



# Common Waterfowl of Long Island

The two most common waterfowl species found on Long Island are the Canada Goose (*Branta Canadensis*) and the Mallard Duck (*Anas platyrhynchos*). This educational flyer provides a natural history of each. Information on helping distressed birds and answers to questions about feeding birds and common nuisance situations are also provided.

## VOLUNTEERS FOR WILDLIFE

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### Natural History: Mallard

The Mallard Duck is the most common duck on Long Island. The male has a green head and white neck ring, and the female is streaked brown all over.



Their range covers most of the United States.

The mallard is in the family of ducks known as “marsh” or “dabbling” ducks; these ducks feed both on land and in water. When feeding in the water, they submerge their heads and the top half of their body to feed on vegetation in pools or lakes. In addition to vegetation, mallards eat a variety of animal foods, including snails, small fish, insects, and even frogs.

Nest building takes place in April or May, and it is the female who explores for a suitable nest site, which may be near water, in the woods, or in brush. The nest is built entirely by the female, and consists of a collection of grasses, leaves, and reeds on the ground. The female uses her own downy feathers to line the nest. Eight to ten white or light green eggs are laid, usually one per day, until the clutch is complete. The female will incubate the nest full-time for the next 23 days. All the young will hatch within 24 hours, and are soon led to the nearest water source by the mother. Within 60 days, the young have developed sufficiently for flight. Mallards are usually migratory, but given sufficient resources, some will remain in the same place year-round.

## Natural History: Canada Goose

The Canada Goose is the most widely distributed goose of the North American continent. Among the eleven subspecies, weights range from three to 24 pounds. All subspecies are similar in patterning, with a long black neck and black head, and white cheek patches meeting under the throat. All have a gray-brown body with varying brown breast shade patterns.



Nests are built on the ground from March through June, on a foundation of sticks and made primarily of grasses. The nest is usually elevated, and always near water. The female will line the nest with downy feathers from her own body, and then lays up to a dozen dull white eggs. Incubation by the female lasts 28-30 days, and the male is always present near the nest site. Within 24 hours of hatching, the goslings are led to the water by the male. Geese establish strong family bonds, and stay together as they migrate and on wintering grounds. This semi-colonialism guarantees that Canada geese return to traditional breeding sites. While not considered aggressive, the Canada goose will vigorously defend nest and young by hissing loud warnings.

Geese are essentially grazers, feeding on marsh grasses, clover and other plants. Some will eat mollusks and small crustaceans. In agricultural areas, Canada geese frequently graze on winter wheat and waste grains in upland fields.

## Do Not Feed Waterfowl!

Birds are cued to migrate south when their summertime food sources become scarce. Birds are encouraged to remain at local ponds when people feed them. Birds will learn to remain local year after year, and populations will grow uncontrolled. Large populations results in an excessive amount of droppings, which pollute the water. Bacteria builds up as food rots at the bottom of the pond, and disease spreads quickly among large populations. Botulism is caused by a toxin produced by such bacteria, the illness can affect humans as well as animals.

Overcrowding is compounded by the fact that foods offered by humans do not provide adequate nutrition to the birds. Malnutrition frequently results in poor feather condition and a bone deformity known as “angel wing.” Bones grow faster than tendons, the wings become deformed, and this bird is debilitated to the point that it is permanently unable to fly. A flightless bird is unable to escape from predators and can travel only by walking to seek out new sources of food and clean water.

## Legalities

In New York State, wild birds are protected by Environmental Conservation law (article 11, title 5, section 11-0511). It is illegal to keep a wild duck or goose in captivity as a pet without the proper state and/or federal permitting. If you have been caring for an orphaned duck or goose and need to return it to the wild, please contact a wildlife rehabilitator for assistance.

Most species of wild birds are federally protected as well. Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, it is illegal to possess a wild bird, or the nest, eggs, feathers, etc. of a wild bird without a federal permit. Violation of this federal law is punishable by a fine of up to \$15,000.

