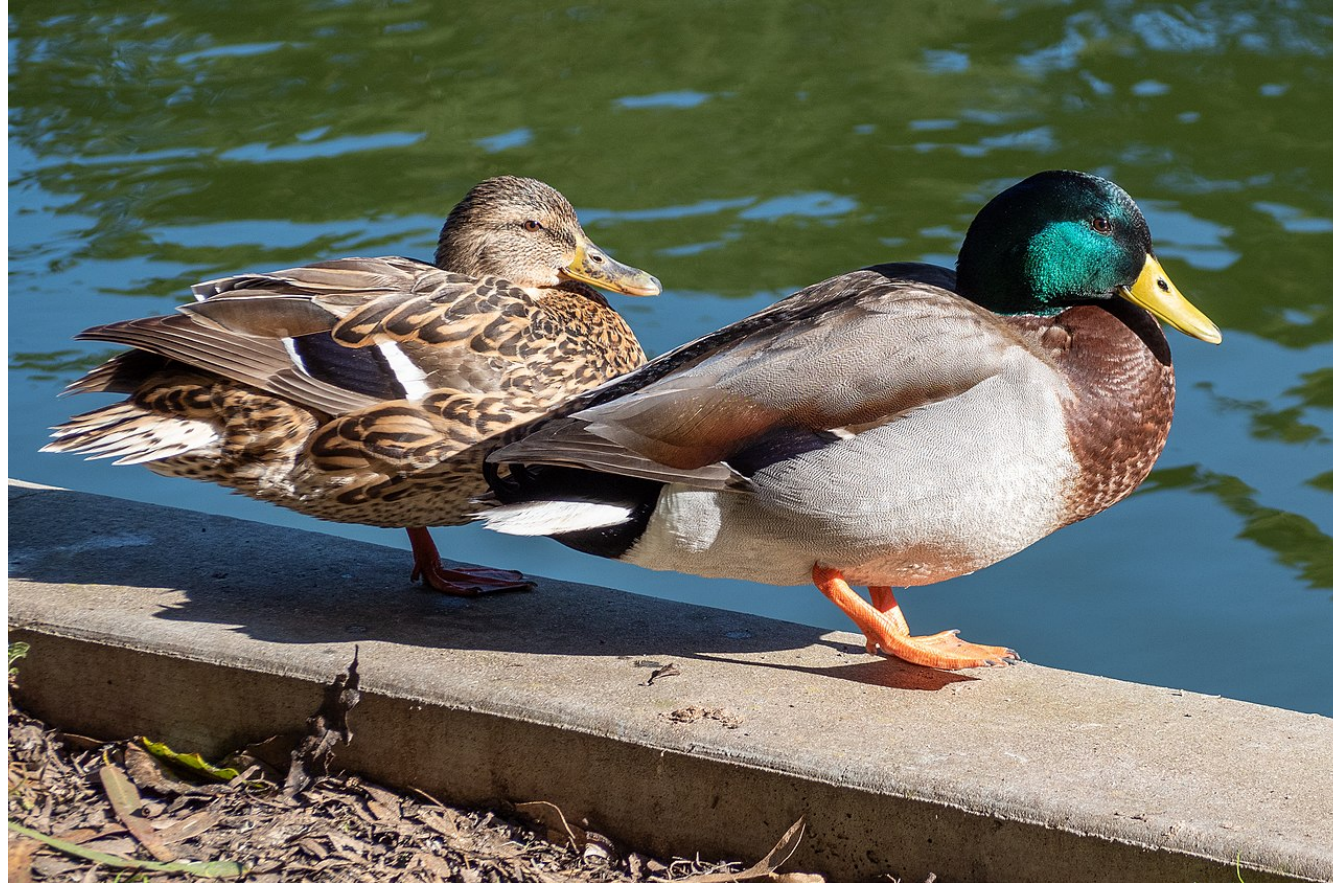


# Mallard

# Mallard

## Appearance

The quintessential duck within most of its range, found anywhere with water, including city parks, backyard creeks, and various wetland habitats. Males have an iridescent green head, chestnut breast, gray body, and yellow bill. Females are mottled brown with orange and black splotches on the bill. Both male and female have orange legs.



