

Avian Encounter 3

A Mallard Mystery

Briar Sexton, Vancouver

Friends of ours, Pierre and Nonie, live in a home with a big yard in the Shaughnessy neighbourhood of Vancouver, BC. Nonie has lived there for most of her 83 years. She reports that it is very rare that they have mallards in the yard and that usually they just stop overnight. I was excited to see photos of a lone female Mallard on March 23. It looked to our friends like she was nesting.

Watching her over the next few days it became clear that it was classic Mallard nesting behaviour. She nested on dry land by forming a shallow depression in a corner of their garden. She was observed pulling up vegetation. The only thing that made no sense was the lack of nearby water as a food source for Mama Mallard.

On March 26 Pierre sent photos of the eggs in the nest once the bird had left for the night. To our collective chagrin, mama duck did not return until April 4. My theory was that she had laid the eggs too far from any known water source and had abandoned them. But then she turned back up. After that she would arrive each morning and sit on the eggs until about 8:00 PM. During



Photos by Pierre Augereau.

that time she covered the nest with feathers and vegetation. We couldn't really see the eggs even when she wasn't there.

We were all worried that the eggs wouldn't have survived eight days alone followed by the cold, lonely nights. Once it warmed up she cut back even further, nesting from dawn until around 6:00 pm.

I was surprised by this behaviour as my understanding was that most waterfowl sit on their eggs for most of the day. Ducks Unlimited reports female Mallards leave the nest for 1–3 hours per day in short intervals. I couldn't find any reports of mallards leaving their nests overnight. Another really

strange behaviour from our duck.

After a few weeks had passed I got curious about the incubation period for Mallards. Once again, I consulted the experts. Ducks Unlimited says it is 28 days on average. Cornell Lab of Ornithology cites 23–30 days. On May 2, I checked in with Pierre. Mama Mallard was still coming and going. I felt sorry for her. Thirty-eight days of effort that I was sure would be wasted.

Imagine my surprise on May 3 when I heard there were at least three ducklings. On May 4, true to form, she started to lead the ducklings towards water. There were eight of them! Pierre and Nonie were afraid to follow them but I am really puzzled about where they were off to. Even a search of Google Earth doesn't readily show as much as a backyard pond. There are lots of swimming pools but I can't imagine any of them are open yet. And they certainly wouldn't have a food source.

My theory is that the duckling embryos developed more slowly because of the long periods of inattention when they would have been at colder temperatures than expected. Somehow, they survived, and they must be eight of the toughest ducklings hatched this year.

Was she a first-time mom? Will she be back next year? And where on earth did she take her babies? Mama Mallard left behind more questions than answers. If anyone reading this has eight ducklings in their backyard pond, that would be the perfect epilogue to the story!

