

## WATER BIRDS

**M**ANY of the water birds are not hard to attract — a mixed blessing, maybe. Almost any city park with a body of water in it has geese and ducks, wild and domestic, that are as hungry for hand-outs as any pigeon. **Mallards** (ancestors of most domestic ducks) and **Canada geese** are found all over the country. They are all members of the order Anseriformes, family Anatidae. Ranging from medium-size to large, all of them have webbed feet and bills that serve as strainers.

Sometimes, however, when these geese and ducks find a likely looking place, they forget all about migration. In their enthusiasm to provide suitable habitat for geese, some cities and towns — some states, even — have managed to create king-size problems for themselves. You think pigeon droppings are a nuisance? Geese are much worse. They become half-tame very

willingly if ample food is available. Some people, and some government agencies, plant grain for the visitors. But geese can't — and don't — discriminate between what's planted for them and what's planted for market. They're big birds with enormous appetites. A flock of them can strip a field in short order. Gleaning is one thing, and many farmers welcome migrants stopping for a snack *after* the harvest. But what has happened in some areas is that geese, both imported and migrant, have found the living so fine, they've settled in permanently. They raise families, which in turn . . . but you see how it goes. Canada geese are now breeding much farther south than ever before, and farmers' grain fields have begun to suffer.

The same thing can happen on a small scale — to you. Having raised domestic geese and ducks, I'm painfully

aware of the extent of their appetites. We don't feed the wild ones. We're glad a pair of mallards nest at the brook behind the back pasture. We're delighted to see the Canada geese stopping in the cornfield next to us on their way south. I know of no avian event more exciting than the migration of geese. At the first honk, I drop whatever I'm doing and rush outdoors to watch until they're out of sight and hearing. What splendid creatures they are! However dreary the day, seeing them exhilarates me. But they're going to have to hustle for themselves. Enough is enough.

**Swans, loons, and geese** mate for life, and for birds they live long lives. The **mute swan** can reach the age of 100 years.

**Ducks** tend to have more than one partner. As with pheasants, the females have the job of rearing the young. The drakes are frequently almost gaudy in their nuptial plumage.

*Left to right: Mute swan, herring gull, Canada goose, wood duck, mallards, common loon.*

*Mallard**(Anas platyrhynchos)*

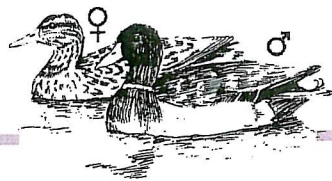
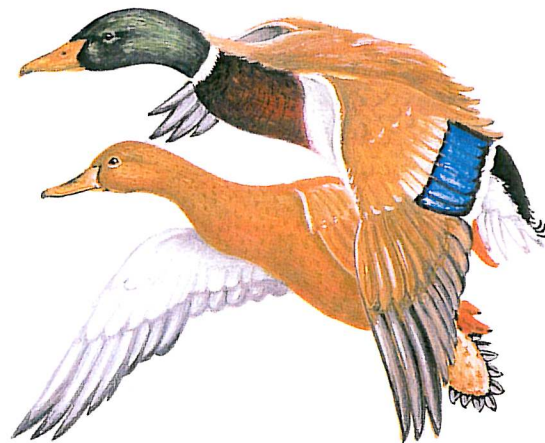
MALLARDS engage in group displays before forming pairs, courtship beginning in the fall and continuing until spring. Males shake both heads and tails, arch their necks with heads pointing to the water, and whistle. Both males and females engage in mock preening. Immediately preceding copulation, pairs face each other, bobbing their heads. Forced copulation is common among mallards during both incubation and fledgling care.

A pair of mallards typically needs an eighth to a quarter of an acre of feeding territory. The male defends only a small area of water and reeds, not including the nest, for ten to fourteen days until incubation begins.

Mallard nests are depressions in dry ground, usually near water and either in woods or brush. Sometimes they are found in tall grass or in alfalfa fields. The inside diameter of the depression is 8 inches, and the nest is made of grass, leaves, and reeds. The female selects the site and builds alone, starting to lay

her eggs on bare ground and gradually assembling more and more nesting materials, constructing her nest as she incubates and placing down over the eggs when she leaves them.

Mallards stay in the nest a day or less; on the second day the ducklings are led to water. The fledgling period lasts fifty to sixty days.