Female (left) and male (right)

# Mallard Appearance

Mallards have white wing bars on the leading and trailing sides of a blue wing patch (often referred to as a *speculum* patch).



A pair of male Mallards in flight, showing white wing bars and blue wing patch.



A pair of female Mallards in flight, showing white wing bars and blue wing patch.

# Mallard

## Appearance

Mallards are large ducks with hefty bodies, rounded heads, and wide, flat bills. Like many “dabbling ducks,” the body is long and the tail rides high out of the water, giving a blunt shape.



# Mallard Appearance

In flight, their wings are broad and set back toward the rear.



Female Mallard in flight



Male Mallard in flight

# Mallard

## Appearance

### Eclipse plumage

Eclipse plumage is temporary, or transition, plumage. Male ducks are peculiar in that they molt all their flight feathers (the long, wing feathers) at once. For about a month, they can't fly and are therefore very vulnerable to predators. To provide some protection, particularly for brightly-colored male ducks like Mallards, the molt 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 as though all the male Mallards have gone. Once the flight feathers have regrown, the birds molt again, and by October the full colors return, and the males are easily recognizable again.

Plumages of the females differ less by season than the males, so their molt is more-or-less undetectable.



Three stages showing a male Mallard changing to eclipse plumage.

# Mallard Sounds

From The Cornell Lab of Ornithology <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/>

## CALLS

The quintessential duck's quack is the sound of the female mallard. Females often give this call in a series of 2–10 quacks that begin loudly and get softer. When courting, she may give a paired form of this quack. The male does not quack; instead, he gives a quieter, rasping, one- or two-noted call. Ducklings make soft, shrill whistles when alarmed.

Listen to the songs and calls at:

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Mallard/sounds>

# Mallard

## Diet

Mallards are omnivores (eat plants and animals). Their diet depends on the type of habitat and available food.

They eat aquatic vegetation and grain crops, like wheat and corn.

They eat different kinds of soft-bodied invertebrates, such as insect larvae, snails, shrimp, and worms.



A pair of Mallards foraging.



# Mallard

## Diet

Mallards often feed on tiny, free-floating, aquatic green plants called duckweed.



Male Mallard in eclipse plumage feeding on duckweed.

