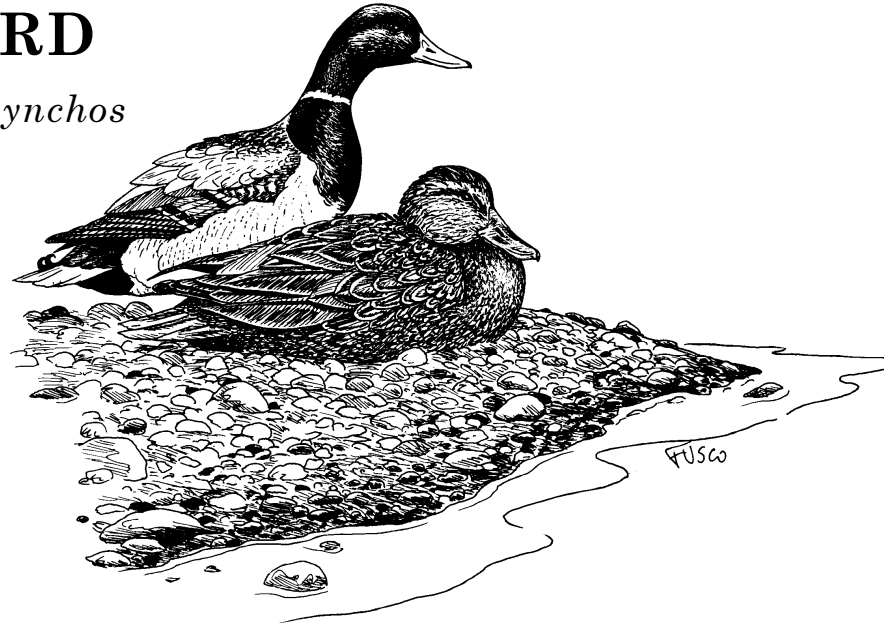


WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

INFORMATIONAL SERIES

MALLARD

Anas platyrhynchos



Habitat: Freshwater marshes, lakes, and ponds.

Weight: 3 to 3.5 pounds.

Length: Up to 28 inches. Wingspan up to 40 inches.

Food: Primarily vegetable matter such as seeds, grain, grasses, and acorns, but aquatic invertebrates are also readily eaten.

Identification: The mallard is a medium-sized duck commonly seen throughout Connecticut. Mallards are dabbling ducks and feed by tipping forward to submerge their heads and necks. The male or "drake" is recognized by its glossy, green head and white neck-ring. It has a yellow bill, rusty breast, and white tail. The female is mottled brown and has an orange-yellow bill and a whitish tail. Both have orange feet and a blue speculum (patch on their wing) framed with a white bar on each side.

Range: The breeding range of the mallard stretches across the northwestern portion of the Northern Hemisphere from Alaska and Greenland south to Virginia and northern Texas, dipping slightly into northern Mexico. Primarily, the wintering area of the mallard lies in the lower half of the Mississippi Valley, although some of the more hardy birds will spend the winter as far north as open water permits.

Reproduction: In Connecticut, mallard courtship and mating occurs through late winter, with nest building by the female commencing in April. The nest is usually well hidden, near water, and constructed in a depression in the ground. Although primarily a ground nester, an occasional mallard will nest as high as 25 feet above ground in a wide tree crotch. The nest is lined with

dead reeds and sedges, softened with dark gray down, and serves as a foundation for the eight to 12 greenish buff-colored eggs. The down is thickest at the edges of the nest and increases in quantity as the 26 days of incubation draw to a close.

The young are born with downy, yellow feathers and remain in the nest only briefly (less than one day) before heading to the water. They are reared by the female and follow close to her for up to two months as they feed among the marsh vegetation. As the ducklings grow in size, their bright yellow coloring fades and at three weeks, the first pin feathers begin to emerge on the flanks and rump. At the end of two months, all feathering (except for flight feathers) is complete and both sexes resemble the mother with her brownish coat. From this time until December, the young males and females undergo another molt. The feathers now produced are those of the adult plumage and the young males and females begin to lose resemblance to each other. Full adult plumage is not acquired until the second year, with first year birds generally identified by their light brown coloration, faded and worn feathers of the wing, and by the notched juvenal feathers which may remain in the tail.

History in Connecticut: Mallard ducks were considered "rare" visitors to Connecticut in the mid-1800s and at that time were not known to nest in the state. In the early 1900s, the deliberate release of captive-reared mallards assisted the mallard's establishment as a nesting bird in Connecticut. Also occurring during this period was a natural range expansion from the mid-continent into the eastern part of Canada and the United States. By the 1930s, the mallard was breeding in local areas where birds were released. The population steadily increased. By the 1970s, the mallard was the most abundant and widely distributed nesting waterfowl species in Connecticut.

Interesting Facts: The mallard is probably one of the most easily recognized ducks. Generally referred to as the "greenhead," mallards commonly interbreed with domestic ducks producing many different variations in feather color and appearance. They are also known to interbreed with wild black ducks and occasionally pintails.

The mallard is the most adaptable of Connecticut's waterfowl and can be found in both urban and rural wetland or pond habitats. The mallard may outcompete the black duck, which is less tolerant to human disturbance.

Like other waterfowl, mallards undergo a series of molts or "feather changes." The male bird usually leaves the female after the eggs have been laid and retires to the

seclusion of the marsh where he undergoes a complete molt from the green head, white neck-ring, and rusty-colored breast to a drab-colored, brown plumage not unlike the female. He is completely flightless at this time. Almost immediately another molt, involving only the body feathers begins, and by mid-October most adult males again sport the brilliant "courtship" plumage.

As soon as the female is finished rearing the young, she, too, undergoes a complete molt, including her flight feathers which must be regrown before the southward migration in mid-September can begin. Unlike the male, which goes from one molt to another within two months, the female mallard retains the plumage acquired in late summer until the following spring when the body feathers are changed.

Migratory mallards from Ontario, Quebec, and the northeastern states begin arriving in Connecticut during October. Some of these remain for a while and then continue south while others remain for the winter. Few mallards come from the mid-continent to Connecticut. Many mallards overwinter in park settings and are especially attracted to artificial feed which may do more harm than good. Feeding waterfowl may result in high numbers of birds concentrating in small areas, creating crowded conditions and competition among birds. In addition, waterfowl may become more susceptible to the spread of disease and less likely to migrate when the weather turns harsh.



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