**Size:** 23"L, 36"W

**Breeding range:** Western North America east to the Great Lakes and New England, south to northern Virginia, and west to New Mexico, Arizona, and California

**Winter range:** Western coast of North America east to Massachusetts, south along the coast; inland from southern

New England west to southeastern Alaska, south to southern Mexico; permanent resident in the middle part of its range

**Preferred habitat:** Edges of lakes, ponds, reservoirs; sometimes grasslands and fields far from water

**Preferred nest site:** In tall grass, dry ground

**Clutch size:** 6 to 15, usually 8 to 15

**Incubation period:** 23 to 30 days, usually 26

**Nestling period:** 1 day or less (precocial)

**Broods per season:** 1

**Preferred food:** Seeds, leaves

*anta canadensis)*

tly after hatching. down is not the pro-at feathers are, so the rd broods the gos-ight and for a few ing the day. As fledg- young depend on the ily for protection.

: 4 to 10, usually

**period:** 28 days

**riod:** 1 day

**season:** 1

**ood:** Grasses, marsh uatic plants, grains

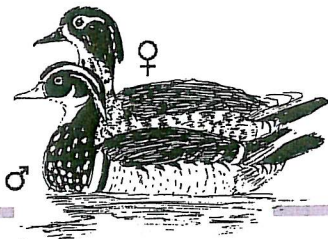
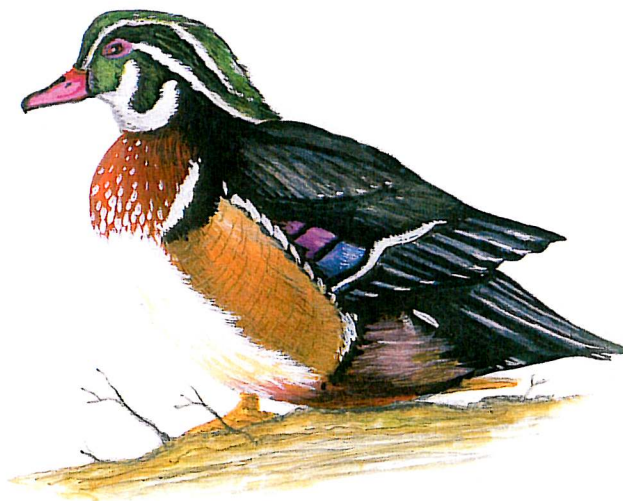
**Wood Duck***(Aix sponsa)*

THE drake of this species is the fanciest of North American ducks, sporting iridescent feathers during the mating season. These beautiful birds, which accept nesting boxes, nest in a tree cavity from 3 to

60 feet up, in wooded swamps or marshes or beside water. The cavity is lined with wood chips and down.

Wood ducks have sharp claws that enable them to climb up from the nest to the

entrance hole, a distance of 4 to 8 feet. Some observers believe the female carries the young to water in her bill, but most think the parents coax or urge them to leave the nest and then lead them to water.



**Size:** 18½"L, 28"W

**Breeding range:** Western coast of North America from southern British Columbia to central California, northern Nova Scotia south to south Florida, west to the midwestern states

**Winter range:** Maryland, south

to Florida and west to central Texas; coast of Washington south to central Mexico

**Preferred habitat:** Wooded swamps, marshes, near bodies of water

**Preferred nest site:** In tree cavity, nestbox

**Clutch size:** 10 to 15, usually 6

to 8 (another source says 6 to 15, usually 9 to 14)

**Incubation period:** 28 to 31 days (another source says 28 to 37, average 30)

**Nestling period:** 1 day (precocial)

**Broods per season:** 1

**Preferred food:** Acorns, insects

**Killde**

ALTHOUGH this is a small bird, the killdeer is well known if you can find it. It is a common bird in the United States. The killdeer is a member of the plover family. It seems to have a special ability for nesting but it is not clear why birds gather there. The killdeer is a common bird in the United States. It seems to have a special ability for nesting but it is not clear why birds gather there. The killdeer is a common bird in the United States. It seems to have a special ability for nesting but it is not clear why birds gather there.



**Size:** 10½"L

**Breeding range:** Canada and

south to Nova Scotia

**Winter range:** England and

north along the coast

south to South Carolina