

Fourteen species of ducks breed regularly in the UK, and many more migrate south from the Arctic to winter here. The commonest duck in the UK is the mallard. They can be found in most habitats throughout Britain and Ireland, and readily inhabit even town parks. For many children, feeding mallards in a local park is their first encounter with waterbirds. A mallard nest in a garden is still a surprise to many, but a regular occurrence.

Identification

The male (drake) mallard has a greenish yellow bill, dark green head, white neck ring, purple-brown breast and grey body. The two central tail feathers curl up - characteristic to mallards and their domestic descendents. Both sexes have a distinct broad blue wingbar, edged in black and white. Otherwise, the female (duck) is mottled brown all over.

Domestication

The mallard was first domesticated in China or south-east Asia over 2,000 years ago. Most modern domesticated ducks are descendents of the wild mallard. In Britain alone, there are about 20 breeds of domestic ducks, ranging from white through multicoloured and brown to almost black.

Wild mallards and their domestic descendents often live side by side on village ponds and park lakes. They interbreed readily, creating a bewildering array of plumages. Despite the varied appearance, all males have the curly tail feathers of the wild drake mallard.

Food

Mallards are dabbling ducks, and get much of their food from close to the water's surface. They often upend to reach morsels a little deeper down. They also feed on land, grazing on a variety of plant material. Young birds around 4-7 weeks old regularly dive for food, but adults rarely do so. Mallards are omnivorous and opportunistic, but seldom eat fish. Young ducklings depend on emerging aquatic invertebrates during the first few days of their life, but as they grow, they eat more plant matter. Being very tolerant of man and very adaptable to local conditions, they quickly learn to use new food sources provided by people.

Nesting

Mallards start to nest in March. They prefer a quiet undisturbed location, and the duck generally makes her nest well covered in vegetation or in a natural hole in a tree. Town ponds, where people feed the ducks providing an abundant and reliable food supply, often attract more mallards than are able to nest close by. This sometimes results in the choice of less than perfect nest sites as many ducks nest well away from the pond to avoid competition and harassment from others. Nests have been found in boathouses, wood piles, old crows' nests, hay stacks, roof gardens, enclosed courtyards and even in large flowerpots on balconies several floors up! If the nest is a long way from water, the ducklings will have a long and hazardous journey to reach water.

Egg laying

The female builds a nest from leaves and grasses, and lines it with down plucked from her breast. She lays a clutch of around 12 eggs at one to two day intervals. After each egg is added, she covers the clutch to protect it from predators, and leaves the nest. If you find a nestful of duck eggs, leave it well alone – it is unlikely to have been abandoned. Duck nests can be found any time between March and July. The laying period is very stressful for the female – she lays more than half her body weight in eggs in a couple of weeks. She needs a lot of rest and depends heavily on her mate to protect her and their feeding and loafing areas. After the female has started to incubate, the male leaves her and joins other males to moult. At this time, groups of males with no obvious duties often mate forcibly with females that appear to be unattached. This anti-social phase is short-lived and ends once moulting is underway.

Hatching

The female starts to incubate as she lays the last egg. She sits very tightly, and her brown plumage blends her perfectly to the background. She rarely leaves the nest apart from short breaks to feed and stretch her legs. About 28 days later the eggs hatch within hours of each other. The ducklings stay in the nest for several hours while they dry and gather their strength. When they are ready, the female leads them to water. Bad weather may delay this exodus, but the sooner the ducklings get to water to feed, the better their chances

of survival. The nest is abandoned, although if it is close to the feeding area, the family may continue to use it for brooding and roosting.

Travelling to water

If the nest is some way from water, this first journey can be the most perilous time in a duckling's life. Where a nest is high up (up a tree or on a balcony) the birds must first jump to the ground. Being very light and covered in down they usually come to no harm during the fall. If the landing area is very hard and there is cause for concern, placing something soft like straw or a blanket underneath will cushion the fall. Next, they will have a long and potentially hazardous walk before they can reach water.

Helping the family to water

The mother duck knows where the nearest water is to take her young to, although it may be a couple of miles away. In most instances it is best to leave her alone, because interference can cause extra stress and risk the mother panicking and abandoning her brood. In many instances keeping an eye from a distance and shepherding the family across a danger point, such as a busy road, is all that is needed.

In rare occasions the duck nests where the ducklings will be at real risk on hatching. Only in such cases the birds could benefit from being caught and taken to water, but this must be well planned and prepared. There is normally no second chance, and if the mother panics and flies away, she may not return to her young. The following points need to be remembered:

- Do not move the family from the nest until all the ducklings are dry and ready to travel.
- Move the family in the morning because this gives them the whole day to get settled, feed and find somewhere safe and dry to roost for the night.



- Count the ducklings carefully before you start – it is surprisingly easy to lose one or two.
- First, catch the mother; an easy way is to gain her confidence over the weeks that she is sitting. Put out food for her in a pet carrying basket with the door wedged open. She will get used to feeding inside. When her young are ready to leave, give the normal meal, making sure that the door can easily be closed on her. Once she is inside, cover the basket so she is in darkness and unlikely to panic. If this fails or you are too late to begin feeding, try throwing something over her, such as a coat or a towel, or use a handnet, and place her securely in a box.
- Chasing should be kept to a minimum because the ducklings may panic and scatter, making it difficult to find them again later. Get someone to watch where the ducklings go while you catch the mother.
- Collect the ducklings carefully into a second box and count them. Do not be tempted to place them in with their mother because she might try to escape in the process.
- Handle the duck and ducklings as little as possible. However gentle you are, the whole experience will be very stressful for them.
- Keep the boxes together during the journey so the mother is constantly aware of her young.
- When you get to the water, let the ducklings go first on an open bank where they can stand, be seen by the mother and get in and out of the water easily.
- When you release the mother, make sure she has seen the ducklings before letting her go. Place the box she is in carefully on its side so that the opening faces the ducklings. Stand behind the box so that when it is opened she can walk straight out to her family.

