

Ducks

More Than They're Quacked Up To Be

by Tony Young

As the Easter holiday fast approaches, many parents contemplate the idea of purchasing baby ducks for their children. After all, these tiny mallard ducklings are so cute and fluffy and have been given as Easter presents for many generations. But before making that decision, first consider all the ramifications.

Did you know these ducks have an average lifespan of 10 years? Sure, they might make nice pets while they are small enough to fit in your hand, but what happens when they become full-grown and the novelty wears off?

Often when this happens, parents and children grow tired of caring for their birds and decide to release them into the wild after they have outgrown their cages. Most people do not realize doing this is illegal and that these mallards pose a serious threat to Florida's native wildlife.

Last July, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) approved a new rule making it unlawful to release captive-reared mallard ducks into the wild. This rule requires that people buying or selling mallards in the state must be permitted by the FWC.

One reason for this rule is that domesticated ducks are capable of transmitting diseases and compete with native wildlife for food and habitat. It is actually illegal to release any animal into the wild if it poses a disease hazard. Another reason is that releasing domesticated mallards into the wild threatens the existence of the Florida mottled duck.

The Florida mottled duck (*Anas fulvigula*), often called the Florida duck, is a unique subspecies found only in peninsular Florida. This native duck is brown in color and maintains a small homerange relative to that of other waterfowl, inhabiting both inland and coastal wetland ecosystems.

The mottled duck is a valued part of Florida's wildlife heritage and has inhabited our state for thousands of years. The species is one of only a few non-migratory ducks in North America; the mottled duck spends its entire life within Florida, unlike most ducks, which fly great distances each year between northern and southern latitudes.



Both sexes of the Florida mottled duck resemble the female mallard, but the mottled duck's head and neck are lighter than its body.

This conflicting behavior poses a big problem. Wild mallards are migratory birds, inhabiting Florida only during the winter months. In the spring, they fly north to breed and are not present by the time the mottled duck mating season begins in Florida.

On the other hand, domesticated mallards released into the wild do not migrate and will become year-round Florida residents. These domesticated, or feral, mallards are crossbreeding with the mottled ducks, which are closely related and very similar in appearance. The hybrid offspring is fertile, which further compounds the problem. This hybridization a serious concern and, if not stopped, could result in the Florida mottled duck's extinction.

Other communities around the globe have witnessed several similar situations. In New Zealand, feral mallards were released to provide hunting stock, and the result of that action devastated the local gray duck populations. Now, approximately 95 percent of the gray ducks in New Zealand are hybrids.

The Hawaiian duck is another example. This endangered bird is most likely completely hybridized on the island of Oahu and may be genetically intact only on the island of Kauai. Meller's duck in Madagascar is yet another. It, too, is now a highly endangered species because of the introduction of mallards.

The fate of the Florida mottled duck could be similar, as their population is relatively small—estimated at 30,000-40,000 breeding birds. Already, FWC biologists say approximately 12 percent of the ducks are showing genetic evidence of hybridization.

To make matters worse, a survey by Florida State University reports that more than 12,000 mallards are purchased statewide from feed-and-seed stores and released each year. With these alarming numbers, coupled with the mottled duck's small population, it is obvious that it wouldn't take long for the Florida mottled duck to suffer the same tragic demise as its worldly counterparts.

Today, the future of Florida's mottled duck is uncertain. Scientists can predict what will happen, but as Floridians, the fate of the mottled duck is in our hands.

You might ask yourself "What can I do to help prevent these creatures from going extinct?". The solution starts with not buying your child a duck for Easter.

For more information on protecting Florida's mottled duck, contact one of FWC's waterfowl offices at (850) 488-5878 or (321) 726-2862, or visit FWC's website at www.MyFWC.com.

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