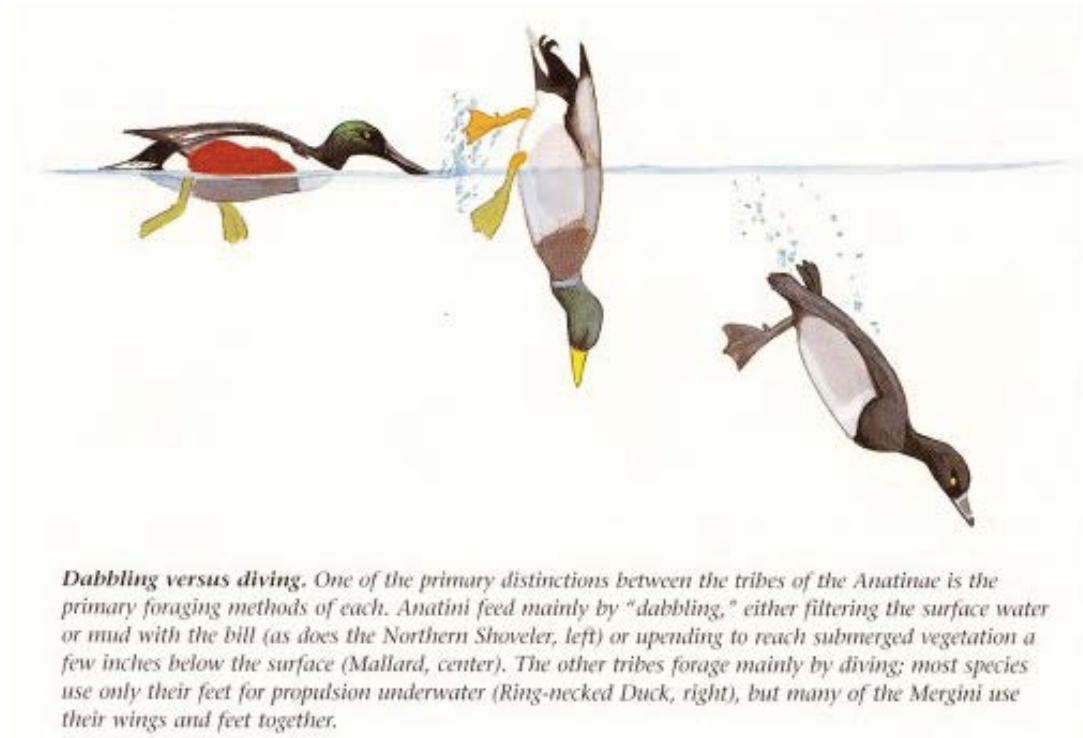
# Mallard Diet Dabbler vs. Diver

Birders often separate ducks into two convenient groups: dabblers and divers.

Dabbling ducks usually forage by working their way along the surface, munching on floating plant matter and small invertebrates. Or they use their feet to tip their heads and necks under the surface, leaving their rear ends bobbing high in the air.

Diving ducks, as their name suggests, submerge themselves completely using their feet to propel themselves under the water in search of plants and small animals.

David Allen Sibley, in his terrific book *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior*, illustrates this in the diagram shown on the right (from page 197).

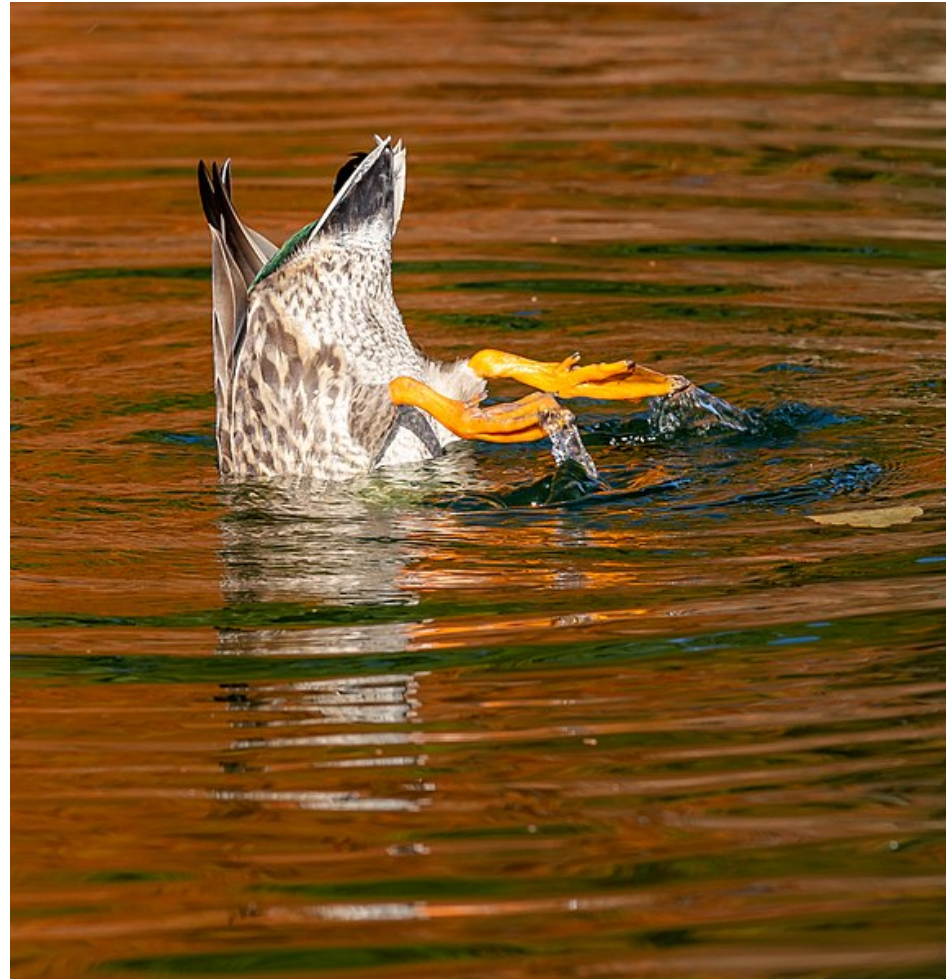


*Dabbling versus diving.* One of the primary distinctions between the tribes of the Anatinae is the primary foraging methods of each. Anatini feed mainly by "dabbling," either filtering the surface water or mud with the bill (as does the Northern Shoveler, left) or upending to reach submerged vegetation a few inches below the surface (Mallard, center). The other tribes forage mainly by diving; most species use only their feet for propulsion underwater (Ring-necked Duck, right), but many of the Mergini use their wings and feet together.

