

Courtship display and mating of Mallard in the winter near Rajkot

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On 1 February 2018, we visited a pond at Raiya village, near Rajkot, in the evening at around 17:00 hrs. We observed Indian Spot-billed Duck (*Anas poecilorhyncha*), Common Teal (*Anas crecca*), Gadwall (*Anas strepera*), Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) and a pair of Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). We visited this area in the morning and evening on 2 February 2018 and again in the evening on 3 February 2018.

The ducks were relaxing and not very active when we were observing them. In the morning, most of the ducks were roosting on the banks of the lake, except Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*) which were active. An interesting observation which we made there was seeing and photographing a pair of Mallard doing courtship display and mating in the evening on 1 February 2018 and 3 February 2018.

The Mallard pair, on all the three days, started becoming active after about 17:00 hrs. They were seen using the same mounds or places to roost. Generally, the female was seen following the male. After some time, the male started to pump his head and bob it several times. The male and female faced each other and the female replicated head pumping to show interest. If female did not respond to his display, the male swam away

and displayed after sometime. This display was followed by mating. The female was submerged under the water during copulation, when the male held the female by her neck with his beak. After mating, both the male and the female swam rapidly for a short distance with the neck held low (known as nod-swimming), and with tail raised by the female. This behaviour was observed in the evening on two days. We also observed that when the pair was displaying, the female became territorial/aggressive and chased Spot-billed Ducks from the area. However, we did not observe it chasing Eurasian Coots, which came near to the pair. As per senior ornithologist Taej Mundkur (in litt, by email), Mallards can mate on the wintering grounds as a part of pair bonding. We kept visiting the place frequently till early March and saw the mating of Mallards twice more in this period.

The Mallard is a winter visitor to Gujarat (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). Within Indian limits, it breeds in small numbers in Kashmir lakes; egg laying was observed from March till early June (Shah *et al.* 2009). It is known that courtship often occurs in the winter, with pair bonds lasting until early or midway to the incubation period (Carboneras & Kirwan 2018). The mating of Mallards observed here in the winter (early February) is quite unusual. However, a similar observation was made in December in Sukhna Lake, Chandigarh (Kalsi 1990), when too mating was observed in the winter. Thus, this observation further confirms that Mallards may display and mate in their wintering areas.

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