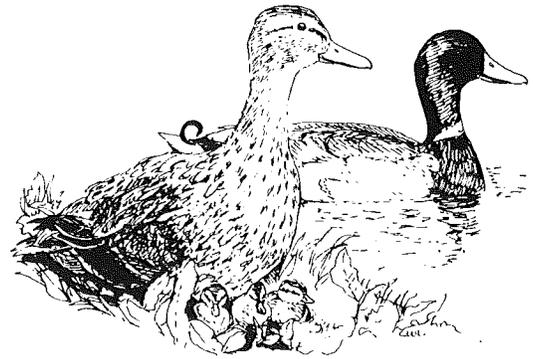


Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

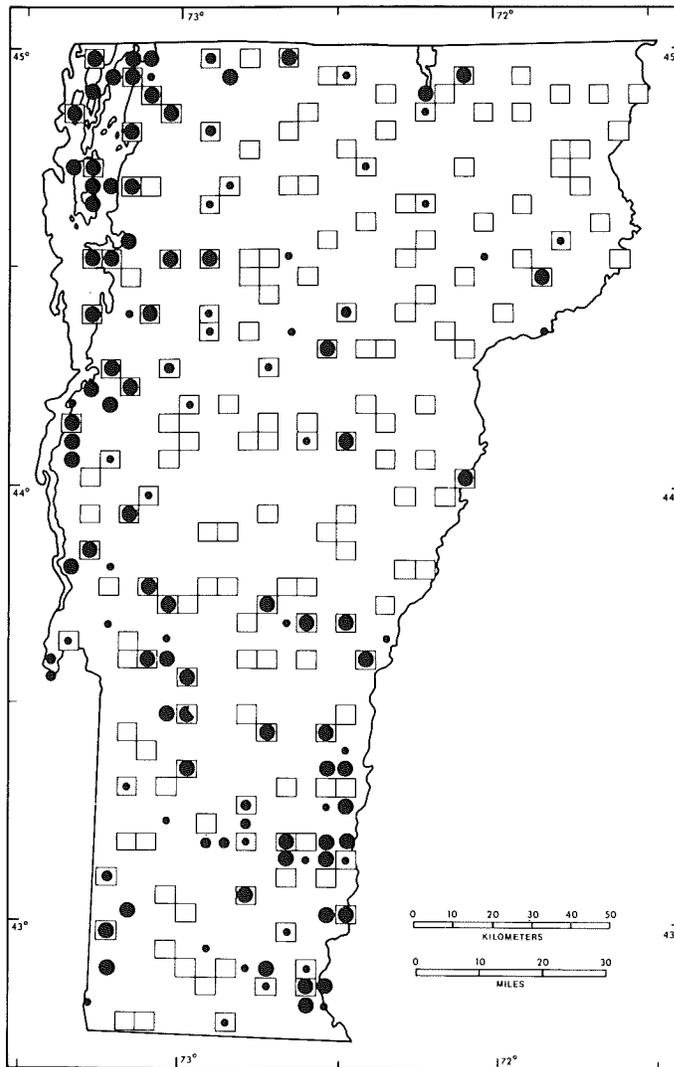
The Mallard is probably the most well-known of all wild waterfowl, and the one of greatest economic importance to man. All domestic duck breeds, with the exception of the Muscovy Duck, have been developed from the Mallard, including the well-known white Peking duck. The most widely distributed duck in the Northern Hemisphere, the species ranges from the Arctic to the subtropics in Europe, Asia, and North America. In the U.S., its breeding range encompasses the northern third of the country (Bellrose 1980). Occupying a tremendous variety of habitats and adjusting well to humans, the Mallard is one of the most successful of all avian species and is the most abundant duck almost everywhere (Todd 1979). Documenting its success, Kortright (1942) called it the most abundant species in North America and noted that it is "more prevalent in the western portion, giving place in the East to the Black Duck." A 1933 Vermont bird list (Fortner et al. 1933) called the species a "rare summer resident" and "not common." In 1976, Spear (1976) considered its status as common from mid April to mid October and limited for the balance of the year. In 1978 (RVB, Fall, 1978) Ellison stated that "over the last 20 years the species has become the commonest duck in western Vermont, remaining uncommon in eastern and central portions of the state."

In Vermont, most Mallards arrive in early spring; migration peaks in late March and early April. Extreme early dates are inconclusive as some birds overwinter. The Mallard utilizes a variety of breeding habitats in New England—ponds, lakes, rivers, streams, marshes, wet meadows, wooded swamps—but seems to require water less than 41 cm (16 in) deep in order to feed from the bottom by tipping up (Pough 1951). Courtship often begins on the wing, with sometimes as many as three drakes in pursuit of a single hen, circling in rapid and vocal flight. On the water, the drake rears



up, displaying his breast and uttering a wheezy whistle. Copulation is preceded by mutual bowing, usually initiated by the drake but sometimes by the hen.

Much has been written about unusual nesting sites of Mallards; Harrison (1975) stated that "perhaps more than any other waterfowl, Mallards seek unnatural nesting sites," from rooftops to old hawk nests in trees. More typically the nest is located within 91 m (100 yd) of water, in cover on the ground, where a bowl is scraped in the ground litter. Coulter and Miller (1968), studying Mallard nest sites on Lake Champlain's islands, concluded that ground litter may be as important in the choice of a nest site as the surrounding cover. Some hens start more than one nest and form the bowls 2 to 3 days before laying. The hen gradually pulls sticks, leaves, and grasses into the chosen nest as egg laying progresses, adding down after the 4th or 5th egg is laid (Coulter and Miller 1968). Generally, 1 egg a day is laid until the clutch of 8 to 12 greenish buff to grayish buff eggs is complete. Incubation periods vary from 21 to 30 days (Harrison 1975; Harrison 1978); it is typically 27 days in Weathersfield, Vermont (E. Ellis, pers. observ.). Coulter and Miller's studies (1968) found the average first egg date to be April 12, with no known eggs laid after June 16. The percentage of new clutches started peaked during the last 15 days of April. Most hens that had lost clutches re-nested, though their persistence varied. Vermont egg dates range from April 19 to May 23 (four dates). The Mallard's eggs are indistinguishable from those of the Black



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 70 (39%)
 Possible breeding: 22 (31% of total)
 Probable breeding: 6 (9% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 42 (60% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

| | no. of priority blocks | % of region's priority blocks | % of species' total priority blocks |
|---------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| Champlain Lowlands | 26 | 84 | 37 |
| Green Mountains | 14 | 26 | 20 |
| North Central | 4 | 21 | 6 |
| Northeast Highlands | 2 | 13 | 3 |
| East Central | 4 | 21 | 6 |
| Taconic Mountains | 8 | 50 | 11 |
| Eastern Foothills | 12 | 50 | 17 |

Duck (Harrison 1975). Drakes take no interest in the nest and desert the hens soon after incubation has begun, gathering together in small flocks while molting into eclipse plumage. Dates for downy young for Vermont range from May 26 to June 22 (four dates). Fledged young have been reported from Vermont on four dates from June 22 to July 31. Mallards are normally single-brooded, but records of second broods do exist.

Considered a "principal nesting species" in Vermont by Spear (1976), the Mallard was located by Atlas Project workers in all seven physiographic regions of the state, with the greatest abundance in the Cham-

plain Lowlands, Eastern Foothills, and Taconic Mountains. Confirmed in 70 priority blocks, the most commonly used codes were FL (37 records) and NY (18 records), both of which refer to downy young. Confirmation was achieved most easily by locating a hen with her brood on the water.

ELEANOR ELLIS