# Mallard

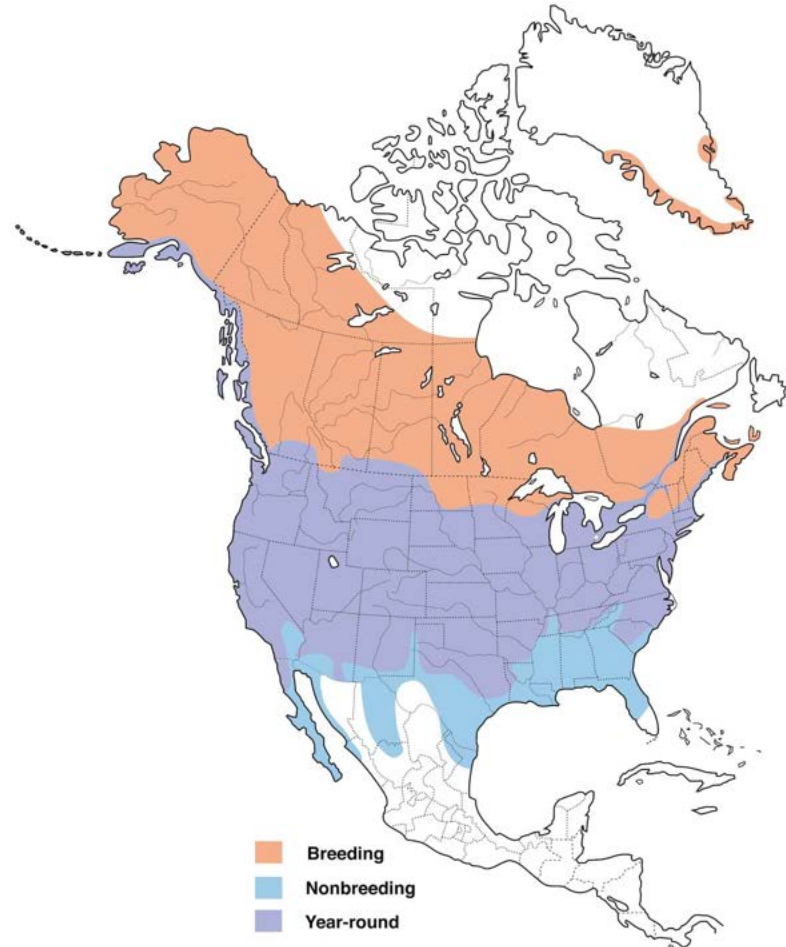
## Diet

Mallards, as shown in Sibley's diagram on the previous slide (the middle duck), are dabblers. You can see them feeding in their characteristic manner at your local pond or lake. They look like this:



# Mallard Range

Resident to medium-distance migrant. Mallards occur year-round across much of the United States. Populations that breed across Canada and Alaska leave in fall for wintering sites in the southern United States and northern Mexico, typically traveling along well-known migration flyways. Mallards can be found year-round in DuPage County.



# Mallard Habitat

Mallards are often found congregating in shallow or heavily-weeded waters (along with many other ducks) searching for snails and other small creatures. They can be found nearly anywhere around the globe where there is a temperate or sub-tropical climate.



# Mallard Habitat

Mallards are found in DuPage County throughout the year.



