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Where Have All The Male Mallards Gone? – Evergreen Audubon

2 minutes

Here we are in August and when we look at Mallards these days (or any ducks for that matter) we have to once again talk about eclipse plumage.

A reminder that eclipse plumage is when male ducks at the end of breeding season molt from their brilliant breeding plumage to a dull, cryptic plumage. As the Birder's Handbook says, "Their brilliance is dimmed – they go into 'eclipse.'"

This all happens at the same time that the main flight feathers are moulting, and some ducks actually become flightless for a few weeks. It makes good sense, if you are temporarily flightless, that it might be to your advantage to be more cryptically colored. The duration of the eclipse plumage varies between species, lasting for some just a couple of weeks, and for others persisting into early winter. With the next molt the brilliant male colors return.

One interesting thing to contemplate in all this eclipse plumage business is to think about the inherent advantages in remaining cryptically colored for a longer period of time versus regaining one's brilliance more rapidly. To be camouflaged longer is to be

less visible to predators; while to regain breeding plumage more rapidly is to have a “leg up” on impressing the females, but may be deleterious if you really can’t quite fly yet.