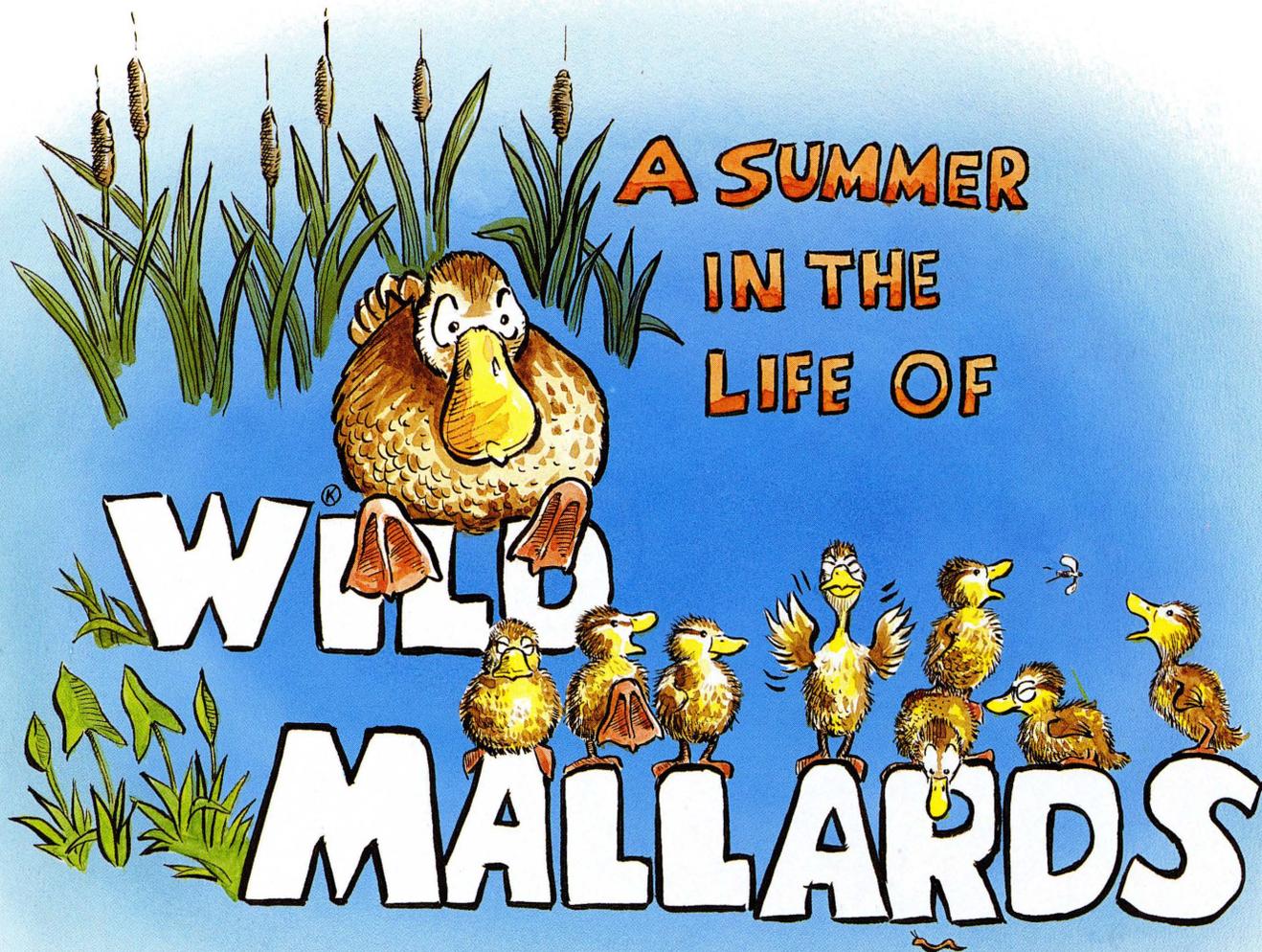


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A Summer in the Life of Wil...