Growing up

Young ducklings can feed themselves as soon as they reach water, but must learn what is edible. They depend on their mother for warmth for a few days. She broods them regularly, particularly at night, as they chill easily in cold weather. The down of the ducklings is not naturally waterproof, but they get the waterproofing from their mother. She also protects her ducklings from attacks by other

mallards. Ducks do not tolerate stray ducklings close to their own brood, and females kill small strange young they encounter. Ducklings take 50-60 days to fledge (fly) and become independent. They are able to breed when they are a year old.

Orphans

The journey to the water is hazardous for the whole family, and on occasions, the mother dies or part or all of the brood becomes separated from her. When faced with a handful of endearing duck orphans, think carefully before you take on the task of rearing them. Rearing ducklings is a long, messy, time-consuming process, and it is best to pass the youngsters on to an expert rehabilitator.

Eclipse plumage

After breeding, ducks moult. Ducks are peculiar in that they moult all their flight feathers at once. For about a month they are flightless and very vulnerable to predators. To provide some protection, particularly for the brightly coloured males, the moult starts with their bright body feathers. These are replaced by dowdy brown ones, making them look much like females. This 'eclipse' plumage is why in mid-summer it seems that all the drakes have gone. Once the flight feathers have regrown, the birds moult again, and by October the full colours have been regained.

Overpopulation

Feeding ducks is popular but can cause problems, particularly on enclosed waters that are not flushed by rivers or regular flooding. The population of birds on a pond and the food supply are very closely linked. More food means more mallards.

A regular supply of extra food can lead to artificially large numbers of ducks nesting in the area, and can especially encourage large numbers of unattached birds (particularly males) to stay. Forcible mating of unattached females by groups of males can become regular and can make feeding breaks dangerous for the already exhausted incubating females. Young females, breeding for the first time, may die, unaware of the danger and already weak from egg production.

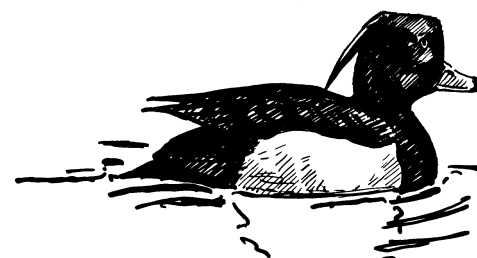
If the food supply remains reliable and adequate for

all the ducks over a long period of time, the population can increase from year to year and the birds will become increasingly sedentary. Build up of droppings in the pond favours the growth of algae, which can smother aquatic plants and deprive the water of oxygen. Algal growth is unsightly and smelly, and in hot weather can be a source of botulism, a fatal form of food poisoning.

While feeding ducks is a popular pass-time, please do it responsibly and in moderation. Bear in mind that many other people may also be feeding the birds. Never give the birds more food unless it is all eaten up immediately – uneaten food can fester food poisoning bacteria and even attract rats. Encouraging ducks to feed from the hand can make them too bold and demanding, and is not a good idea. Always wash your hands after you have been feeding any wild birds. Sometimes a local authority is forced to put up signs asking people not to feed the ducks at a local park. There is always a good reason behind this, so please respect these signs and refrain from feeding in these situations.

Ducks and the law

Mallards and their nests are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, which make it an offence to intentionally or, in Scotland, recklessly kill, injure or take any wild bird, or to take, damage or destroy its nest, eggs or young. In Scotland, it is also an offence to intentionally or recklessly obstruct or prevent any wild bird from using its nest. In Northern Ireland it is illegal to disturb birds at an active nest. Therefore, it is important not to chase away a duck that comes into your garden in the spring. Since she has most likely already started nesting, she must be allowed access to her nest. If you find a nest full of eggs, you must not interfere with them. A failed nest can be cleared and remaining eggs destroyed later in the year, once it is absolutely certain that nothing will come of the contents. If you have a pond but do not want it to attract nesting ducks to your garden, make sure you cover the pond well before the breeding season starts. Although the ducks may still nest, without access to water, they will be less likely to stay in the garden until the ducklings are old enough to fly.



Tufted duck

The mallard is only one of the many species of ducks that live in the UK. A variety of ducks can be seen in RSPB reserves at any time of the year. If you Love Nature, you can visit our website at www.rspb.org.uk to find out more about the birds you can see on our reserves.

The RSPB

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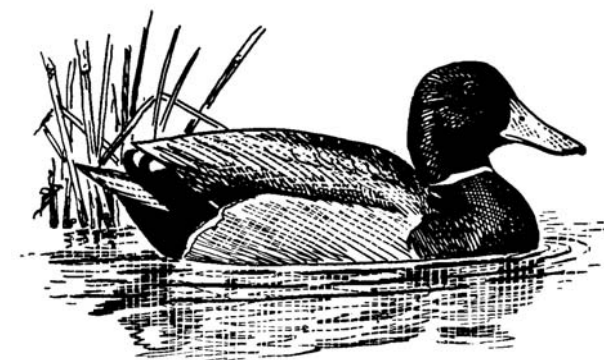
The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way. We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

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Illustrations by Mike Langman & Dan Powell wpo\np15190
Leaflet revised 2009



INFORMATION Ducks and ducklings



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