Mallards in summer



Mallards in winter

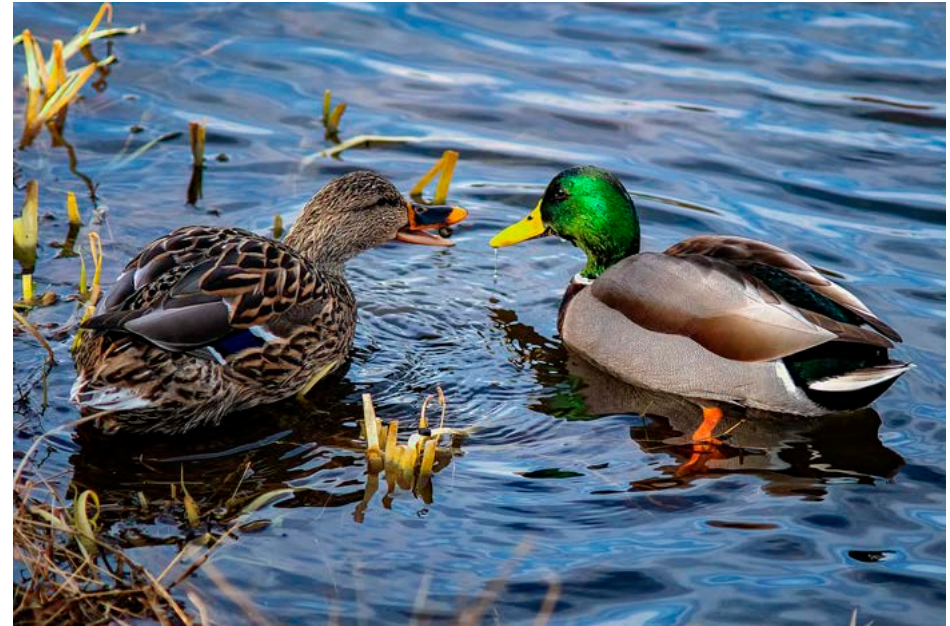
# Mallard Behavior

Mallards have a huge variety of displays that can be fascinating to watch and decipher.

Most displays are ritualized versions of common motions: males may face off with a head-bob, threaten an aggressor with an open bill, or push against each other, breast to breast. Paired males defend their territories with vigorous acrobatic chases. Males court females by shaking or flicking the head side to side, looking over their shoulder, or raising up in the water and flapping their wings. Several males often gather around a female to display. A female encourages a male by nodding her head back and forth or paddling with her head held low.



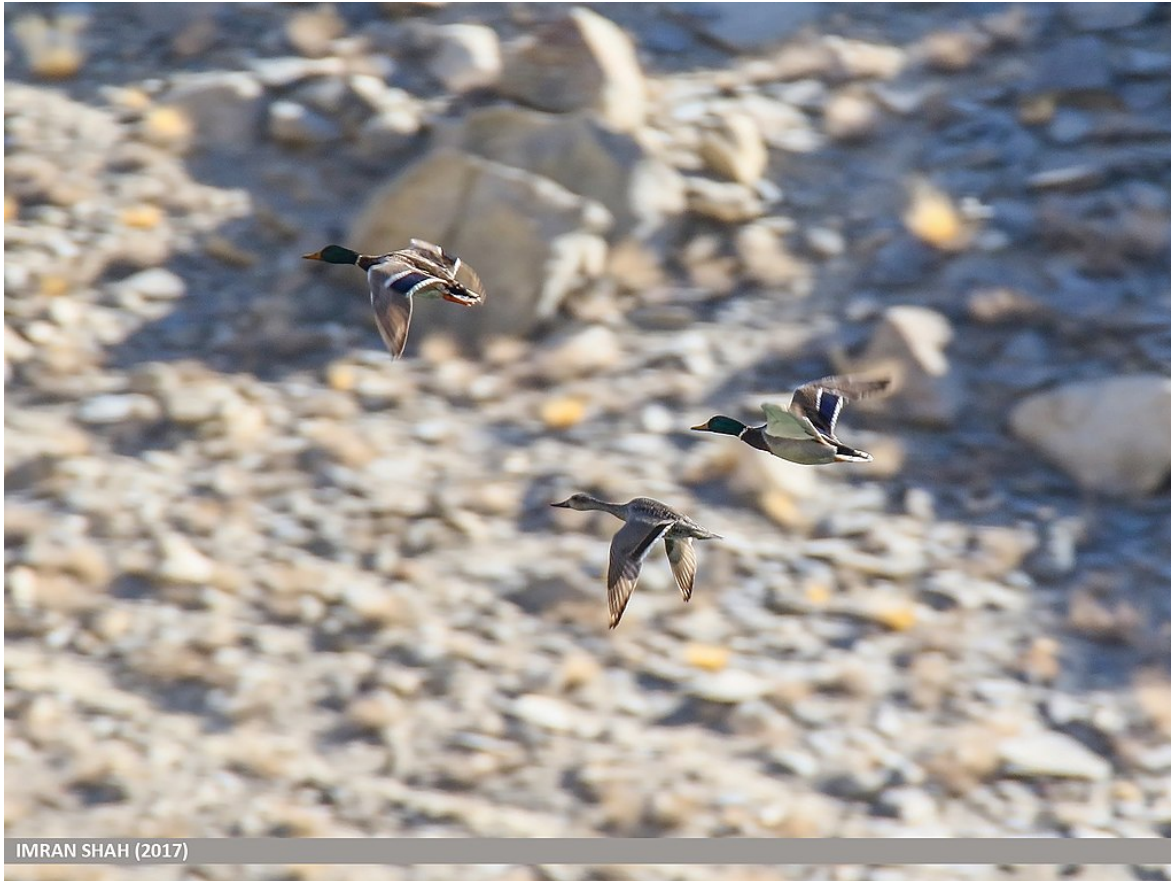
Male courting female by flapping his wings.