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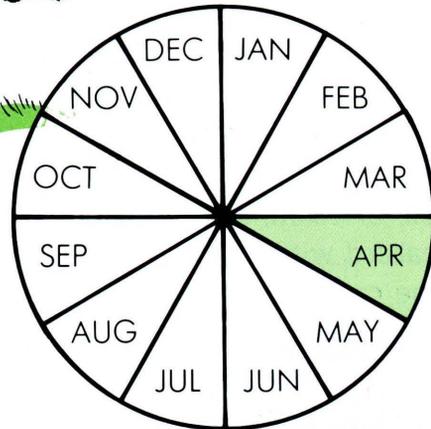
Art and Text by Kent Olson
1989



A brisk west wind stirs the prairie grasses. It is early spring and the grasslands are alive with the sights and sounds of another growing season. Nestled down, deep within the tall grasses and wildflowers, a hen mallard carefully tends her nest. The eggs, nine in all, lie cradled in the nest which is lined with down plucked by the hen from her breast. Above the eggs, the hen sits warming them with her body. She is incubating the

eggs, keeping the embryos inside the eggs warm until they are fully developed and ready to hatch.

Only briefly does she slide off the nest to take a break. Before she leaves, she rearranges the down in her nest to cover the eggs. This layer of down will keep the eggs warm while she's gone. After drinking and feeding, she'll hurry back to the nest to resume incubation. Patiently, she waits for the eggs to hatch.



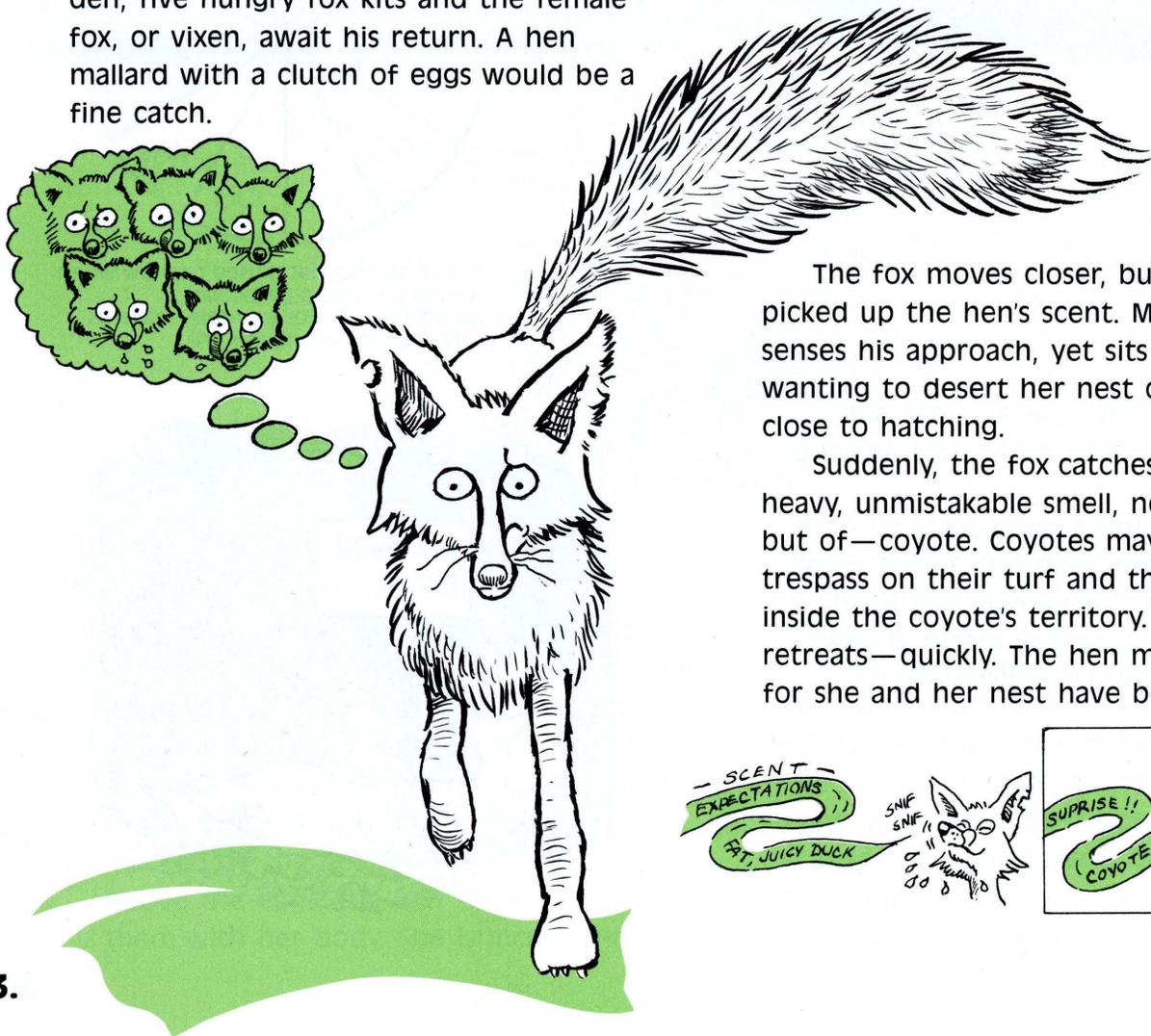
The small calendar is used to show when during the year a particular activity occurs. For example, mallards often begin nesting in April.