## Young Separated From Parents

On Long Island, many waterfowl families are forced to cross busy streets, and young may not be able to keep up as adults negotiate traffic. Slowing traffic will allow adults to safely cross all of their young. If young are separated from the parents by a great distance, they can be contained in a box near the area where the adult was last seen. You may watch from a safe distance, and the young will call out to attract the adult if they are nearby. When the adult appears, the box can be tipped on its side to free the young, and they will run to the adult. If it becomes necessary to hold the birds overnight, they may be kept in a cardboard carton with high sides. A heat lamp or heating pad on a low setting may be used to keep the birds warm. Offer crushed poultry pellets or corn meal, and a very shallow dish of water may be left (ensure the birds do not become soaked in water, as they will become chilled).

Please be certain that the young birds you may find are truly orphaned before bringing them to a wildlife rehabilitator. These birds need their parents' care and guidance in order to develop properly. Young birds learn what foods to eat, what predators to fear, and the appropriate adult behaviors from their parents. This cannot be replicated in captivity; therefore, any bird raised in captivity will be at a disadvantage when it is released back to the wild.

## Common Nuisance Situations

Birds that have nested on suburban lawns must not be interfered with, as per federal law. Waterfowl should not be provided with handouts of food, as this will discourage them from leading their young to an appropriate habitat. If young become entrapped in a swimming pool, a wood plank can be placed in the pool to provide a ramp for the young to climb up and out.

## Safe Capture of an Injured Adult

It is particularly difficult to capture a duck or goose that is still capable of flight despite its illness or injury. It is generally assumed that if a bird is able to escape from you, it will be able to escape from predators as well, and is therefore best left alone.

A debilitated duck or goose can be caught by slowly herding it away from any body of water and leading it to a corner situation, such as against a fence or building. Completely cover the bird with a blanket or towel, being sure to cover the head. A pillowcase also works well for covering the bird's head. By blocking the bird's vision, their level of stress is reduced, helping to calm them and prevent further injury. Quickly and firmly hold wings to the side of the bird's body.

Once in hand, put the bird directly into a cardboard box with a secure lid and holes for ventilation. If it is necessary to hold the bird for a short period of time, keep the bird in a quiet warm place. A shallow dish of water may be offered, as well as cracked corn, corn meal, or poultry pellets.



## Quick Facts

About twenty species of ducks and geese are commonly seen on Long Island, the most ubiquitous being Canada Geese and Mallard Ducks.

Other common waterfowl species include Brant Geese, Bufflehead Ducks, Mute Swans, Scaups, Eiders, Scoters, and Mergansers.

Geese establish strong family bonds, and stay together as they migrate. Young birds learn migration routes by traveling with their parents in their first year.

A female mallard lays one egg per day for eight to ten days. However, all of the eggs can be expected to hatch on the same day.

Do not feed ducks and geese at local ponds! These handouts do not provide adequate nutrition for birds, and young birds that eat human foods such as bread commonly develop a deformity known as “Angel Wing” as they grow. Excess food thrown into the water also results in a buildup of bacteria, polluting the water and sickening the birds.

Young ducks and geese may be separated from their parents as they try to cross a busy road. Fortunately, the parents will usually stay nearby in an effort to find their babies, and few of these young birds are ever truly orphaned.



## About Volunteers for Wildlife

Volunteers For Wildlife is a non-profit, volunteer organization, founded in 1982 and dedicated to preserving Long Island, New York's wildlife and natural habitats. We operate a Wildlife Hospital and Education Center at Caumsett State Historic Park in Huntington, NY. We accept and rehabilitate sick, injured, and displaced young wildlife. Our Wildlife Advisory telephone and email services assist the general public in need of information and help with distressed wild animals. Last year, we received over 3,000 requests for help.

We have wildlife education programs for Long Island schoolchildren and adults. The participation of our permanently non-releasable birds, animals, and reptiles make these programs an exciting way to learn about Long Island's wildlife.

Volunteers for Wildlife has members all over Long Island and the New York area. We have a network of cooperating veterinarians, who provide initial emergency care to injured and displaced wildlife, and independent licensed wildlife rehabilitators throughout the New York area.

For more information on our organization and contributing your time or making a donation to our cause, visit our website: [www.volunteersforwildlife.org](http://www.volunteersforwildlife.org).

Ducks and geese are brought to our hospital throughout the year, some with injuries from being hit by a car, and others become entangled in fishing line or litter. Many are orphaned each year as well. The average cost of care for a water bird in our hospital is \$50. You can contribute to the care of any animal in our hospital through our “Help Our Wildlife” program, and animal sponsorships make a great gift! For more information, visit our website, email, or call us at (631) 423-0982.