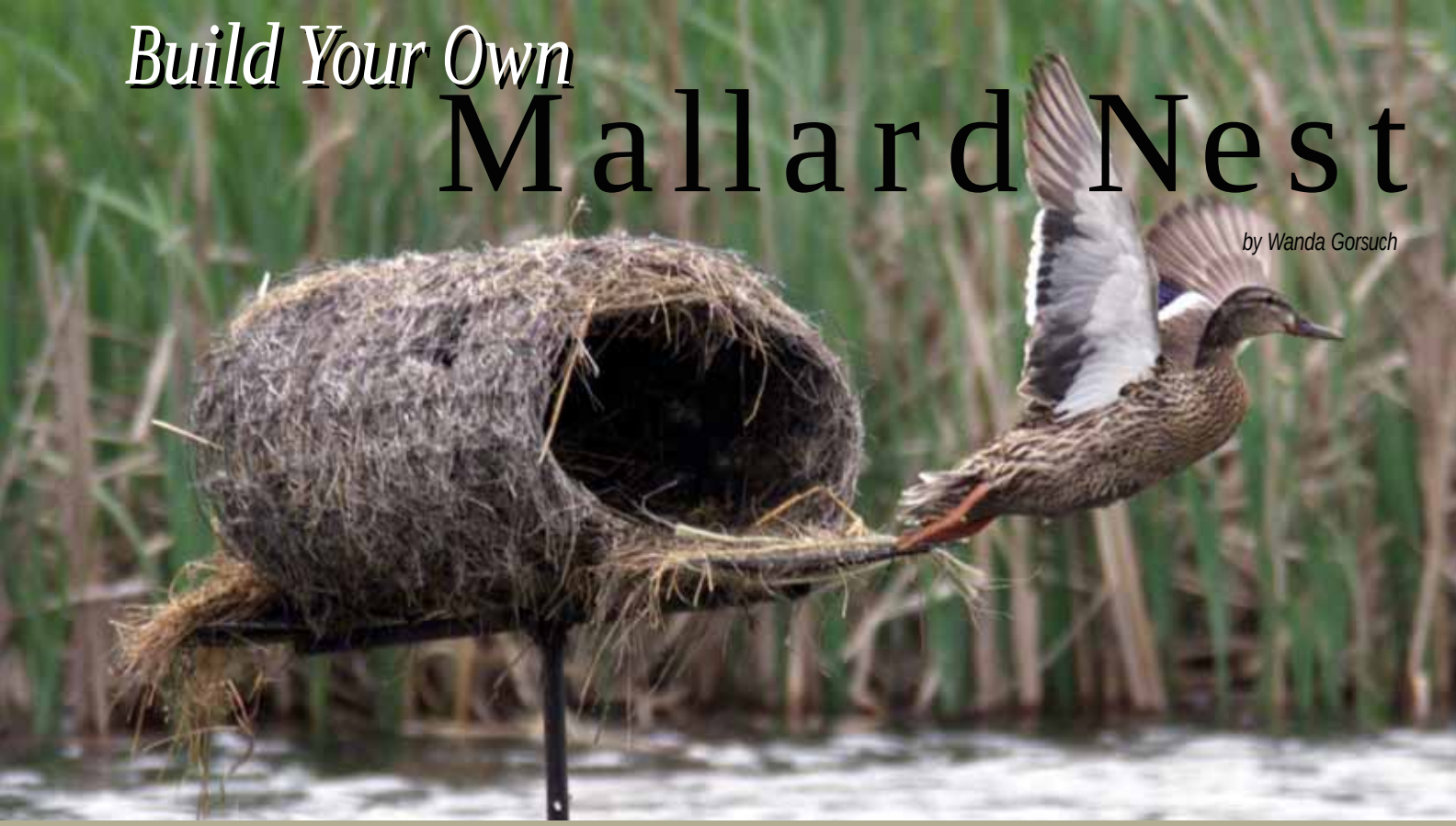
Build Your Own Mallard Nest

by Wanda Gorsuch



Introduction

A mother duck guiding her downy ducklings across a wetland is a thrilling sight in the spring. Many acreage owners would be excited to have these guests gracing their property. However, there are few safe places left for ducks to nest. It is estimated at least 20 million acres of wetlands have been lost in Canada, along with over 70% of prairie grasslands.