Twenty days have passed since she began incubation. Five more days and the eggs will hatch.

She has selected a good place to nest. Tall, dense native grasses wall her in on all sides and form a canopy over her head. She feels secure. A nearby marsh will be a good place to rear the ducklings after they hatch.

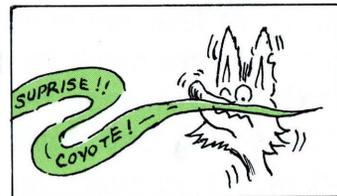
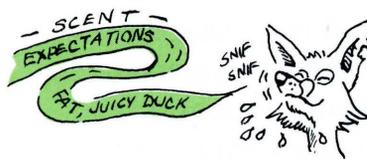


Meanwhile, a quarter mile away, a red fox is just completing his evening rounds. So far, the hunt has been a bust. This is a male fox with responsibilities. Back at his den, five hungry fox kits and the female fox, or vixen, await his return. A hen mallard with a clutch of eggs would be a fine catch.

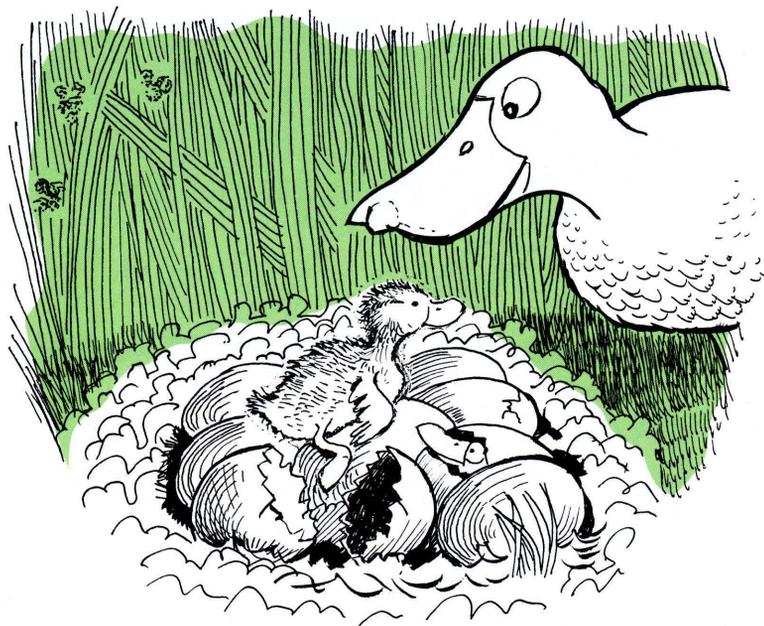


The fox moves closer, but has not yet picked up the hen's scent. Mother mallard senses his approach, yet sits tight, not wanting to desert her nest of eggs so close to hatching.

Suddenly, the fox catches a scent—a heavy, unmistakable smell, not of mallard, but of—coyote. Coyotes may kill foxes that trespass on their turf and this fox is well inside the coyote's territory. Old Reynard retreats—quickly. The hen mallard relaxes, for she and her nest have been spared.



Five days later, right on schedule, the ducklings emerge from the eggs. All make it but one who was too weak to chip its way out of the egg.



