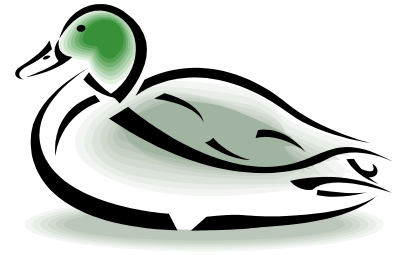


Mallard Questions and Answers



Why did Mrs. Mallard lay eggs in the Glover Outdoor Classroom?

In early spring, mallard male and female pairs search for a territory and place to nest. The female (also called a hen) often chooses a place close to where she was born. Some females return year after year to the same site.

When choosing a nesting site, mallards are very careful. They know how important it is to find a place that is safe from predators, well hidden, and near water, but not too close (in case there is flooding).

Last year, we saw a Mr. and Mrs. Mallard checking out the Glover Outdoor Classroom. But they decided not to stay.

This year Mrs. Mallard found a great place to nest in the Glover Outdoor Classroom! She is really well hidden and camouflaged under the Eastern Red Cedar tree. The only predator that could be a danger to her and her eggs is the red-tailed hawk (you may have seen them fly over the courtyard before). But she's so concealed under the tree that it's unlikely a hawk would find the nest. We also need to make sure we don't disturb her. If she's scared away, she could abandon the eggs and then they would not hatch.

What is her nest like?

Mallard hens usually make nests in the cover of native grasses in April and May. The nesting site may be up to 100 yards from water.

Mrs. Mallard makes a cup-shaped nest (about 7" to 8" in diameter) and lines it with grass and feathers (down) from her belly. The nest is usually on the ground in good cover, like thick grass or under a tree or bush. But nests sometimes are found in hollow trees or on the roofs of buildings.

Mallards may re-nest up to 3 to 4 times if their nests are destroyed. But, each successive nest will have fewer eggs. However, mallards do not raise more than one brood of ducklings each year.

What do the eggs look like?

Mrs. Mallard has laid 5 eggs. (A typical clutch is between 8 and 12 eggs.) The eggs are almost white. After Mrs. Mallard started incubating the eggs, Mr. Mallard left to go feed with other males (also called drakes).

What does incubating mean?

The mother duck sits on the eggs (incubates them) to keep them warm until they hatch. The cells in the egg will not develop into a duckling unless the egg is kept at the right temperature. The hen doesn't start incubating the eggs until the last one has been laid. This ensures that all the ducklings will hatch at about the same time.

During the early stages of incubation, the mother sheds down (fine feathers) from her belly to line the nest. She pulls this down over the eggs when she leaves the nest to feed. The down keeps the eggs warm and also hides the eggs from predators.

When will the ducklings hatch?

Mallard eggs usually hatch from late April to late May. The incubation period (time from when the eggs are laid until they hatch) is 26-30 days. We estimate that Mrs. Mallard laid her eggs sometime during the week of April 24th—so the eggs will probably hatch sometime after May 20.

What will happen when the eggs hatch?

At first, the ducklings will be little balls of down with brown backs and yellow patches. Their faces and underparts will also be yellow, except a spot and brown line across the eye. As soon as the ducklings are dry after they hatch (usually within about 12 hours), Mrs. Mallard will lead them to water. This usually happens early in the morning.

Since the Glover Outdoor Classroom is a totally-enclosed courtyard, there is no way for Mrs. Mallard to get her ducklings out on her own. We will have to open the door to the courtyard and the outside, and block off the hallways on either side. That way, we will provide a path for her to get outside. Then she can lead the ducklings to Turner's Pond. During this time, we'll have to watch from a distance and be sure not to scare Mrs. Mallard or the ducklings. Again, if she is frightened, she may abandon the ducklings.

What will happen then?

When they reach Turner's Pond, Mrs. Mallard will teach the ducklings to avoid predators (foxes, skunks, coyotes, turtles, rats, and predatory birds—like hawks) and show them what to eat. The ducklings will eat mainly insects (like mosquito larvae), crustaceans, and plant parts. They will gradually lose their down and grow feathers. After about 2 months, the ducklings will have full-grown feathers and be able to fly. At this point, Mrs. Mallard will leave the ducklings on their own. When she leaves her brood, Mrs. Mallard will molt (shed their feathers and regrow new ones). For about a month during this time, she will not be able to fly. (The drakes go through this same molting process while the females are incubating their eggs.)

Mrs. Mallard is an excellent mother. If surprised by an intruder, she will flap and squawk across the ground, acting as if she is injured. This ploy is designed to lure predators away from her ducklings.

Do Mallards mate for life?

In the late summer, the drakes then begin to perform aerial courtship displays to attract hens. Drakes and hens pair up in August to form pair bonds or couples. The birds usually pair for just one season, but sometimes the same birds mate again in subsequent years. They spend the rest of the summer feeding to fatten up for fall migration.

What do mallards eat?

Mallards are dabbling ducks. They don't dive underwater for food, but simply "upend" themselves to feed at or just below the water's surface. (This is why you often see them in shallow water—not deep water.) Mallards' bills have serrated edges to allow them to pick up food. Water is sifted through their broad and flat bills to filter out tiny plant and animal material. Mallards eat wetland plants, insects, mollusks, crustaceans, worms, snails, and small fish. They also can graze on land, like geese.

In the spring, the female mallard starts to eat aquatic invertebrates found in wetlands. This diet gives her the nutrition and energy she needs to lay and incubate a clutch of eggs.

Before fall migration, mallards also eat more food to build up a store of fat on their bodies. This gives them energy for long migratory flights and helps them survive cooler temperatures.

Sources: Hinterland Who's Who Bird Fact Sheets, www.hww.ca/hww2.asp?id=54.
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