

# Tips & Tactics For Hunting Mallards

by Mike Marsh



Photo by Mike Marsh.

Large rivers hold large aggregations of mallards. Hunting them successfully requires realistic decoys -- and lots of them.

While we scouting a natural lake that was far off the beaten path, my son Justin heard something that caught his attention.

“That sounds like a flock of park ducks,” he said. “What are they doing way out here?”

Following the mallard conversations to their source, we discovered several hundred ducks sitting in a hidden cove of the 1,500-acre lake. It was located in a national forest, yet all other hunters passed it by as they headed to a dedicated waterfowl impoundment a couple of miles away.

A couple of days later, as we set our decoys beneath the pastels of a predawn sky we listened to dozens of mallards passing overhead. Some dive-bombed the silhouettes of our plastic fakes. These ducks were not feral mallards fed popcorn in a park, but strong-flying wild waterfowl that had surfed the bow wave of a cold front southward. They were “new” ducks, fresh from elsewhere. Ignorant of the dangers of their flyway pit stop, the mallards fell from the sky as if laser-guided after we were set up with sliver of sun warming our boat blind.

While the initial shooting was good, what came later was even better as we heard battlefield sounds reaching a crescendo at the impoundment. That’s when mallards leaving the impoundment for the safety of the nearest open water, which happened to be our “secret” lake, saw our decoys. Coaxing greenheads and Suzies shooed from the impoundment with a duck call ranged in difficulty from simple to impossible, depending on their degree of fright and experience with hunters. It wasn’t long before we had our

mallard limits. Even while we waited for other species, mallards continued coming to our decoys.

Mallards are found everywhere there is water. But hunting success depends on many factors besides the number of birds hunters can see.

When they are migrating, flocks of mallards in flight can number into the hundreds. Flocks feeding in agricultural fields or resting on large water bodies can also be enormous.

For success when hunting these areas, decoy spreads depend more on numbers than anything else. A spread that is measured by the acre can be best for luring small flocks that break off from the main aggregations.

But most hunters will experience the best success in areas where flock sizes are smaller. Flooded timber is classic mallard habitat that holds remnant flocks. So are potholes, stock watering ponds, beaver ponds and manmade waterfowl impoundments.

On small water bodies, small decoy spreads are more effective. Mallards know the water is there and are coming to that particular place to feed or rest. What the hunter needs to bear in mind is that he is preparing a landing zone in the best place for making good shots. On smaller waters, brush, trees and terrain dictate the best places for mallard decoys. The other consideration is where to place decoys so they are close enough to a blind or natural cover that will conceal the hunter.

No duck decoys more readily than a mallard that is not wise to the ways of hunters. Conversely, no duck is more decoy-shy than a mallard that has been shot at and missed during a migration that may cross the borders of several states. Therefore one of the best times to hunt mallards is during the opening few days of hunting season.

The other top option is hunting them during “ducky” weather, such as during the passage of a cold front, when freezing conditions drive mallards from safe havens into unfamiliar territory. Windy, rainy or snowy weather resulting from a weather front disorients mallards. While some hunters fear hunting in fog, expert mallard hunters embrace an overly hazy day. Mallards are extremely vulnerable to being duped by duck calls when they can't see well, so fog makes them especially susceptible to calling. Other low visibility conditions that enhance opportunities for taking mallards include the half-hour before dawn, heavy snow, or vegetation conditions that limit the visibility of flying mallards. The less visibility, the more important calling becomes to success.

Calling championships are based on contestants' abilities to blow four main mallard calls. The greeting or hail call, feed call or chuckle, come back call and mating call. Hunters should learn to blow these calls. But often a simple quack, blown at the right moment, is all it takes to make a greenhead cup his wings and drop his webbed, orange landing gear. There are many ways to learn to make mallard calls, including instruction from a seasoned hunter, CDs and Internet sites. Listening to a park or refuge that has mallards is

among the best ways of acquiring your own unique “voice” for engaging mallards in conversation.



Photo by Mike Marsh.

Mallards are among the most welcome of ducks coming into a decoy set, and in the late season are challenging to hunt.

Anyone who thinks it takes an expert to call mallards within shotgun range is wrong. Some duck hunters are experts with calls, but some of those experts become overconfident and call too much, alarming mallards that may have otherwise decoyed. Learning when to call, not to call, and the proper cadence of each type of call are more important than reproducing exact tones. Expert hunters, as opposed to expert callers, know when and when not to call because they “take the temperature” of the mallards they are working. They begin with minimal calling, then watch and listen to how mallards respond. Then they adjust their calling according to whether mallards return calls and whether they move toward or away from the decoys.