The hen mallard is indeed fortunate to have hatched her eggs, for far more duck nests are destroyed by predators than hatch. This is her second nest of the season, the first having been broken up by a skunk five weeks earlier.

Quickly, the ducklings dry off, each looking like a tiny, energized fuzz ball. Now the hen must lead them quickly to the relative safety of the nearby marsh. The ducklings fall in behind the hen as she begins a forced march through the tall grasses.



Finally, after a long, tiring walk, the grasses give way to the shallow waters of a beautiful marsh.



This will be their home for the next three to four months. Here they will find water, shelter and food, but they, in turn, will become food for other animals, if they are not careful.

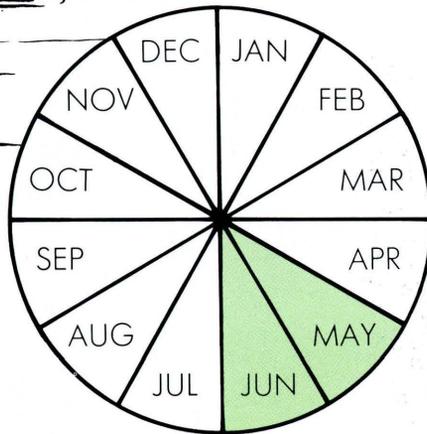


A FOOD CHAIN

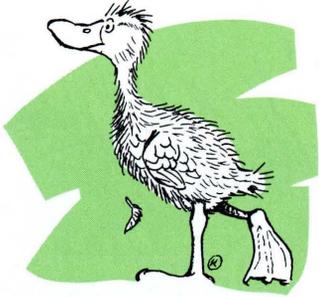


Mother mallard will quickly give her ducklings a crash course on survival. A good "rule of feather" will be to avoid creatures larger than themselves. She teaches them to respond to different calls, each with a distinct meaning. One high-pitched, rapid call means to scatter. Another instructs them to get behind her, and a third informs them to freeze right where they are. To a large extent, their survival will depend on how well they respond to these calls.

Ducklings grow fast, and reach full size in only 8-10 weeks. They feed early and late in the day on an abundance of insects and other small aquatic organisms which provide the necessary protein for rapid growth. During the heat of the day, they often rest in the shade of marsh vegetation along the edge of the marsh.



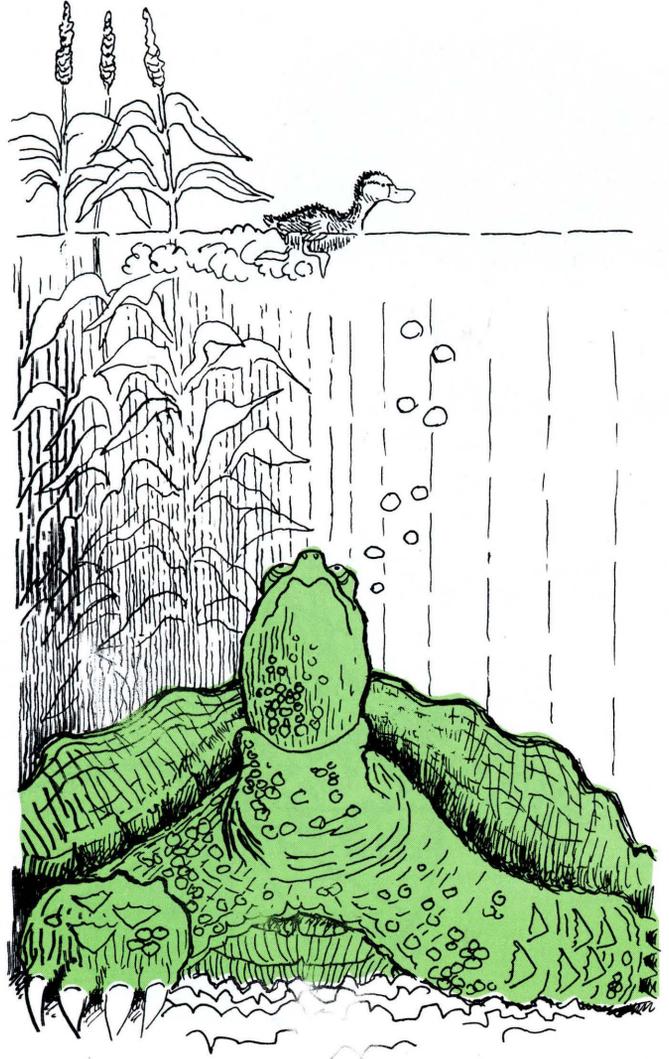
Three weeks pass and the ducklings now resemble gangly teenagers.



