



Nesting Time

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Where do ducks make their nests? Lots of places! Can they nest in trees? Some ducks do. Or out on the prairie? You bet! How about way up north in the Arctic? Brrrr . . . but yes! In the spring, you can find ducks on all kinds of wetlands. And if there is good cover nearby, you will likely find nesting ducks too. Read on to learn more about when, where, and how ducks make their nests.

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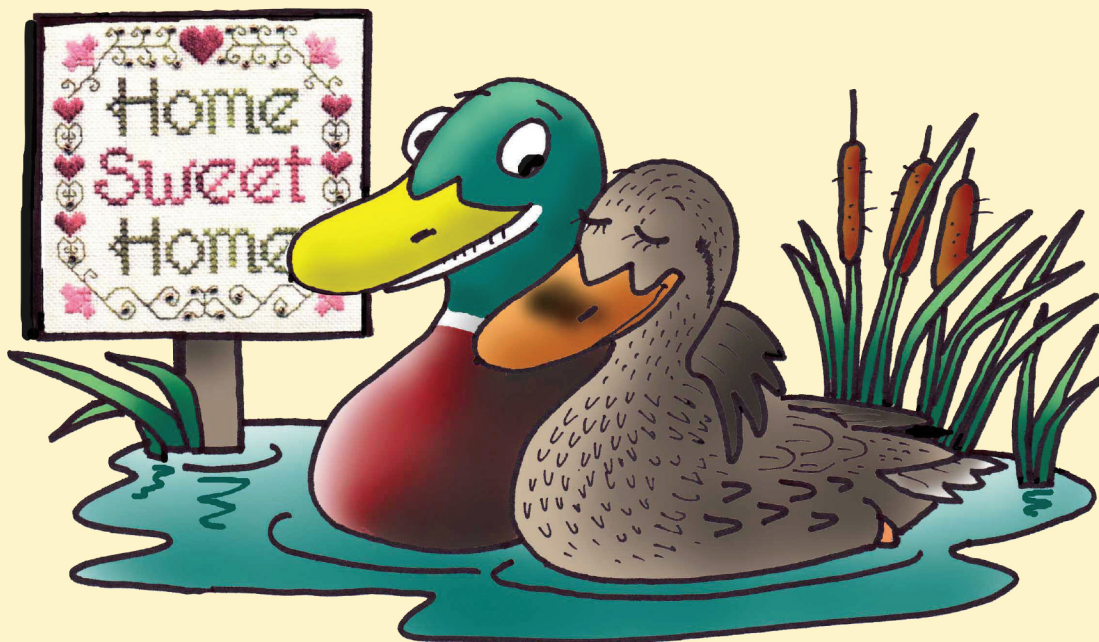


Homeward Bound

In the spring, many female ducks return to the same area where they hatched or where they raised ducklings in the past. We call this amazing ability “homing.” This behavior is important because it allows ducks to find their way back to the best nesting spots. Hens are followed north in the spring by their mates. Most ducks arrive on northern nesting areas sometime in May.



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A Little Place to Call Home

As pairs of ducks return to the breeding grounds, many of them settle down on small wetlands called “pair ponds.” These warm, shallow waters are full of seeds, bugs, and other good duck foods. Hens must eat a lot in the spring to produce eggs. The drake’s job is to defend their small wetland territory, so other pairs of the same species don’t settle too close by. He patrols the area like a security guard. If he spots a lone drake or a pair of the same species in his territory, he chases them away. This is known as “territoriality.”





X Marks the Spot

After several days of feeding, pairs begin looking for nesting sites. Many dabbling ducks, such as American wigeon, northern shovelers, and blue-winged teal, nest on the ground in thick grass or brush near water. Gadwalls like to nest on islands in the middle of wetlands. Northern pintails nest the farthest from water, often in cropland as much as a mile away from the nearest pond. Most diving ducks, like canvasbacks, redheads, and ring-necked ducks, nest over water in thick flooded plants. Other ducks, such as wood ducks, buffleheads, and hooded mergansers, nest in hollow trees, stumps, or manmade nest boxes. Mallards are the least picky nesters. You might find a hen mallard nesting just about anywhere in the spring, including under bushes in your yard.

Wood ducks and other “cavity-nesting” ducks will use manmade nesting boxes.



