

PLATES FROM JOHN JAMES AUDUBON'S BIRDS OF AMERICA

5 Mallard Duck *Anas boschas* Linnaeus

Now known as *Anas platyrhynchos* Linnaeus
(PLATE CCXXI)

'Look at that Mallard as he floats on the lake; see his elevated head glittering with emerald-green, his amber eyes glancing in the light!' Audubon's especial delight in the colorful males of this species inspired him to more than usual rapture in his Ornithological Biography.

'How brisk are all his motions compared with those of his brethren that waddle across your poultry-yard!' he declares, 'how much more graceful in form and neat in apparel! The duck at home is the descendant of a race of slaves, and has lost his native spirit: his wings have been so little used that they can hardly raise him from the ground. But the free-born, the untamed duck of the swamps, see how he springs on wing, and hies away over the woods.'

This duck is probably the most numerous species of waterfowl in the world, for all domestic ducks are descended from Mallards, except for those of Muscovy ancestry. Wild Mallards are widely distributed in the Americas and Eurasia, and it is a tribute to the adaptability of this hardy species that it thrives so commonly despite great annual mortality due to hunting.

Mallards interbreed with domestic ducks as well as with such close relatives as the American Black Duck, so that males exhibiting mixed plumage can often be seen. Within the species, a drake may consort with a particular hen from late winter into spring, but often breeds with a number of females during the mating season. In his most luxuriant prose, Audubon describes how at this time the males, 'like other gay deceivers', pay promiscuous court to the females, who are thus goaded to compete among themselves for 'the caresses of the feathered beau'.

'See that drake,' he goes on, 'how he proudly shews, first the beauty of his silky head, then the brilliancy of his wing-spots, and, with honeyed jabbering, discloses the warmth of his affection. He plays around this one, then around another, until the passion of jealousy is aroused in the breasts of the admired find flattered.' He concludes: 'Many tricks are played by ducks, good Reader, but ere long, the females retire in search of a safe place in which they may deposit their eggs and rear their young.'

As with many birds in which the sexes differ markedly in color, male Mallards have little to do with family life. 'The unnatural barbarian cares nothing about his progeny, nor has a thought arisen in his mind respecting the lonely condition of his mate', writes Audubon, for the female builds her nest by herself, on the ground, lining it with feathers plucked from her breast. She chooses secluded spots well away from water, in marshes or in woods. Seven to twelve eggs are incubated for twenty-five to thirty-one days. Shortly after hatching, the downy young follow her to water, and begin to fly after about eight weeks,

After the young have grown, ducks gather in flocks. At about this time the annual molt occurs, and adult males go through a brief 'eclipse' plumage, in which they resemble the females. Mallards feed around the edges of ponds, with tail upright, searching underwater for pondweed, rushes, as well as worms or insects. Rice and other grains are favorite foods when available. This fine composition was originally painted in Louisiana or Mississippi between 1821 and 1825.