

DUCK, DUCK, GONE -

A Look at How We Can Eliminate a Threat to the Florida Mottled Duck

By Kim Jamerson, FWC

If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it must be a duck. That may be a catchy phrase, but it doesn't represent the diversity that exists in nature. In fact, this old adage is giving Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) biologists headaches when it comes to protecting a native subspecies found nowhere else in the world – the Florida mottled duck.

"People love ducks. They like seeing them in their lakes and ponds, and feeding them is often a form of family entertainment," FWC biologist Diane Eggeman said. "The problem is that desire to have ducks around often leads people to buy and artificially stock our waterways with domestic mallards. That's illegal and can have devastating effects on native wildlife."

Eggeman says released domestic ducks transmit diseases and compete with all wild ducks for food and habitat. Additionally, domestic mallards pose a specific risk to the Florida mottled duck – the threat of extinction through hybridization. Unlike wild mallards, which migrate north in the spring to breed, captive-reared mallards have become established as year-round residents that are breeding here.

"These birds are closely related and similar in appearance to the mottled duck and are crossbreeding with that species. Left unchecked, the crossbreeding could completely swamp the mottled duck population to the point of extinction," Eggeman said. "We might be left with only mallards and hybrids."

Other communities around the world have experienced similar hybridization problems. In New Zealand, captive-reared mallards, which were released to provide hunting stock, have nearly wiped out local grey duck populations. Ninety-five percent of grey ducks in that country are now hybrids. The Hawaiian

duck is thought to be completely hybridized on the island of Oahu and genetically intact only on the island of Kauai.

While the biological threats facing the Florida mottled duck may seem complex, the steps you can take to protect the subspecies are simple:

- Don't release any new mallards.
- Don't support mallards that already call your neighborhood ponds home by feeding or sheltering them.
- Do spread the word about how releasing and supporting domestic mallards threatens the Florida mottled duck.

The Florida mottled duck breeding population is relatively small, approximately 30,000-40,000 birds, and FWC biologists estimate that as many as 12 percent of those birds are hybrids. Eggeman says those are frightening numbers, but there is still hope.

"We have a real opportunity to save a valued part of our state's native wildlife," Eggeman said. "The Florida mottled duck has lived here for thousands of years, and with the help and support of Florida residents we can conserve it well into the future."

In recognition of the threats domestic mallards pose to the mottled duck, the FWC has established rules that make it illegal to release these birds and require permits to buy and sell them. Also, the agency has partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to allow removal of artificially introduced mallards by people with special permits.

You can learn more about the mottled duck and what you can do to help by visiting MyFWC.com/duck or by calling the FWC's waterfowl offices at (850) 488-5878 or (321) 726-2862. ↴



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