The eight have become six ducklings. One failed to obey the hen's call, panicked and moved instead of remaining still, and became a meal for a gull gliding overhead.



Another unknowingly swam too close to a large snapping turtle and was quickly gulped down.



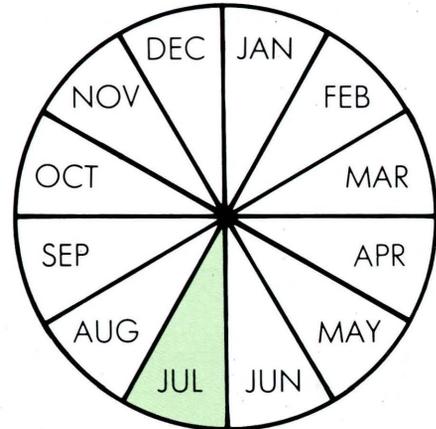
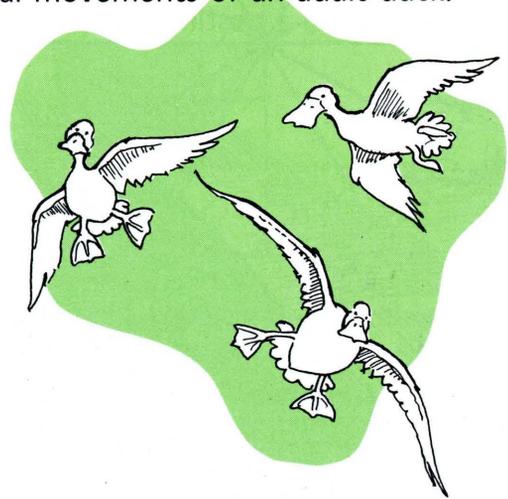
Eight weeks have now gone by since the ducklings left the nest. They are the same size and color as their mother. The long, stiff feathers in their wings that make flight possible are almost grown to full length.



