



Susan L. Shafer

Anas platyrhynchos

The Mallard

by Eileen Stegemann and Bryan Swift Art by Jean Gawalt

Visit any park with a pond and you'll likely be greeted by a familiar sight—a group of mallards jockeying for position as they beg for food. Some are so tame and bold that they will waddle right up to you demanding a handout. Others are content to hang back, hoping for a scrap.

Mallards are the first duck seen by many. They are a favorite of children, and are popular with bird watchers and waterfowl hunters alike. Mallards are found throughout North America and all across Europe and Asia. In fact, the mallard is thought to be the most abundant and wide-ranging duck on Earth. In New York, it is an extremely common year-round resident, with the greatest number occurring in the Coastal Lowland, St. Lawrence Valley and Great Lakes Plain.

The ubiquitous mallard owes much of its wide distribution to its tremendous adaptability to various habitat types and nest sites. It can be found in almost any water body, including wetlands, lakes, ponds, rivers, and even flooded fields. In addition, mallards occur in most urban park ponds, as well as in brackish and saltwater.

Like all waterfowl, mallards are well adapted to their lives on the water. Their broad, flattened bills allow them to feed on aquatic plants and invertebrates. Their wide-set legs and webbed feet make them excellent swimmers, and their waterproof plumage and thick layers of down feathers keep them warm in cold weather.

Male (drake) mallards are easily recognized—their trademark metallic green heads, white neck ring, chestnut-colored chest,

THE MALLARD







Susan L. Shafer

The ubiquitous mallard owes its wide distribution, in part, to its tremendous adaptability to various habitat types and nest sites.

Mallards breed throughout the United States and Canada, nesting in a wide variety of habitats. In New York, they nest in marshes, wetlands, fields, grasslands close to water, beaver flows, remote bogs, tidal marshes, suburban gardens, and urban park ponds. Nests are usually constructed in dense vegetation, and consist of a depression scraped in the ground (or built in a protected location, such as a tree cavity) and lined with down from the female's breast, and vegetation.

Although breeding occurs in the spring, mallards begin courting in the fall, and by midwinter pairs have formed. After mating, hens lay between one and 13 cream to greenish buff-colored eggs. The hens incubate the eggs for 23 to 30 days. Drakes stay with the hens until incubation is well underway, then they leave to join a flock of other males.

Newly hatched chicks are covered in down. They leave the nest 13 to 16 hours after hatching, and can swim and feed on insects immediately. Until they become independent at 52 to 70 days of age, they will stay near the female for protection. Mallards have a number of natural enemies, including snapping turtles, raccoons, skunk, mink, foxes, coyotes and raptors.

Mallards are perhaps the most prolific breeder in the waterfowl world, and are believed to be the ancestor of nearly all domestic duck breeds, except the Muscovy. Mallards frequently interbreed with domestic stock, producing an amazing variety of patterns and colors. Many of the domestic breeds look like wild birds, but are usually larger. In the wild, mallards often interbreed with its close relative, the American black duck. Unlike many hybrids, mallard and black duck offspring are usually fertile.

Adult mallards are highly gregarious outside of the breeding season, and may form large flocks on the water. However, when flying, mallards usually remain in small flocks.

yellow bill tipped with black, and white tail with two black, curled tail feathers make them hard to confuse with other duck species. In contrast, females (hens) are mottled brown in color and have an orange bill, usually speckled with black spots. Both sexes have a distinct violet metallic speculum (wing patch) bordered with white on each wing. During their annual molt, when they shed their feathers in summer and early fall, drakes lack their bright breeding plumage and resemble the more dull-colored females. However, drakes are still distinguishable by their yellow bills and reddish breasts.

A type of puddle (or dabbling) duck, mallards generally feed on or just below the surface of the water by tipping-up or dabbling with their rumps in the air. They eat a variety of items, including aquatic invertebrates, aquatic vegetation, insects and larvae. Unlike diving ducks which have their legs positioned far back on their bodies, making it difficult to walk on land, puddle ducks like the mallard have legs positioned near the middle of their bodies, allowing them to walk well on land. As a result, they can also be seen feeding on land, grazing on seeds, acorns, grains and plants.

Mallard Facts:

- A large dabbling duck
- Size: 20-26 inches
- Wingspan: 32-37 inches
- Weight: 2-3 pounds
- Drakes make a low kwek or yeeb sound; hens make the well known loud quack
- Swims with tail held above the water enabling it to spring directly out of the water and into the air
- The most common wild duck in New York and the world



Susan L. Shafer