

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

The Mallard is San Diego County's most widespread duck. Over the final third of the 20th century its population exploded, the birds taking advantage of any water from large reservoir to intermittent creek. As a result, the Mallard is now a common, locally abundant, year-round resident. It provides a counter example to the general principle that birds nesting on the ground retreat from urbanization.

Breeding distribution: The Mallard has by far the widest distribution in San Diego County of any breeding duck. Hardly any pond on the coastal slope now lacks the species. The largest numbers are seen where domestic Mallards have been released, as at O'Neill Lake (E6; 200 on 30 July 2001, P. A. Ginsburg), Miramar Lake (N10; 212 on 5 July 1999, A. and G. Kroon), and Sweetwater County Park, Bonita (T12; 300 on 14 June 1999, T. W. Dorman). But there is no longer a clear-cut distinction between domestic and wild Mallards. Many Mallards nesting in urban areas bear no sign of domestication and fly strongly. Every evening, speeding over the traffic clogging Highway 163, flocks commute from Balboa Park to Mission Valley.

A few Mallards nest where the only water available is salt, as at the Chula Vista Wildlife Reserve and salt works in south San Diego Bay (U10/V10), regular sites for the species (Stadtlander and Konecny 1994, M. R. Smith, R. T. Patton). Most Mallards, though, nest around brackish or fresh water. Some are in urban settings where the only possible nest sites are under ornamental shrubbery, such as a cement-lined channel near Goodland Acres Park,



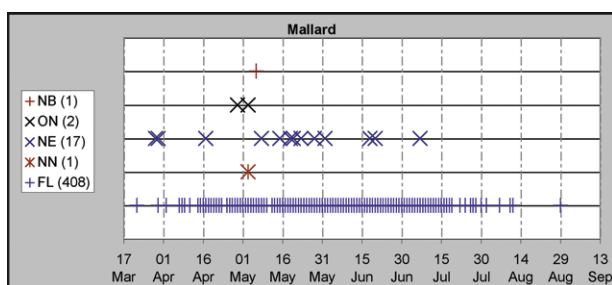
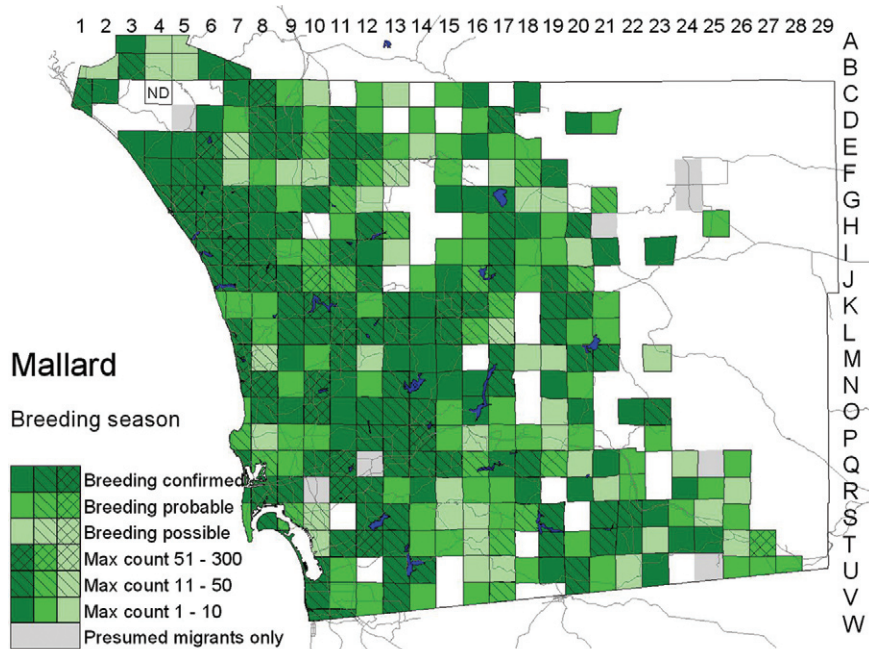
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Spring Valley (R12; female with chicks 12 July 1998, P. Unitt). Some are along creeks deep in the wilderness, such as San Mateo Canyon (A3; family of five on 18 June 1998, J. M. Wells, J. Turnbull).

The breeding range spills onto the desert slope in San Felipe Valley (H20/I21; young on 27 July 2000, J. O. Zimmer) and in southeastern San Diego County, where the birds range east to Jacumba (U28; up to five on 22 April 1999, F. L. Unmack). Our most interesting Mallard nesting was in the wet spring of 1998, when San Felipe Creek flowed farther than usual, reaching the mouth of Sentenac Canyon (I23). Here P. K. Nelson found a female and five downy ducklings on 26 May. The Mallard has never been confirmed nesting in the Borrego Valley, though such nesting is possible around golf-course or sewage ponds. Occasional birds occur in this area late

in the spring, as late as 27 May (2001, four at the Roadrunner Club, F24, M. L. Gabel). Three records from the riparian oasis of Lower Willows along Coyote Creek (D23) include a bird there 4 July 1999 (K. Wilson, B. Getty). Three juveniles at Butterfield Ranch (M23) 22 May 2001 (P. K. Nelson) had likely already dispersed from elsewhere, as this was our only breeding-season record from this site.

