



Article & Photo by Margie Manthey and published in the Westport Review Mirror, 2019



**Whether you opt to shoot with a gun or a camera, the mallard duck may be on your list of quarry.** This species of duck

is so common, that most people can easily recognize the handsome *drake* (male) with his emerald green head and white-ringed neck. The *hen* (female) is, by contrast, rather plain, with brown and tan plumage. Mallards can be found in diverse habitats: lakes, streams, marshes, floodplains and park ponds...pretty much on any freshwater body bigger than a puddle! While they are definitely common and widespread, there are some pretty neat things about mallards that you may not know.

For starters, only the hen makes the familiar “quack-quack” sound that even the youngest child will imitate when asked, “What does the duck say?” Quacking is also known as a “hail call,” and its purpose is to bring ducklings or other ducks to the hen. This sound can carry over long distances.

Mallards are among the first duck species to nest in the spring. The hen raises her ducklings without any help from the drake, whose parenting role ends after mating. A mother duck may fake being injured to lure a predator away from her young. Myriad creatures predate on mallard eggs and ducklings, including foxes, raccoons, mink, snapping turtles, large birds, northern pike, bass, snakes and even bullfrogs; so a seemingly large brood of 12-13 youngsters can be quickly diminished. Ducklings are especially vulnerable during the 50-70 days it takes to reach flight status. They are also very sensitive to extreme weather. Their fuzzy down feathers help to insulate them in dry weather, but don't function well when wet -- so cold, rainy, windy spells can lead to hypothermia. Soaring temperatures, hailstorms, starvation and disease pose additional threats. In search of wetlands with abundant food and cover, a mother mallard may lead her young over surprisingly long distances, during which they are susceptible to predation and exhaustion. It's a wonder that any of these fragile, little puffballs survive to adulthood, let alone reach the status of *our most common wild duck in the northern hemisphere!*

Another thing you may not know about mallard ducks is that twice each year, they lose their flight feathers. It takes about 3 weeks for the new ones to grow in, and during this period, they can't fly. However, they are incredible flyers, capable of taking off nearly vertical from the water. Mallards have been clocked at over 112 kilometers / 70 miles per hour. They migrate southward each year to avoid harsh winter weather, using familiar landforms to guide them along their journey to warmer climes.

“Waddle like a duck,” you might tell a toddler during a silly game. That comical, characteristic way mallards waddle when they walk on land is due to their legs being set so far back on their body. They're built to “dabble,” that is, tipping forward in the water with bums aimed skyward as they forage for aquatic plants, seeds and insect larvae. They also meander along the shoreline, looking for insects and earthworms and to browse on vegetation. During migration, mallards rely largely on agricultural seeds and grains.

A last interesting fact about this common but cool waterfowl: almost all domesticated duck breeds have been derived from the mallard.

*Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summered on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.*