Mallard squabble!

# Mallard Behavior

Mallards commonly associate with and may hybridize with other dabbling ducks.



Mallards with a Northern Pintail



Mallards with a Northern Pintail and a Northern Shoveler



# Mallard Behavior

Mallards are an abundant city and suburban park duck and because of constant feedings by park visitors. They can become very approachable. In more natural settings or where Mallards are heavily hunted, they can be very wary of approaching people.



Feeding the ducks in the park.

# Mallard Behavior

## NEST PLACEMENT

Mallards nest on the ground on dry land that is close to water; nests are generally concealed under overhanging grass or other vegetation. Occasionally, Mallards nest in agricultural fields, especially alfalfa but also winter wheat, barley, flax, and oats.

Both urban and wild populations readily nest in artificial nesting structures. Pairs search for nest sites together, typically on evening flights circling low over the habitat. Occasionally nests are placed on floating mats of vegetation or woven into plant stems that rise out of the water.

## NEST DESCRIPTION

The female forms a shallow depression or bowl on the ground in moist earth.

She does not carry material to the nest but rather pulls vegetation she can reach toward her while sitting on nest. During the egg-laying phase, she lines the nest with grasses, leaves, and twigs from nearby. She also pulls tall vegetation over to conceal herself and her nest. After incubation begins, she plucks down feathers from her breast to line the nest and cover her eggs. The finished nest is about a foot across, with a bowl for the eggs that is 1–6 inches deep and 6–9 inches across.



Photos: Dick Daniels (left); Mayumi Barrack (right)

## Mallard Literature/Prose

~ Nature's Invitation ~  
(Chicago morning)

A cool, crisp Fall day  
wind and sky serene  
Top leaves on trees flame-red  
lower branches yet green

Along pond's sparkling waters  
glide mallards in perfect rows  
Airborne geese head south  
in V-formations just so

The rich blue above  
the air bracing, fresh and clean  
Nature's invitation to celebrate  
what it all means

Poem: ©[Gershon Wolf](#)



# Mallard Feeders

Mallards have been known to show up regularly at ground feeders to eat corn and seeds.



# Mallard Names

## Common name Mallard

*Mallard* is derived from Latin via French and is related to “maleness” in both its syllables.

The Latin *masculus*, “male,” yields the *mascle* and *masle* of Old French. The latter is combined with the suffix *-ard* and is used often to connote force or strength when associated with masculine names. Hence, in Old French there was *maslard* for a wild drake, which was transformed to *malard*.



## Scientific name *Anas platyrhynchos*

*Anas* is Latin for “duck.”

*platyrhynchos* comes from *platus*, a Greek word for “broad,” and *rhynchos*, a Latin word for “bill.”

So we have a duck with a broad bill.

