

FLORIDA MOTTLED DUCK UPDATE

FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

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The Plan for Conserving Florida's Mottled Ducks

The mottled duck is a valued part of Florida's wildlife heritage, and its conservation is important. This unique subspecies, which occurs only on the peninsula, has been in Florida for thousands of years—it evolved here. Florida's mottled ducks are genetically distinct from mottled ducks that occur in Louisiana and Texas. Additionally, the breeding population of Florida's mottled ducks is relatively small, with the best estimate being between 30 thousand and 40 thousand birds. The mottled duck is a defining member of the unique suite of species characteristic of the prairie wetlands of southern Florida. Wildlife biologists have been studying this irreplaceable bird for more than 30 years. However, not until the 1990s did biologists undertake a comprehensive planning process of the work needed to conserve the mottled duck in Florida. In 1999, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) formalized these plans in a document entitled "A Conservation Plan for the Florida Mottled Duck." This document is to serve as the FWC's map and compass regarding mottled duck conservation efforts.

For those people interested in learning about the bird, the conservation plan contains information about the mottled duck in Florida and a summary of previous conservation efforts. More importantly, it provides the FWC with a blueprint for future conservation efforts. The plan establishes a need for conservation action, a goal for achieving effective conservation and specific strategies and tasks for accomplishing this goal.

The goal of the plan is to "maintain the Florida mottled duck as a functional member of the south Florida ecosystem, at a population level that can sustain hunting and viewing opportunities over the long term." To achieve this goal the plan has three objectives that focus on population management, habitat management and public information/education. Strategies and tasks under each of these objectives are prioritized, and if followed and completed, should result in effective conservation of the Florida mottled duck.

The population objective is to maintain the population at or above 0.7 birds per square kilometer within the core area of the mottled duck range. Strategies under this objective deal with monitoring the status of the population via a survey, implementing appropriate hunting regulations for mottled ducks, minimizing interbreeding between mottled ducks and mallards and gaining additional information on factors influencing population growth.

The habitat objective encompasses all aspects of mottled duck habitat requirements, including the amount and quality of habitats needed for nesting, brood-rearing, molting and wintering. Strategies to meet this objective include increasing the amount of habitat available to mottled ducks, identifying and monitoring required habitats and determining impacts of specific agricultural practices on mottled ducks. Examples of tasks include conducting studies to assess habitat requirements and developing a system to monitor important habitat areas.

The information and education objective focuses on gaining public support for mottled duck conservation activities by educating Florida's citizens about the status and needs of the Florida mottled duck. Tasks associated with this strategy center on developing and distributing informational materials.

.....continued on page 4



**For more information about Florida's waterfowl
and their conservation and management, visit floridaconservation.org/duck**

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Mottled Duck Hybridization Update: Reducing Mallard Releases

The Florida mottled duck is one of approximately 25 closely related, mallard-type species worldwide and is one of only a few nonmigratory ducks in North America. Mottled ducks, which are highly valued by wildlife observers and waterfowl hunters, are one of only four species of waterfowl that regularly breed in Florida. Biologists believe the biggest immediate threat to the conservation of Florida's mottled duck is hybridization with introduced mallards. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is attacking this problem on several fronts. There are ways that every concerned citizen can help.



Background

Mallards, a species that is closely related to mottled ducks, occur naturally in Florida only as winter residents. They migrate north to breed in the spring and thus are reproductively isolated from mottled ducks. However, Florida citizens are releasing domestic or captive-reared mallards in large numbers, and these feral birds remain in Florida year-round. These year-round resident mallards are not part of Florida's native wildlife and, like most exotics, are causing problems. Released mallards inter-mix with wild mottled ducks, and the two closely related species interbreed. FWC biologists have observed mixed pairs and the resulting hybrids, which are reproductively fertile. Every mallard released in Florida potentially can contribute to the hybridization problem. Of a sample of 228 mottled ducks collected near Lake Okeechobee, an estimated 5 percent showed hybrid characteristics. Similarly, approximately 5 percent of mottled ducks examined in the upper St. Johns River Basin in recent years exhibited indications of hybridization.

Mallards released by humans in other parts of the world have devastated local, wild populations of closely related species. The New Zealand grey duck is an example. Mallards did not occur in New Zealand naturally but were released to provide hunting stock. Now, approximately 95 percent of the population of grey ducks is composed of hybrids. The Hawaiian duck is another example. This endangered bird is very likely 100 percent hybridized on the island of Oahu and may only exist genetically intact on the island of Kauai. Meller's duck in Madagascar is also highly endangered, and the remaining birds are being hybridized by introduced mallards. The situation in Florida is comparable to these examples in that Florida's mottled duck is a small, isolated population of a close relative of the mallard. Because of the relatively small size of the population (estimated breeding population of 30,000 to 40,000) complete hybridization is a serious concern. Reducing mallard releases in Florida is a big step to alleviate the problem.

