

Celebrating Ohio Wildlife: American Black Duck

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Many might be wondering if we have touched on every major form of wildlife that lives in Ohio. While there have been several species that have been covered in our *Ohio Wildlife Series*, we have not even scratched at the surface of all the amazing wildlife species that call our great state home! Even when this article is done, there will be more to cover so that you can be more aware of the beauty and life that the great outdoors has to offer. So, what animal got picked for this week's feature? The American Black Duck is the spotlight species for this week. Where do they live? What do they eat? What are their behaviors? Read on to find out more!

The American Black Duck belongs to a group of birds called puddle ducks. According to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), this subset is commonly found in shallow freshwater swamps or rivers compared larger lakes or bay areas, hence the name. It is quite common to see members of this group tipping their bills into the water and moving them around to catch a meal. ODNR adds that feeding by ducks that you may see near agricultural areas are also likely to be puddle ducks as they can walk very well over land. It is a species that is found well throughout Ohio and is very likely that you have seen one before.

Contrary to its name, not all the American Black Duck is not entirely black. Overall, they have a dark brown feathered body with a silver contrast on the bottom side of the wings with the legs and feet of this species appearing red in color. During their flight, this duck species will have white colored feathers on the bottom portion of their wings. ODNR writes that this duck has a purple speculum (secondary feathers) with a black border and a hint of white at the tail end of the wing. The males will have a pale green head with a yellowish-green bill. It is common that you may see a cross species between the American Black Duck and the Mallard Duck, which share identifying characteristics of both species. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the females will generally be slightly paler in color than the males with a dull olive colored bill.

Have you ever noticed the nest of this species? Their nests are usually easy to spot as they are found at ground level appearing as a very small depression in the soil that is covered with some form of vegetation. The average clutch or group of eggs will number around nine to ten that will take about a month to incubate or 27 days to be more specific. Female ducks are bred in the early spring with the baby ducks typically hatching in May or the first part of June. The young American Black Ducks usually begin to become mobile within a few hours after they hatch.

Vegetation is the main dietary staple for the American Black Duck. They are also known to eat a variety of aquatic plants such as pondweed, small fish, and the occasional invertebrate. According to ODNR, this duck species has been known to associate with its mallard relative all along the Atlantic coast in small flocks or groups and their sounds can easily be confused with that of the mallard as the quack of the hen (female), and the drake's "kwek-

kwak” sound one in the same with the two species. The American Black Duck likes to nest in wetlands throughout the east in either a freshwater or saltmarshes. According to Cornell University, they like to take up shelter in various protected ponds, marshes, or bays during the winter season and their annual migrations.

As mentioned, this species makes annual migrations as the seasons change. According to the Audubon Society, the fall migration happens a little later in the season as their waters freeze or the food supply becomes very limited. Those that live in more moderate southerly climates or along the coast will travel a shorter distance compared to the more northerly ducks. Most of the migration will take place during the nighttime hours rather than in the daylight.

Are there a lot of American Black Ducks to be found? According the Audubon Society, due to clearing of a large amount of forest land has led to a decline in the population of the American Black Duck while favoring an increase in population of their mallard relatives. The increase of the mallard population has made it difficult for the black duck to maintain a strong presence in many areas. They can still have be found well in localized populations, all depending on the amount of forest cover an area has to offer.

Hopefully you enjoyed learning about another animal that finds itself at home right here in Ohio. The American Black Duck can be seen and heard in places far and wide! Have you seen this duck around? If so, we would love to see your pictures! Stay tuned for future installments of our *Ohio Wildlife Series* as we look at the wildlife and natural beauty that Ohio has to offer.