

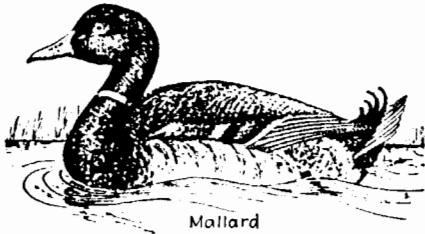
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## Natural History Notes

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### THE MALLARD



One of the most common wild ducks in the world is the mallard. The mallard is found over much of the northern hemisphere, including Europe and Asia. In North America the mallard breeds from Alaska to Northern California, east to the Great Lakes region and, more recently, in New England. The mallard is adaptable to civilization and has been known to successfully raise a family in a city park if there is a pond. The mallard can be found from sea level to mountains, wherever there is fresh or brackish water. It is especially abundant in agricultural areas. This wild duck has given rise to almost all of our domesticated ducks, the exception being the Muscovy. The mallard is also a favorite game bird due to its wariness and edibility.

The adult male mallard, or drake, is easily recognized by his iridescent green head with a white ring around his neck. He has a purple-brown breast and a light gray back and belly. The tail is white and the tail coverts are black. The female mallard is a mottled buff and brown overall with a darker brown stripe through the eye. Both sexes have grayish colored wings with a metallic violet-blue speculum (band) on the center of the wings bordered by black and white. Both sexes also have a yellow or orange bill and orange feet and legs. Like most of his near relatives, the drake molts into the eclipse plumage after the spring breeding season. He then looks similar to the hen. The mallard is a relatively large stocky duck. The male averages 2-3/4 pounds and 25 inches in length and the hen is slightly smaller.

Mallards will eat a variety of food, including both plant and animal materials. Animal matter, however, makes up only about ten percent of this duck's diet. For the most part mallards feed on aquatic plants. The mallard is a dabbling duck rather than a diver, meaning it feeds from the water's surface. It can often be seen with just its tail sticking out of the water, as it feeds on small plants and animals found on the bottom in shallow water areas. In certain areas, mallards feeding on cultivated crops such as wheat or corn can cause considerable damage.

In the spring one of the first ducks to return north is the mallard. Upon arrival the flock starts to break up and the individual pairs choose a home range. A few days after this, a nesting site is selected. Mallards will utilize a wide variety of nesting sites but prefer being close to water in dense vegetation. However, they have been observed nesting in open fields, on rocks, in trees, and atop artificial nesting platforms.

The nest is constructed entirely by the hen. It's lined with dead leaves and down from her breast and belly. Approximately eight to ten dull green eggs are laid. They are incubated by the hen for 28 days. When she leaves the nest to feed, the hen pulls down over the eggs to keep them covered. As soon as the young are dry, within twelve hours of hatching, the mother duck leads them to water. The ducklings are able to fly about two months later.

In the fall the drake puts on a courtship display prior to pair formation. It's a rather elaborate ritual involving head and tail shaking, whistling, and displays. The mallards which have the most prolonged fall migration of any duck, are one of the last of the dabbling ducks to start the fall migration. They may travel as far south as the Gulf of Mexico, but are found all over the U.S. as long as there is open water available. The migrating flock is a well-formed V-shape consisting of 40-60 ducks. Occasionally there may be several hundred ducks in a flock. The ducks spend the winter in their chosen area until their internal clock tells them it is time to fly north. And the entire cycle is repeated again.