

American Black Duck

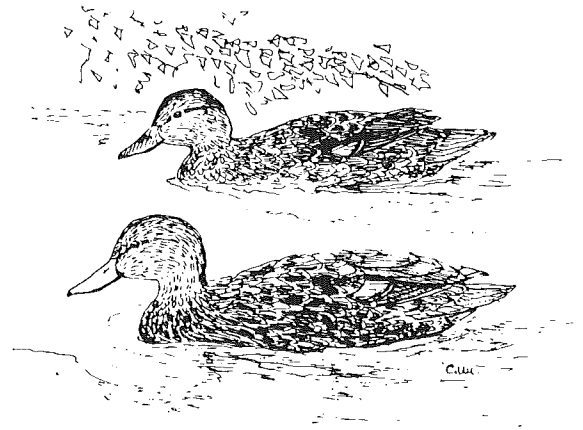
Anas rubripes

The American Black Duck is an eastern Nearctic species that breeds from Labrador and northern Quebec west to the Great Lakes, northwest to Hudson's Bay, south to Illinois and Ohio, and along the Atlantic Coast to North Carolina.

The American Black Duck is capable of inhabiting nearly as wide an array of freshwater habitats as the Mallard. In Vermont the black duck is found on beaver ponds, in glacial kettles surrounded by bog mats, along creeks and rivers, on lakes, in swamps, and in extensive sedge or cattail marshland. The species may prefer more wooded habitats to open marshland; Stotts and Davis (1960) found 60% of 731 nests in Maryland in wooded situations and only 17% in marshes. Coulter and Miller (1968) noted that while high numbers of black ducks nest on islands in Lake Champlain, the species shunned islands at study sites in Maine when sedge-shrub marshland was available.

American Black Ducks place nests in a wide variety of situations wherever there is thick concealing cover. On islands in Lake Champlain black ducks placed nests under live conifers (18.6% of nests studied), under logs, dead tree tops, and fallen limbs (10.5%), under low dead vegetation, in particular raspberry and nettle (27.9%), in hollow tree boles, crotches, and stubs (10.5%), and in young herbaceous growth, mostly nettle (10.5%) (Coulter and Miller 1968). The hen digs a nest bowl and adds litter to it during early stages of egg laying; down is added from about the 4th or 5th egg on (Coulter and Miller 1968). The average clutch for 620 incubated sets of eggs in northern New England studied by Coulter and Miller (1968) was 9.5, with the range being 4–15. The eggs are smooth shelled and creamy white to green-buff. The incubation period for 19 clutches studied in Quebec averaged 29 days (Reed 1968).

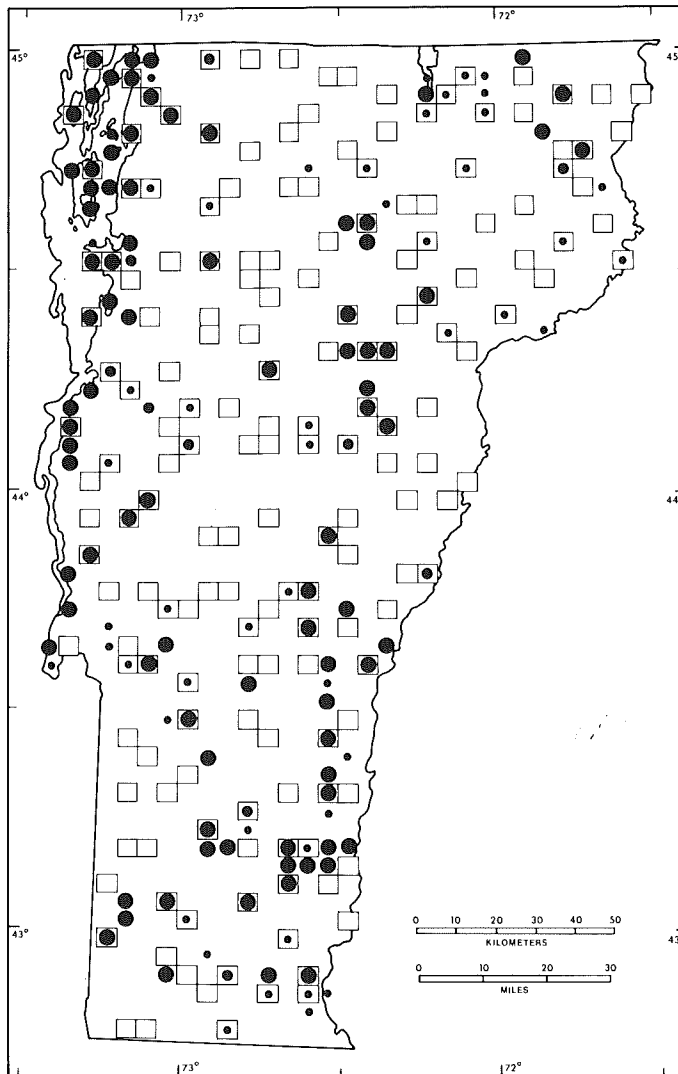
Coulter and Miller (1968) recorded nest starts as early as April 3 on Lake Champlain; the average date of initiation was



April 6, and clutches were initiated as late as June 14 and 15. Vermont egg dates range from April 30 to June 30 (22 records), and dates for broods range from May 14 to July 24 (18 broods). Young black ducks first fly at 58 to 63 days (Gollop and Marshall 1954).

In Vermont, the autumn migration peaks in October; however large numbers linger well into December. American Black Ducks winter as far north as they can find open water. The species will stay on Lake Champlain until it freezes, and utilizes fast-moving creeks and rivers. American Black Ducks winter in the Otter Creek valley at least as far south as Rutland, on the Connecticut River and the lower reaches of its tributaries, in large numbers on the Winooski River in South Burlington, and occasionally along the Lamoille River in Milton (RVB, Winter 1973–83). The spring migration commences in late February in some years, but may be delayed until mid March if rivers are still frozen. In spring, returning migrants peak in late March and early April.

The American Black Duck is declining over its entire range, including Vermont. Bellrose (1980) cited an alarming 40% decline over the years 1955–74 in winter inventory data gathered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Reasons for the black duck's decline are obscure and controversial (Bellrose 1980), and may involve competition from the genetically and ecologically similar Mallard, hunting pressure, habitat destruction, and/or chemical pollution of



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 79 (44%)

Possible breeding: 29 (37% of total)

Probable breeding: 8 (10% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 42 (53% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	22	71	28
Green Mountains	14	26	18
North Central	12	63	15
Northeast Highlands	5	31	6
East Central	9	47	11
Taconic Mountains	6	38	8
Eastern Foothills	11	46	14

the species' favorite winter food (estuarine mollusks) (Hubbard 1984). Bellrose (1980) pointed out that the decline is not related to a comparable loss of habitat. There has been an increase in the Mallard population in the East during the period of the decline. The ratio of American Black Ducks to Mallards went from 5.4 to 1.0 on Vermont Christmas Bird Counts in 1975-76 (CBC 1975-76), to 1.0 to 1.1 in Christmas Bird Count data for 1982-83 (CBC 1982-83).

According to Atlas Project data, the American Black Duck is still widespread in Vermont. The species was found breeding in all physiographic regions. The Champlain Lowlands contain the most productive wetlands

in the state, much of which is managed by the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife or is in the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge; this region yielded the largest number of records. The second highest level of occurrence was in the North Central Region, reflecting the presence of large wetlands around Lake Memphremagog and its inlet streams, and the large number of lakes and ponds within the region.

WALTER G. ELLISON
ELEANOR ELLIS