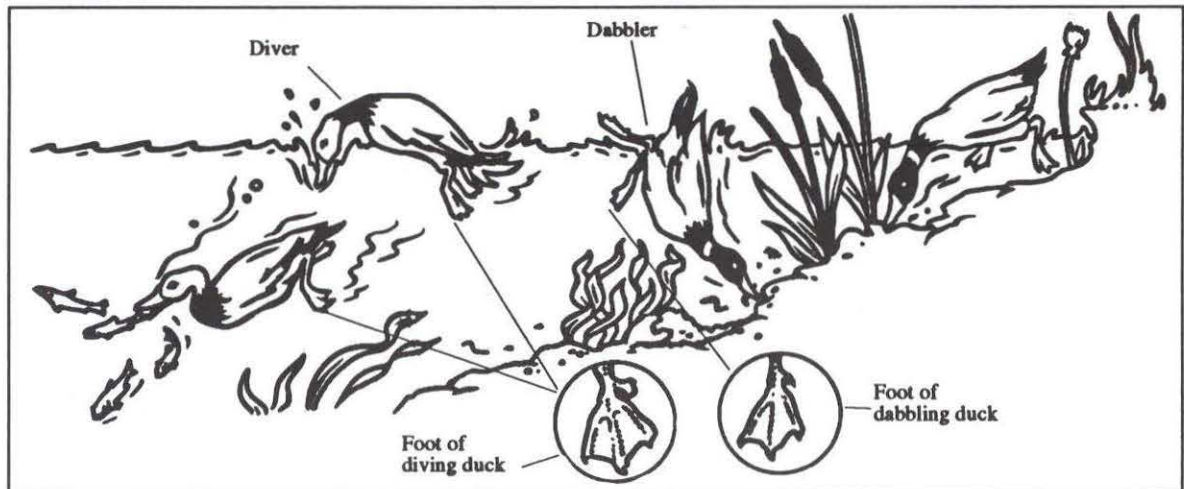
Male



Female

Distribution of the Mallard





Divers and dabblers

Wild ducks feed either by dabbling on the surface of the water, or by diving below the surface. Although Mallards dive in emergencies, they are dabbling ducks that find most of their food at the surface. Unlike diving ducks, they are lacking the special lobe on their hind toe that divers use like a paddle in the water.

other predators, which are quick to find uncovered eggs.

The female does all the incubating, which takes around 28 days. The ducklings emerge as handsome little balls of down. Their clove-brown backs are relieved by four yellow patches. Faces and underparts are also yellow, with the exception of a dark ear spot and a brown line through the eye.

Mallards may re-nest up to three or four times if their nests are destroyed. Each successive nest will have fewer eggs. However, Mallards do not raise more than a single brood of ducklings each year.

As soon as the ducklings are dry, the female leads them to the nearest water. This may be a long and hazardous journey. Although the female may have nested near a pothole or slough full of spring meltwater, much of this water may have evaporated, leaving nothing but drying mud. On overland trips, straggling ducklings may get lost in the grass or be picked up by predators.

The Mallard is an excellent mother, however. She will stop at frequent intervals to collect and brood her young. If surprised by a human or beast, she is likely to go flapping and squawking across the ground, as if injured. This feigned injury may not fool a human, but undoubtedly lures predators away.

Once on the water, the female leads her brood to feeding areas. The young find their own food, which at first probably consists of small crustaceans, such as water fleas, insects, and tiny plants like duckweed.

The young gradually lose their down and grow their feathers. In about 10 weeks they have assumed a plumage that is much like that of the female. By that time, the female has abandoned them.

After the breeding season Mallards moult into what is known as an eclipse plumage. The males are the first to undergo this moult.

The males remain on their territories for about the first 10 days of incubation. After that, they desert their mates. They move to larger marshes, where they lose their brilliant breeding plumage and become more similar to the hen. All their flight feathers are shed at once, and for about a

month the birds are flightless. They skulk in the reeds until their new feathers are grown.

When the females have left their broods, they too gather in the reeds to moult. They also become flightless, but the new plumage they assume is little different from the one they have shed. In the late fall the young gain the plumage of their respective sexes. The males, however, may not attain their full brilliance until their second year.

