

Mallards—What are they dabbling for?

Many of us have had the opportunity to view the Mallard in the Northeast. It is the most commonly noticed wild duck in North America as well as throughout much of the Northern Hemisphere (Pennsylvania Game Commission 2008). Mallards are among the “dabbling ducks” that tilt the head downward in the water while feeding with the tail up in the air for brief periods of time. Usually the plants or animals they consume are out of view from the land-bound observer, leaving one to wonder, *what do they eat?*

On 1 Mar 2008 I was given an assignment for my Avian Biology class at Orange County Community College. The assignment was to report on one bird species, randomly selected by drawing a card with the bird’s name on it. To my disappointment, I ended up with the Mallard and wondered what I could possibly learn about a duck I had seen all my life.

After class was over, I drove to a small stream near Middletown, Orange County, New York. The water in this stream was still flowing despite ice and snow on its banks, and the Mallards had been there every day as I drove past it

on the way to work. It was a partly cloudy day and about 35 degrees, so I decided to park my car along the stream where I could quietly view these birds with my binoculars without getting out of the vehicle. This position placed me approximately 30 feet from the stream.

Swimming in the stream and walking on its snowy banks were two female and three male Mallards and a Canada Goose. One female who had been dabbling popped up with something brown in her bill, and she flaunted this in front of the other Mallards. For a moment it appeared to be some type of aquatic plant, but on closer inspection I discovered it was not. To my surprise it was a frog! For several minutes she played with the frog by tossing it in the water, picking it up again and teasing the other ducks with it. She then walked up on the snowy bank and used her feet and bill to pull and stretch the frog. By this process she aligned it in her mouth and tilted her head upward to swallow it but did not succeed. Through binoculars it seemed that the frog was too large for her. After these unsuccessful efforts, she took the frog down to the stream, swished it in the flowing water, and then repeated her attempts to swallow it. It certainly appeared that the duck was trying to moisten her catch to aid consumption. This second attempt failed as well and the duck went back in the water, where she resumed the teasing game with the other ducks. This same female finally lost the frog in her play, and it was then taken up by another female who also played with it and then lost it in the flowing stream, never attempting to eat it.

These exciting personal observations led me to consult some publications to increase my knowledge about the Mallard's versatile feeding habits. In addition to amphibians, the Mallard's menu may include small crustaceans, mollusks, aquatic plants, and grain, such as corn found in fields in the fall and winter months (Pennsylvania Game Commission 2008). A scientific study conducted by Su Sin Teo (2001), Department of Agriculture in Malaysia, compared wild Mallards and six domestic breeds for use in biological control of golden apple snail infestations of rice fields. In this study, Mallards consumed more snails than did the Peking and Cherry Valley domestic breeds.

Literature Cited

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Joyce M. Depew, 52 Rockwood Circle, Apt. 4D, Middletown, NY 10941.

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