

Duck Secrets on the Willamette River

A mid-August field note from Friends of Maddax Woods Volunteer

There are interesting happenings on the Willamette River right now, visible from the observation area at Maddax Woods. On August 11th, the scene included two adult mallards, two Canada goose parents with their two young geese, a Bald Eagle, and one osprey. The geese and raptors made the river feel lively, but the mallards offered the day’s best mystery: one had an orangish bill, while the other carried a darker, duskier bill.

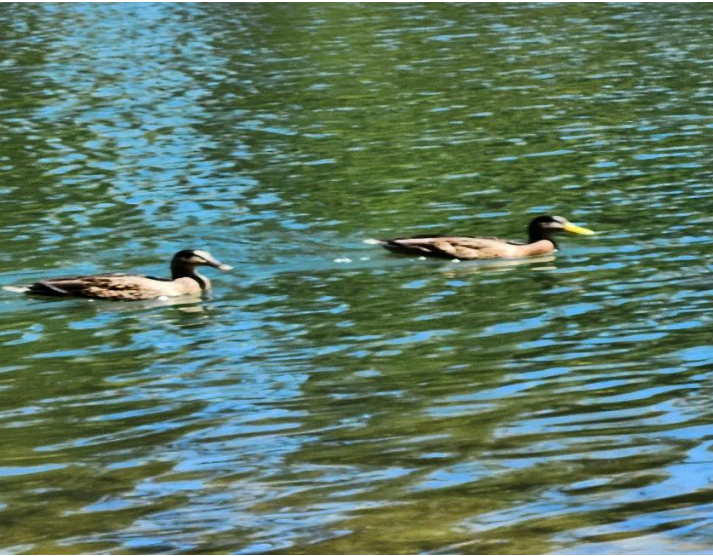
What was Observed

In mid-August, mallards can be surprisingly hard to sort out. Adult females are usually mottled brown with orange bills marked by darker patches. Young mallards—both males and females—also wear brown, female-like plumage as they grow, which helps them blend into river edges and vegetation. At the same time, adult male mallards may be in *eclipse plumage*, a temporary summer outfit that replaces the familiar green head and bright breeding colors with a duller brown look.

That means the orange-billed bird may well have been an adult female, while the darker-billed bird could have been a juvenile, a female with darker bill markings, or an adult male “dressed down” during molt. The bill, body pattern, hints of green on the head, wing markings, and tail shape can all help, but from a distance it is wise to leave room for mystery.

That is part of the fun of late-summer birdwatching. The river is full of young birds becoming independent, adults changing feathers, and familiar species appearing in less familiar costumes. A pair of plain-looking mallards can become a lesson in camouflage, growth, molt, and careful observation.

Next time you watch mallards from Maddax Woods, try a gentle detective game: look first at the bill, then at the body pattern, then at the tail. Is the bill orange with dark patches, yellowish, olive, or dusky? Are the feathers crisp or patchy from molt? Is there a hint of green returning? Mid-August mallards remind us that familiar birds are not always simple birds—and that a quiet river scene can hold a whole seasonal story.



Mallards on the river at Maddax Woods. 8/11/2026