Sometimes referred to as "Mallard Nests", Hen Houses™ aren't fancy chicken pens, but artificial nesting structures for Mallard hens. Hen Houses are designed to give Mallards a safe place to nest away from roving dogs, as well as foxes and egg-hungry raccoons and skunks.

An artificial nesting structure for ducks is not a new idea. Records show they were first used in 1665 in St. James Park, London, England. Today, waterfowl managers use them in areas where little natural habitat is left for nesting. You can help out your local duck population by spending half a day building your own, easy-to-make, Hen House.

Construction:
(3 hours, not including trip to purchase supplies.)

Materials:
(NOTE: measurements between holes are measured from the center of the hole)

Nesting Tube

- 7' length of 1" x 2" (mesh size) 16-gauge or 19-gauge weld wire, 3' high $7.00
- 8 2" strips of stainless steel wire $0.05
- 4' stainless steel wire $0.12
- 1/4 bale of flax straw (or other coarse, leafy dried material that sticks together well).. $0.40
- 1/8 bale of brome hay (or other soft, leafy hay) .. $1.00

Base

- 3' of 1" x 6" board $1.50
- 1 piece 3/16" iron, 2' x 1", bent in half at a 90 degree angle (L shaped).....$2.30

You need 5/16" holes at 3", 6" and 9" along one arm of the L (measured from bend).

You need 5/16" holes at 2" and 7" along other arm (measured from bottom side of bend).

- 3 1 1/2" long 5/16" bolts with nuts.....$0.55
- 2 2" long 5/16" bolts with nuts.....$0.38
- 8' 1 1/2" x 1 1/2" x .100 square metal tubing.....$20.00

You need 5/16" holes at 1 13/16" and 6 13/16" (measured from the top) straight through pipe.

Total costs: $33.30
(Not including GST. Prices may vary.)

TIPS:

- ☞ Do not use regular commercial L brackets as they will bend.
- ☞ Ask your local hardware store or metal shop to cut, bend and drill metal bracket and tubing.
- ☞ Contact a local farmer for straw and hay.
- ☞ Use leather work gloves when working with wire.

TOOLS:

- ☐ Wire cutters
- ☐ Pliers
- ☐ Power drill
- ☐ Wrench
- ☐ Ice auger
- ☐ Sledge hammer

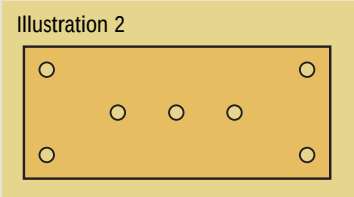
Instructions:

Nesting tube

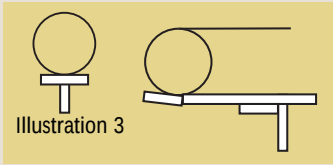
Lay out the 7' of weld wire. Cover wire in 2" of flax straw, leaving 32" free of straw on the left side of the narrow end. Grasp the left end of the wire and roll so the end comes to the 32" mark (where the straw begins). Secure with four 2" strips of wire. Continue rolling the wire so that the straw is very tightly sandwiched between the two layers of wire. Secure at the end with the remaining four 2" strips of wire. (Illustration 1.)

Base

Take the 3' board and drill a 5/16" hole in the center. Drill a hole 3" to the left of the original hole and one 3" to the right of the original hole. You now have a row down the midline of the board to attach the L shaped iron to. Next, drill four 5/16" holes about 1" in from each corner of the board. (Illustration 2.)



Bolt the metal L bracket to the board, using three 1 1/2" long 5/16" bolts. Place your nesting tube on the other side of the board and secure tightly using stainless steel wire through the holes in the corners of the board. (Illustration 3.)



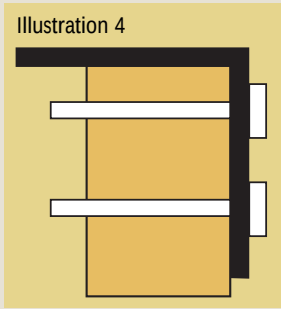
Installation (1/2 hour)

Hen Houses should be placed in small wetlands 0.5 to 3 acres in size. Ice movement or fast moving debris in lakes, rivers and large wetlands can bend or dislodge the Hen House base. Winter is the best time of year to install a Hen House, when you can safely walk out on the ice (6-8 inches thick).