Some mallards are more wary than others. In fact, the majority of the annual hunter take consists of inexperienced, young-of-the-year drakes that don't recognize poor calling or battered decoys. But mallards that have survived several hunting seasons can become nearly impossible to kill without the benefit of a weather edge. Educated ducks can tell the difference between a mallard hen and a hunter's call, or between a plastic decoy and a real bird.

When it comes to decoy selection, hunters get what they pay for. Some very expensive handcrafted wooden decoys, precisely painted, are available. Some custom decoys even have velvety, featherlike finishes. Conversely, there are inexpensive plastic decoys that lose paint at the slightest scrape. Having decoys that look like real ducks can be the most important aspect of decoying mallards close enough to shoot late in the season, on hard-hunted waters or on sunny days.

Savvy hunters inspect their decoys after each hunt, washing away mud and checking finishes. Decoys with bare patches of underlying plastic may shine like a mirror and should be retired until they can be repainted.

The attractiveness of any mallard decoy spread is enhanced by motion. A line from a fishing reel tied to a decoy that the hunter can pull to make the decoy move to create concentric circles can fool the wariest mallard. Another way to impart motion is sloshing water with a leg or rocking a duck boat to send ripples throughout the decoys.

Whether the mallard hunter is successful or not depends in large part to his ability to set decoys, use calls and shoot. However, the biggest ingredient for success is finding a good place to hunt.

There are many ways to locate mallards. A good way to begin is joining a hunting group, such as a local Ducks Unlimited chapter or duck-hunting club. Staying in contact with other hunters who target mallards will at some point result in an invitation to participate in a duck hunt. Another good way is to pay for a guided hunt. Many guides hunt public waters or at private hotspots near public hunting areas, giving the hunters clues as to where there might be some large mallard concentrations.

Many national wildlife refuges and state public hunting areas offer excellent mallard hunting. Visiting a website or calling a refuge manager or state waterfowl biologist will usually get a hunter pointed in the right direction.

But when it gets down and dirty and it's time to pick a precise location to plop down decoys, personal scouting is best way to find success. The successful mallard hunter is a highly mobile hunter. He has a navigation aid such as a topographic map, aerial photo, soils map or their electronic equivalents, a vehicle that is preferably a four-wheel drive, at least one boat with an outboard engine, at least one boat that can be dragged or carted overland and launched at water's edge, waders, a binocular and a good set of ears. A hunter who cannot hear well should be accompanied by someone with good auditory capabilities or use a hearing enhancement device such as Walker's Game Ear.

Mallard calls can be heard from distances exceeding a mile, depending on factors such as the elevation of the bird, terrain, vegetation, weather and how excited the duck that is making the call might be at the time. Most of the time, mallards are heard before they are seen.

To narrow down the search area, hunters should drive over bridges that cross swamps, rivers and lakes, on back roads that wind along shorelines, through farm country pockmarked with stock watering ponds, through wildlife refuges and state hunting lands. The best times to scout are dawn and dusk. During scouting excursions, time should be allowed for stopping and listening at key places, which can be predetermined by studying maps that show potential resting and feeding areas.

Powerboats are used in a similar manner as vehicles for scouting, with the hunter watching for ducks while traveling. The boat should be stopped often and large expanses examined with a binocular and so the hunter can listen for mallards.

Once mallard concentrations have been discovered, the hunter can narrow down the best places for hunting them. It's highly likely that other hunters will have already found the high-profile places. The presence of blinds and decoys, duck boats or empty shotgun shells floated against the bank will pinpoint hotspots.

But high hunting pressure sends mallards to secret haunts. While hunters may see and hear lots of mallards in hard-hunted areas, their success rate, unless environmental conditions give them an edge, will not be as high as it is for hunters who dig deeper into the cover.

Portaging a paddle craft with a buddy at the other end can be an exciting experience in the pre-dawn darkness. When the beaver pond, oxbow lake or overgrown farm pond no one else knows about explodes with wings and the alarmed quacking of mallard hens and wheezing of panicky greenheads, you know you are in for an exciting morning as they return, answer your calls and stretch their feet toward your decoys.

(Article Courtesy of [Gameandfishmag.com](http://Gameandfishmag.com))