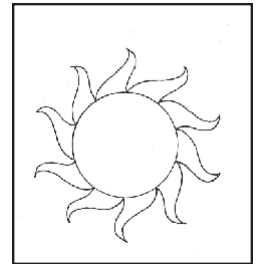
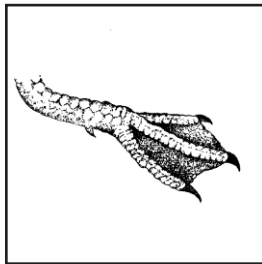
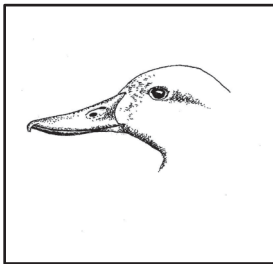
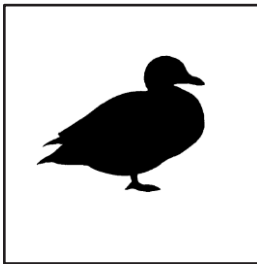




Puddle Ducks

Order Anseriformes

Family Anatinae
Subfamily Anatini



Puddle ducks or dabbling ducks include our most common and recognizable ducks. While the diving ducks frequent large deep bodies of water, the **puddle ducks can be found along shallow shorelines, ponds, creeks and marshes.** Puddle ducks feed mostly on the seeds, grasses, leaves and stems of aquatic plants, but they'll also waddle on land to eat farm crops. True **omnivores**, they will also eat mollusks, insects and fish. The **silhouette of a puddle duck sits higher on the water than diving ducks** and when they want to **take off, they lift directly upward.** Their diving cousins need to run along the water before gaining altitude.



They are excellent swimmers, thanks to their **webbed feet.** On each wing is an **iridescent patch of color called a speculum.** It may serve as a visual ID to help keep the flock together. Varying from species to species, the speculum is an important field mark to bird watchers.



Mallard

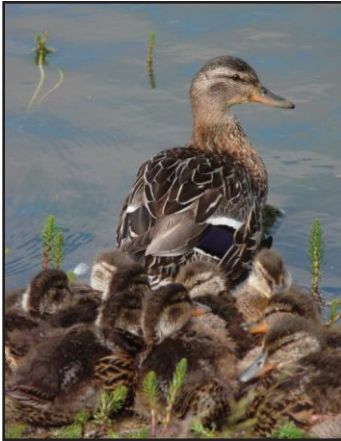
Anas platyrhynchos



The **mallard** is perhaps our most recognizable bird and **has the largest breeding range of any bird in the United States.** The **drake** is well-known for his **dark green head, white neck ring and rusty breast.** The buff and brown hen is often seen with a cluster of pale-yellowish ducklings following closely behind her. Both drake and hen have **bright orange bills and orange webbed feet.** The wing **speculum is violet with white borders.**



Mallards are vocal waterfowl, able to swim and fly well. They **eat a variety of foods** including pondweeds, millet, sedges and wild rice, leaves and stems of aquatic plants, insects and crustaceans and even corn and acorns when they wander onto land. Insects make up most of the duckling's diet.



Mallards and other puddle ducks prefer **shallow water for foraging and dense vegetation for nesting.**

After breeding, the drake leaves the hen, doing nothing to help raise the young. The hen alone builds a simple **ground nest of grasses lined with down feathers pulled from her breast.** She will incubate 8–12 greenish-gray eggs.

Within hours of hatching, the hen will lead the ducklings to water to begin feeding. When the drakes leave the hens behind, they seek out quiet areas to **undergo their annual “eclipse” molt, during which they resemble the hens in color.** Because they are flightless while they molt, the drab plumage helps them camouflage from predators, just as it helps the hens stay hidden while incubating her eggs.