Time to Settle Down

Once a hen finds a spot she likes, her next job is to make a nest. Duck nests are usually nothing more than a shallow “scrape” in the ground or a simple bowl of vegetation. Hens line the nest with soft feathers, called “down,” which they pluck from their body. As soon as the nest is complete, the hen will begin laying her eggs, which together are called a clutch. She will lay one egg a day until her clutch is complete. About this time, drakes abandon their mates, and hens are left to incubate the eggs on their own. Female ducks spend most of each day on the nest, taking only a few short breaks to feed and rest in nearby wetlands. If all goes well, the ducklings will hatch in about three to four weeks.



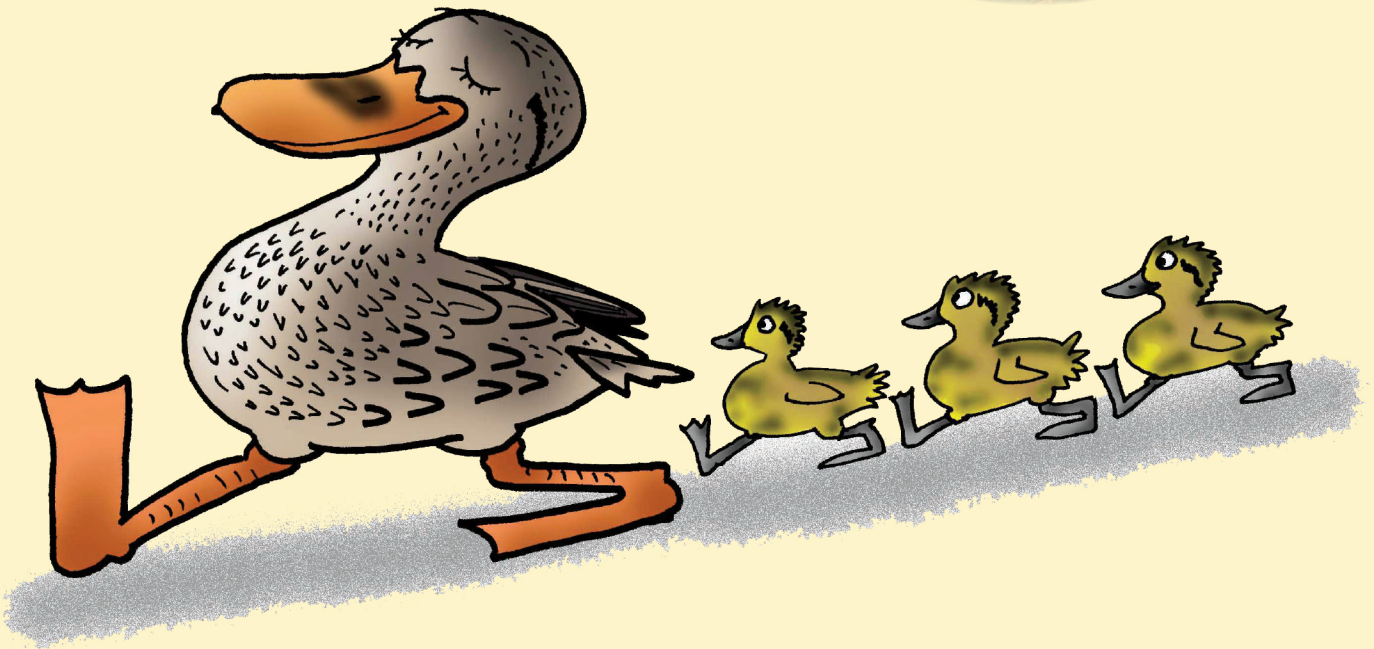
Breaking Out

Even though some of the eggs were laid a week or more apart, the ducklings all hatch at about the same time. How do they know when to hatch? Well, they “talk” to each other by peeping and scraping the inside of the eggs with their bills. This is called “pipping.” Ducklings make these sounds to let each other know that it’s time to break out of their shells. This is important because ducklings that hatch late might get left behind.

All the ducklings in a nest hatch at about the same time.



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Make Way for Ducklings

After the ducklings hatch, the hen keeps them warm under her wings while their down dries. This is called “brooding.” In only a day or so, she calls softly to her young brood and leads the ducklings to water. Ducklings hatched in tree cavities have to jump out of the nest to join their mother. This can be a long drop, but the ducklings don’t get hurt thanks to their soft, fuzzy down, which cushions their fall. The ducklings are ready to swim and feed themselves as soon as they reach the water. It is just the beginning of the incredible journey the young ducks will make before they learn to fly later in the summer.

