

# Green Scene: Enjoy the Ducky Weather

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[photograph]

[caption: The mallard, with the characteristic brilliant green head of the male, is the most common dabbling duck across North America.

Cliff Kelsey photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Don't bother those dabbling ducks

Sub-title: Along our shores and in our lakes & streams, dabbling ducks feed & preen]

During the wet months of autumn and winter, our streams can attract not only salmon but also a variety of dabbling ducks in search of shallow water where they hope to find sufficient food and shelter. Ducks are generally divided into two groups, the dabblers and divers. Diving ducks are more typically observed on open coastal waters where their food, such as clams and mussels, is located well below the surface. In contrast, dabbling ducks are adapted to life in quiet backwater channels and the well-vegetated edges of lakes and bays. Unlike the diving ducks, dabblers tend to have large wings relative to body weight; this allows them to land with precision in small areas and take flight without the need to run along the water surface to become airborne.

The dabblers include the ubiquitous mallard as well as blue-winged and green-winged teal, American widgeon, pintail, gadwall and wood duck. A streamside walk along the trails beside Hyde or Hoy Creek as well as DeBoville Slough and Colony Farm Regional Park should provide views of some of these ducks. The marshes at Minnehada Regional Park and the boardwalk areas of the Shoreline Park in Port Moody also provide excellent opportunities to observe many of the dabbling species.

By late fall, the males of many of these ducks will have developed colourful breeding plumage. The females retain a rather drab plumage throughout the year; this provides critical camouflage when they incubate eggs on the nest or care for their young. In contrast, male ducks, most notable in the splendid colouration of the wood duck, typically have bright colours that provide evidence of their fitness and attract the attention of females. Mallards can commence with courtship displays as early as late fall. These displays include head and tail shaking, lowering bills into the water, lifting wing tips and neck stretching. Because ducks form pairs for only one nesting season, the urge to find a new mate begins anew each winter.

In addition to selecting a good mate, ducks need to find sufficient food to sustain them through the cold winter months. Dabbling ducks typically have bills designed to sieve through water in search of insects or the nutritious roots of aquatic vegetation. During the fall and winter months, many dabbling ducks also take advantage of grain left in behind in agricultural fields. Because of their diet, dabbling ducks have been considered to be a desirable species for human consumption. Each fall in rural areas, a number of ducks are taken by hunters. Until lead shot was banned in the early 1990s, the lead shot left behind from hunting posed a grave threat to the remaining ducks. Because ducks would easily mistake the lead shot as a food item, many ingested it and succumbed to lead poisoning. Although our suburban areas

should be free of such hazards, a portion of the mudflats in Port Moody's Shoreline Park was once heavily contaminated with lead shot, a leftover of hunting activities from the 1970s.

In addition to finding sufficient food, ducks face special challenges during the winter months to stay warm and dry. For a warm-blooded animal, it is quite amazing that a duck can comfortably spend so much of its time in frigid waters with only feathers for warmth. Ducks manage to do this only by keeping their feathers waterproof. Most birds have an oil gland near the base of their tail from which they take oil with their bill and spread it on their feathers to keep them waterproof. Ducks must spend a considerable portion of their time each day preening, i.e., cleaning, rearranging and oiling their feathers. If ducks are disturbed while performing such essential activities by, for example, dogs running at large along trails, they will be unable to remain waterproof. As a consequence, their survival can be threatened during the cold days and colder nights of winter. When enjoying views of our local duck population, it's important to respect their need to spend time each day on preening activities to keep them dry. While it is always a good idea to keep dogs on leash in areas used by wildlife and avoid disturbing wildlife, it is all the more critical as we approach the cold winter period.