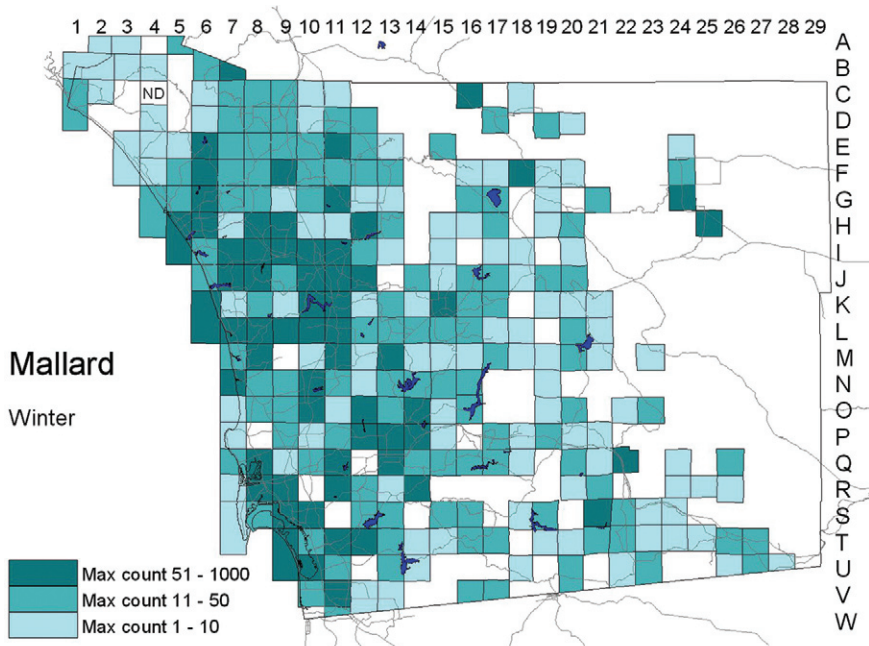
Nesting: Mallards nest in a depression on the ground, using surrounding or overhanging vegetation to screen the nest from predators. Nevertheless, predation is frequent. The chicks follow the female to water soon after hatching. Our dates for nests with eggs ranged from 29 March to 7



June, but on the basis of several sightings of chicks as early as 30 March, laying as early as the first week of March is not rare. One sighting of chicks as early as 22 March (1997, Lake Murray, Q11, N. Osborn) suggests occasional laying in mid February.

Migration: Though the Mallard is highly migratory over much of its range, it is unclear how much of this migration reaches San Diego County. Just to the east, around the Salton Sea, the Mallard is largely a winter visitor, occurring primarily from September to April (Patten et al. 2003). But in San Diego County Mallard numbers at many localities form no clear seasonal pattern. At some places the species is more numerous in winter, but at others, including those best studied with regular counts—San Elijo Lagoon (King et al. 1987) and the salt works (Stadtlander and Konecny 1994)—it is somewhat more numerous in summer.

Winter: The Mallard's winter distribution in San Diego County is similar to its breeding distribution but slightly less extensive. We recorded the species as at least possibly breeding in 44 squares where we missed it in winter, versus only 15 for the reverse comparison. It is likely that wintering Mallards are drawn to places where domesticated—or self-domesticated—ducks reside. Our highest winter counts were from such sites: the Wild Animal Park (J12; 1000 on 30 December 1999, D. and D. Bylin; 679 on 2 January 1999, K. L. Weaver), Balboa Park (R9; 368 on 15 December 2001, V. P. Johnson), and Bonita (T12; 400 on 18 December 1999, E. Mirsky). The Mallard winters as high in the mountains as Big Laguna Lake (O23; up to 25 on 24 December 2001, P. Unitt) and in the desert at ponds in the Borrego Valley (up to 56 in Borrego Springs, G24,



17 December 2000, S. and J. Berg) and at Butterfield Ranch (up to seven on 18 February 2000, H. H. Williams).

Conservation: Over most of North America, the population of the Mallard was fairly stable through the second half of the 20th century, though there was a spike upward from 1993 to 1999 (Drilling et al. 2002). In San Diego County, by contrast, from the 1960s to the 1990s the Mallard population increased exponentially. From 1960 to 1969 the San Diego Christmas bird count averaged 6.4 Mallards; from 1992 to 2002 this average was over 100 times greater at 732. For the Oceanside count the averages over the same intervals were 13.2 and 800. Over their shorter terms the Rancho Santa Fe and Escondido counts show similar trends.

Nesting in the 19th century, recorded by Cooper

(1880), Sharp (1907), and Willett (1933), shows that San Diego County has long been part of the Mallard's breeding range. Stephens (1919a) called the species an "occasional" summer resident; Sams and Stott (1959) said "resident in small numbers." The rapid increase is likely due to a combination of factors: importation of water, creation of ponds, cessation of hunting at many sites, release of domestics, and self-domestication.

Taxonomy: *Anas p. platyrhynchos* Linnaeus, 1758, is the only subspecies of the Mallard in San Diego County, although there are three equivocal records of the Mexican Duck, *A. p. diazi* Ridgway, 1886, from elsewhere in California (Patten et al. 2003).