



Know your ducks – the Grey Ghost

By Fish & Game officer Tom Winlove

The grey duck is a somewhat mysterious game bird, not because it's cunning and elusive – it's far from that – but more due to the wild places it inhabits, out of sight of most people.

This is not due to choice, but more because the bird has been forced into these areas, which were once widespread across the country. Humans are to blame! They've been responsible for the extensive drainage of natural 'wild' wetlands which have been replaced with a handful of farm ponds. Only about 10% of the country's natural wetlands still exist. These wild wetlands are the grey duck's favoured habitat. They would have adapted to the new agricultural scene if they'd been given the chance, but they weren't – the mallard was introduced!

The mallard was a much quicker coloniser and already accepting of humans' presence. They quickly took over and are found throughout the country's new wetland landscape – giving the grey duck no chance to adapt. This has meant that grey ducks have sadly retreated in numbers and distribution at the same time as our wild wetlands have been disappearing.

Greys are very distinctive in appearance, with their masked face the most obvious characteristic. They have a clean cream face and throat, with one black strip leading from the top of the bill to across the eye, and another strip from the bottom of the bill across the lower face. The body is a very greyish brown, and they have grey feet and a green speculum on the wing with no white bars, like the mallard. The under wing is completely white. The only noticeable difference between the sexes is the size; males are 10-15% heavier and therefore bigger.

Like the mallard, about 90% of their diet is made up of plants. They differ though in that these plants are almost all eaten from wetlands, whereas the mallard will also venture onto open pasture or crops. Greys will eat the young roots of wetland plants or the seeds from sedges like *Carex secta*. The other 10% of their diet is made up of animals like beetles, moths, caddis, worms and snails – which provide an important source of calcium

for egg production. Greys have little serrations on the edge of their bill allowing them to sieve through mud for food, and a sharp bill tip to help in biting through plants.

They are very social and behave very similar to the mallard when it comes to courtship and mating. Due to their similarities and the adaptive nature of the mallard, the two species have cross bred – resulting in a bird named the ‘greylard’ – another factor in the dwindling number of pure grey ducks.

Like most duck species, they have a relatively short life span with around 65% dying in their first year, and 90% dead by three years of age.

When trying to identify how ‘grey’ your grey is – if you’re lucky enough to bag one this season – look for the following:

- The cleanness of the creamy face – should be almost speckle free
- White bars above or below the green speculum – there should be none
- The colour of their feet – grey ducks have very, practically fully grey feet

It’s fairly hard to find a pure-looking grey, often there’ll be quite a bit of orange to their feet, or a faint or small white bar present above or below the green speculum. Any of these imperfections mean they have some mallard blood in them.

So, next time you’re hunting, keep an eye out for the mysterious grey duck!