Although FWC's Rule 68A-4.005, F.A.C. makes it illegal to release mallards (or other captive-reared waterfowl) because of their potential to transmit disease to wildlife, mallards are still being released, likely by citizens who are unaware of the rule and the detrimental consequences to wild mottled ducks. Therefore, public awareness is key to addressing this problem.

FWC is addressing the hybridization problem, and these efforts are guided by a plan. The plan has three objectives: (1) develop techniques to identify hybrids, (2) assess the proportion and distribution of hybrids in the mottled duck population and (3) identify and implement mechanisms to reduce hybridization.

Where do these feral mallards come from?

The first strategy of the plan is to learn more about potential suppliers and sources of captive-reared mallards in order to assess the threat of hybridization caused by the release of these birds and help identify solutions to the problem. FWC contracted with Florida State University to conduct a telephone survey to find out primarily what proportion of feed-and-seed stores sell mallards and in what quantities. Statewide, an estimated 12,273 mallards potentially are purchased each year from feed-and-seed stores and are released. Any estimate of mallards from feed-and-seed stores would underestimate the number potentially released in Florida, because other sources are available (e.g., flea-market sales, Internet and telephone sales from breeders shipped directly to customers).

Why don't we just get rid of them?

The second strategy is to facilitate the direct control of mallard populations. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently issued a permit to FWC to allow lethal control of these birds. Under this permit, FWC has substantial latitude to designate subpermites. These free permits are available at www.wildflorida.org/mallard or by calling 850-488-5878 or 321-726-2862. FWC envisions initial efforts to remove mallards under this permit to be targeted and limited until public acceptance of broader scale removal can occur.

Why not simply prohibit the import and sale?

The third strategy is to review and assess other possible regulatory mechanisms for addressing this problem. FWC is considering alternatives at this time.

What is being done increase public awareness?

The fourth strategy is the most important: to develop and implement a public awareness program. The plan for these efforts focuses on maximizing awareness of the issue and effectiveness of the message, given the assumption that funding will be limited. This effort will be to (1) reduce the sale and subsequent release of mallards, (2) gain wider acceptance for reducing the mallard population and (3) create an awareness of the problem among identified stakeholders. To date, the FWC staff has developed and distributed several informational products, made numerous presentations and contacts to groups and organizations and coordinated media coverage resulting in numerous news items.

What about mallards released on private hunting preserves?

In 2001, the FWC revised its rule governing licensed hunting preserves and prohibited the release of mallards for shooting purposes. Under the new rule, preserves that recently have participated in this activity may continue to release mallards until June 30, 2008. The purpose of this rule change was to eliminate one source of feral mallards and thereby reduce the potential for hybridization. The most significant accomplishment of this rule change is that it eliminates the potential for the increase of mallard-release operations on hunting preserves, where birds typically are released by the hundreds or thousands. Also, continuing to allow mallard releases on preserves would seem inconsistent with FWC efforts to eliminate releases by the general public.

How can someone help?

The obvious way to help is not to release mallards and not support existing feral mallards by feeding or sheltering them. Most importantly, spread the word to your friends and neighbors that releasing and supporting feral mallards threatens Florida's mottled duck population. If your golf course or neighborhood association's lake or pond has mallards, notify the managers of the problems and your concerns and ask for their commitment not to release any more mallards in the future. Most people do not realize the problems or the fact that releasing mallards is illegal. You can contact one of FWC's waterfowl offices (850-488-5878, 321-726-2862) for more information.

All mallards, wild and feral, are protected by federal law and cannot be touched without the proper permits. If ponds or canals near you have mallards during the summer, these are feral introduced mallards, which can be removed with the appropriate free permits (go to www.wildflorida.org/mallard or call 850-488-5878



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.....continued from page 1

As information and resources change, so will the focus of mottled duck conservation efforts. Consequently, FWC will update the conservation plan periodically. To obtain all the details, including the most up-to-date information, a copy of the current plan can be viewed on-line at the FWC's Waterfowl Management Section home page, at www.floridaconservation.org/duck. Once at the site, click on "Florida's Mottled Duck" under "Florida's Waterfowl." Then select "Mottled Duck Conservation Plan" at the top-center of the resulting page. Requests for copies of the plan and any questions should be directed to Ron Bielefeld, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 321-726-2862 or ron.bielefeld@fwc.state.fl.us.