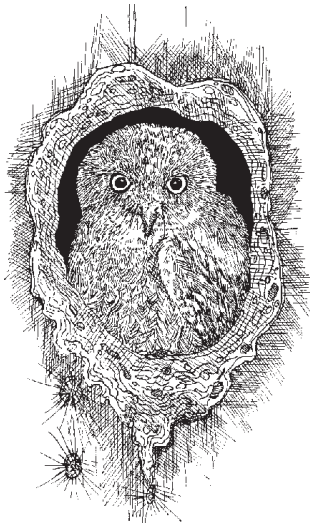
Wood Duck

Aix sponsa



Hands down, **our most colorful duck is the wood duck.** The **only cavity nester among our puddle ducks**, “woodies” are smaller than mallards and have a distinct **crest on their heads.** The drake is an iridescent blend of greens, blues, purples and white. He has bright **red eyes, yellow legs and an orange bill.** The hen is a soft, mottled brown with white rings around her eyes.

While most puddle ducks vocalize by quacking, **wood ducks whistle, and shriek,** making shrill warning calls. The **hen is louder than the drake.** Fast fliers, they can **easily maneuver among tree branches in the woodlands where they nest in tree cavities.**



In addition to pulling up aquatic plants to eat, wood ducks will also eat wild grapes, berries, acorns, hickory nuts and beechnuts. **Like all birds that eat whole nuts, the food is crushed into digestible portions within their gizzards.**

Their **courtship involves the drake spreading his iridescent wings, tucking his chin, fanning his tail and holding his crest erect.** He then circles the hen. The hen chooses a **tree cavity**, often abandoned by a pileated woodpecker, **preferring a tall tree over water.**

One egg per day is laid until a clutch of up to 15 eggs is complete. The **eggs are simply placed on wood chips** at the bottom of the cavity **softened by down feathers from the hen's breast.** The drake will stay with the hen while she incubates her eggs but is usually gone by the time the eggs hatch.

About a day after hatching, the hen flies out of the cavity and goes to the ground to begin **softly calling to the precocial hatchlings to join her.** The downy **ducklings will tumble to the ground** generally unharmed (**sometimes from heights of 60'**) and then follow their mother to a nearby lake or stream.

Early last century, the wood duck was almost extinct due to loss of habitat—woodland ponds and mature nesting trees—and overhunting. **Stricter hunting seasons and man-made nesting boxes have helped the wood duck populations rebuild,** as has the state's beaver reintroduction program. Tree-bordered beaver ponds are perfect for wood ducks and where beavers have increased, wood ducks may follow.



Blue-winged Teal

Anas discors



Blue-winged teal drakes are easily recognized by a **large white crescent in front of their eyes.** Their bodies are chestnut brown and their heads are bluish-gray. Both drake and hen have **blue on the forewing and green speculums.** They are **shy, fast flyers** able to quickly dart among tree branches. They are early migrants, leaving as soon as August to southern wintering grounds.

Like all puddle ducks, the male or drake has bright plumage while the female or hen is drab, helping to camouflage her against the ground vegetation where most puddle ducks nest. Each summer after breeding season, the drakes molt to an “eclipse” plumage resembling the hens until fall.

The bill of puddle ducks have serrated edges that allow water to drain out after the duck has pulled up plant foods from underwater. They will also take small fish, frogs and insect larvae, including mosquito larvae.

Most hens lay clutches of up to 13 eggs on grass, leaf and reed nests tucked into thick ground vegetation. A few species nest in tree cavities. Ducklings are precocial and covered with pale, dark-striped down to help them camouflage as they closely follow the hen. They can swim and feed themselves soon after hatching but will stay with the hen for several months until they learn to fly.



Green-winged Teal

Anas crecca



Green-winged teals are our smallest ducks, about the size of a pigeon. Drakes have lovely reddish-brown heads with a wide green streak and thin white stripe over each eye. The speculum is green. Teals are fast flyers that stay in tight flocks.

Green-wings whistle and call when communicating. Their wings even make a whistling sound when they fly. They feed in shallow waters but prefer to be near dense cover for protection. Most of their diet is made up of invertebrates.



Northern Pintail

Anas acuta

The Northern pintail is slighter in build than our other puddle ducks but among our most beautifully marked. The drake has a dark brown head marked by a bold white stripe running up the neck and white breast. The speculum is greenish brown. The pintail gets its name from its long, pointed tail. They are fast, agile flyers often zigzagging as they descend to land. Their ground nests can be found relatively far from water and are sometimes found in the open.