Install your Hen House about 3 – 5 feet (91- 152 centimetres) from emergent vegetation (e.g. bulrush and cattails). It should sit at least the same distance above the water to prevent mink and raccoons from getting at the eggs while allowing for easy maintenance. Water levels will vary from year to year, so make a 'best guess' at height when installing. It is better to err on the high side than discover your Hen House underwater in the spring. Finally, place the tunnel so that the opening is perpendicular to the prevailing winds. This will prevent nesting material from blowing out.

Using an ice auger, drill a hole in the ice where you want to locate your Hen House. Pound in the 8' tube (make sure the end with the drilled holes is at the top!) using a sledge hammer so the pole is at the desired height and steady.

Attach the L bracket to the side of the nesting tube so the bottom of the L rests on the top of the tube for extra support. Fasten with two 2" long 5/16" bolts. Fill the nesting tube half full with soft nesting material such as brome hay and wait for spring! (Illustration 4.)



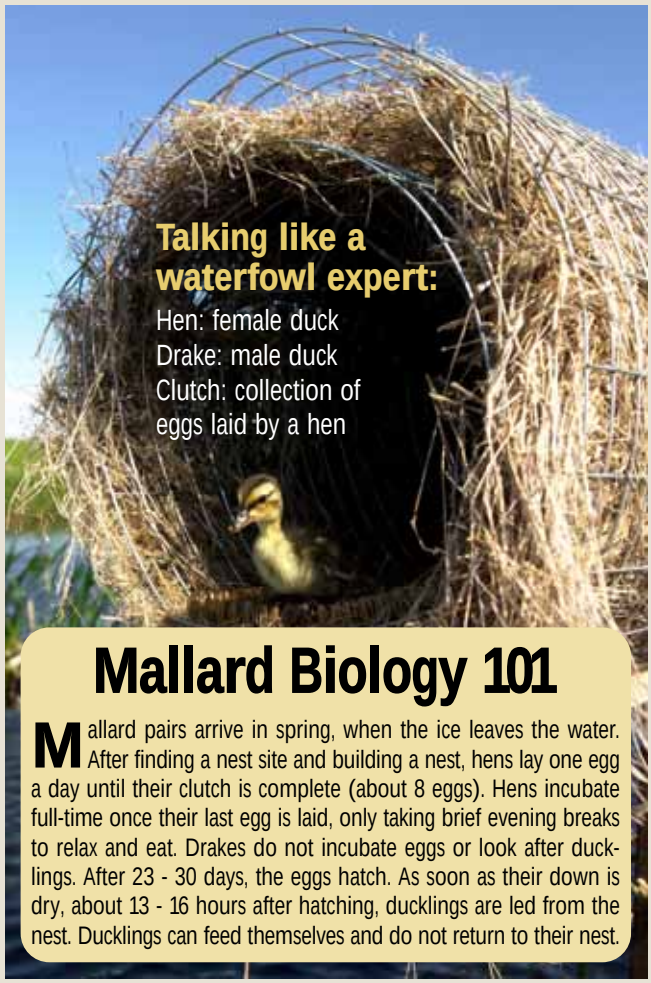
Yearly Maintenance

Yearly maintenance is needed to ensure hens will want to use your Hen House every spring. Check your Hen House in late winter, while the ice is still thick enough to walk on. First, stuff new flax straw into the canopy if it is sparse (a piece of lathe works well for this). Next, add soft nesting material such as brome hay so it covers the entire bottom half of the tunnel. Make sure you do not block the entrance.

For Help

If you have questions about building your Hen House, or to find out about what else you can to help the ducks, phone the Delta Waterfowl Foundation toll-free at 1-877-667-5656 or please visit the Delta Waterfowl Foundation web page: www.deltawaterfowl.org.

– Wanda Gorsuch originally wrote this article for Acreage Life *magazine. Our thanks go to both of them for allowing us to reprint it. Fred Greenslade from Delta Waterfowl Foundation provided the photos.*



Mallard Biology 101

Mallard pairs arrive in spring, when the ice leaves the water. After finding a nest site and building a nest, hens lay one egg a day until their clutch is complete (about 8 eggs). Hens incubate full-time once their last egg is laid, only taking brief evening breaks to relax and eat. Drakes do not incubate eggs or look after ducklings. After 23 - 30 days, the eggs hatch. As soon as their down is dry, about 13 - 16 hours after hatching, ducklings are led from the nest. Ducklings can feed themselves and do not return to their nest.

Photos: Fred Greenslade