In late summer the birds gather in mixed flocks of young and old. Throughout much of the day they sit and loaf far from shore. As the grain ripens, the ducks make their flights to the feeding fields. These flights are usually made in early morning and late evening, but in dull, stormy weather may occur throughout the day. They provide the hunter with the best duck shooting.

Management

The Mallard is famed as a game bird throughout its range. Fast on the wing, it is readily attracted by decoys and its flesh is of excellent quality. Large male Mallards may weigh well over 1.36 kg, but the average weight is around 1.24 kg. No duck is more extensively hunted: in Canada, over 50 percent of all ducks killed are Mallards.

The Mallard is one of the hardiest and most adaptable of ducks. Nevertheless, the continuing loss of prairie nesting habitat, particularly grassy uplands, has caused a long-term decline in continental Mallard populations. Droughts during the 1980s and 90s have created unfavourable conditions for prairie ducks, and many former wetlands have dried out and are now farmland.

In eastern Canada, Mallards are thriving. Abundant nesting cover in abandoned farmlands, forest clear-cuts, and city green spaces has helped Mallard populations expand. Mallards easily hybridize with the closely related American Black Duck. Because of the dramatic increase in Mallards, such hybridization has posed a significant problem to maintaining American Black Duck populations.

Concern for the long-term decline in prairie Mallards and other ducks like the pintail resulted

in a continent-wide effort to benefit waterfowl and other wetland wildlife. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) signed in 1986 has specific habitat management goals aimed at restoring Mallard populations on prairie breeding habitat and also in their migration and wintering ranges. Canada, the United States, and more recently, Mexico, are partners in the plan. The Prairie Habitat Joint Venture under the plan calls for restoring over 1.4 million hectares of prime Mallard breeding habitat in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. For further information on NAWMP, please contact the NAWMP National Implementation Office at the address given below for the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Mallards are one of the few ducks that habitually feed on grain. Barley and wheat are preferred. Most grain is now harvested by combine, and ducks cannot do much damage, except when the grain is left in swaths because of inclement weather.

Throughout the ages, the Mallard has benefited people by supplying them with eggs and flesh. It has long been domesticated, and many strains of our domestic ducks show their Mallard ancestry in their bright colours. Apart from its usefulness, the Mallard is a beautiful bird that brings delight to many outdoor people. The bird watcher knows of few more thrilling sights than Mallards dropping down with feet out-thrust to find the first spring water.

Reading list

- Bellrose, F.C. 1981. Ducks, geese and swans of North America. Revised edition. Stackpole Books. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.
- Bent, A. C. 1923. Life histories of North American wild fowl. Part 1. Reprinted 1987 by Dover Press.
- Godfrey, W.E. 1986. The birds of Canada. Revised edition. National Museums of Canada. Ottawa.
- Munro, David A. 1967. The prairies and the ducks. Canadian Geographical Journal 75(1):1-13.
- Savage, C. 1985. The wonder of Canadian birds. Western Producer Prairie Books. Saskatoon.

The Canadian Wildlife Service

The Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment Canada handles wildlife matters that are the responsibility of the Canadian government. These include protection and management of migratory birds as well as nationally significant wildlife habitat. Other responsibilities are endangered species, control of international trade in endangered species, and research on wildlife issues of national importance. The service cooperates with the provinces, territories, Parks Canada, and other federal agencies in wildlife research and management.

For more information about the Canadian Wildlife Service or its other publications, please contact:

Publications
Canadian Wildlife Service
Environment Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0H3
Tel.: (819) 997-1095



Over 50% recycled
paper including 10%
post-consumer fibre.



Address for access to Hinterland Who's
Who on Internet: <http://www.doc.ca>

Également disponible en français sous le
titre *Le Canard colvert*

Published by Authority of the
Minister of the Environment
©Minister of Supply and Services
Canada, 1973, 1980, 1996
Catalogue No. CW69-4/14-1996E
ISBN: 0-662-24174-6
Text: R. Lister
Revised by R. Bailey, 1994
Photo: G.W. Beyersbergen