American black ducks are sometimes called “black mallards” because they so closely resemble a mallard hen. But their plumage is a bit darker than mallard hen’s, with white underwings and a violet-blue speculum. Both the drake and hen black ducks look alike.



Northern Shoveler

Anas clypeata



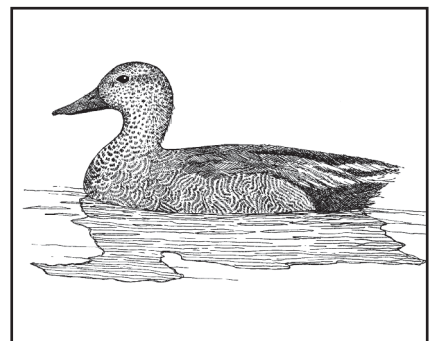
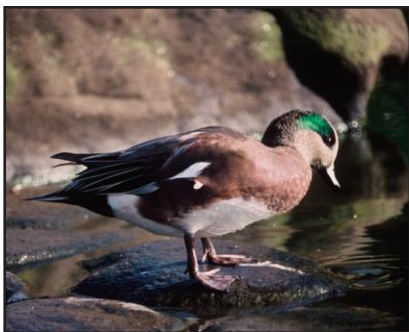
American Black Duck

Anas rubripes

Another striking duck is the **Northern shoveler**. Similar in size and color to the mallard, **the shoveler drake has the same green head as the mallard, but his white breast and chestnut sides are reversed**. The best field mark to identify this duck is its **long, broad bill**, which it holds downward while swimming. **They like to feed on surface plants, straining them through their bills** as they eat. They are common migrants during spring and fall migration.

American wigeons (below left and center) are sometimes called “**baldpates**,” which refers to the **white patch on the drake’s forehead**. There is also a **green area spreading out behind the eye and the speculum is blackish-green**. Wigeons are **easily startled** and will escape threats in compact flocks by twisting and turning in unison. Wigeons migrate through Pennsylvania but nest north into Canada.

Gadwalls (below right) are **subtle brown in color**. While they lack some of the striking plumage of other ducks, gadwalls are **the only puddle ducks with a white speculum**. Gadwalls are **uncommon in our state** but often congregate in mixed flocks with pintails. Although they are puddle ducks, they **will occasionally dive** for food.





A Simple Review of Puddle Ducks



The two large groups of ducks in Pennsylvania are divided between puddle ducks and diving ducks. **Puddle ducks are sometimes referred to as marsh ducks or dabbling ducks.** Our most common duck, **the mallard, is a puddle duck.** If you can picture a mallard, you have a good idea of the body shape and behavior of most puddle ducks.

Puddle ducks feed in shallow water for aquatic invertebrates and pull up aquatic plants. They **dip their head under water, sometimes upending their bodies with only their tail sticking up**, as they feed. Their flat bills have tiny serrated edges (called lamellae) that strain water, leaving behind small pieces of food.



Ever alert to danger, one member of the flock always has its head up while the others feed with their heads underwater. On land or on the surface of the water, **puddle ducks take off by leaping straight up into the air.** Unlike diving ducks, which have a hard time walking on land, puddle ducks can often be seen **waddling on mudflats or marsh edges.** Some more common ducks can even be found walking along sidewalks or through backyards. Most nest on the ground. But a few, like the wood duck, nest in tree cavities.

Wood ducks often travel quite a distance from water to find a suitable nesting tree. Their nests may be as high as fifty feet up in a tree. Like all ducks, their **chicks are precocial.** This means the chicks are born covered with down. They can also walk and swim soon after birth. In order to get the wood duck nestlings to water, the hen leaves the cavity and softly coos to the ducklings. The ducklings leave the nest by jumping all the way to the ground, sometimes bouncing when they land. They then follow their mother to the nearest water to feed alongside the hen.

A group of ducks floating together is sometimes called a “raft” of ducks.

There are many different puddle ducks that live in Pennsylvania or migrate through our state, including the mallard. Male ducks are called **drakes** and females are called **hens**. Most drakes are very colorful, which helps them attract a mate. The hens are browns, blacks and grays. Those shades help them camouflage while incubating their eggs on ground nests. The down-covered nestlings are called ducklings.