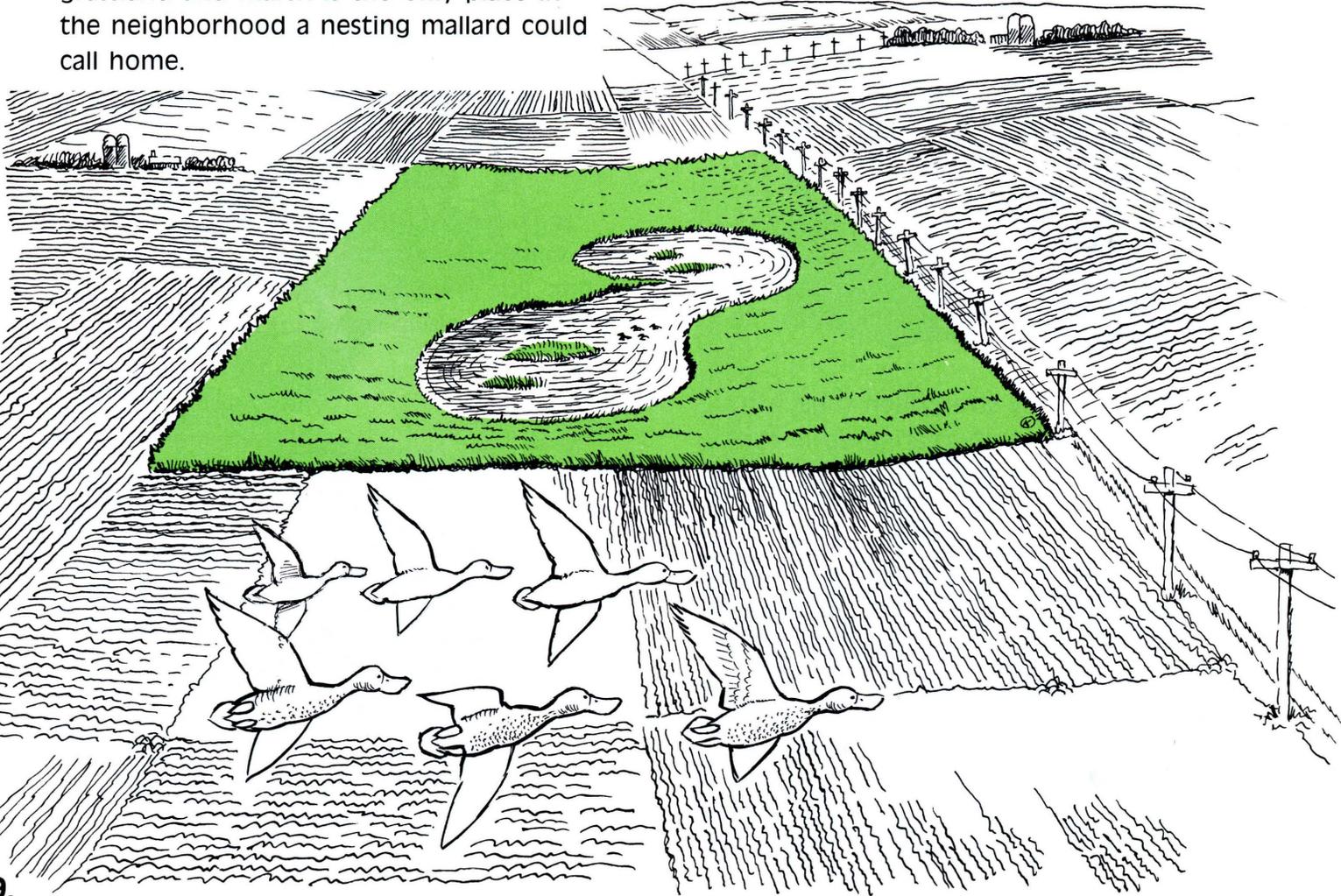
Each day, they strengthen their wing muscles by frequently rearing up in the water and beating their wings. The time to solo has come.



In the course of a few days, each duck lifts off the water and becomes airborne for the first time. Awkward, even clumsy at first, they soon learn the marvelous, aerial movements of an adult duck.



It can now be seen that their summer home is a small wildlife oasis completely surrounded by farm fields. These fields are very important in raising foods for people but are of little use to nesting ducks. The grassland and marsh is the only place in the neighborhood a nesting mallard could call home.

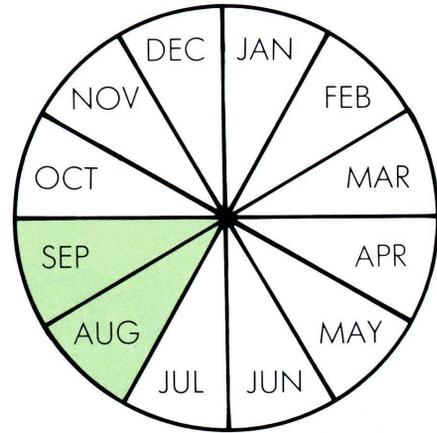


One young duck's flying days are short-lived. Rapidly descending to the marsh, a telephone line is seen too late to avoid hitting the wire. Its neck broken, the duck splashes down for the last time. Its carcass washes ashore to provide the evening meal for a family of raccoons.



Five ducks now remain from the nest of nine eggs. These ducks have survived the hazards of growing up. They and the hen mallard will join the large flocks that fly south in October.

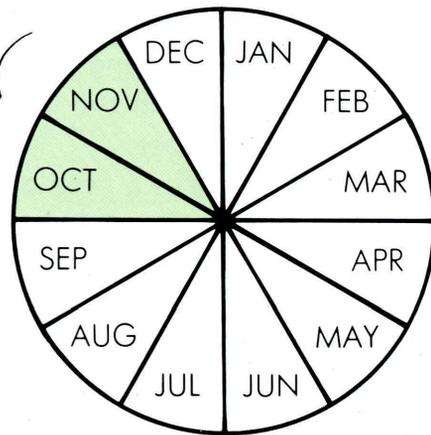
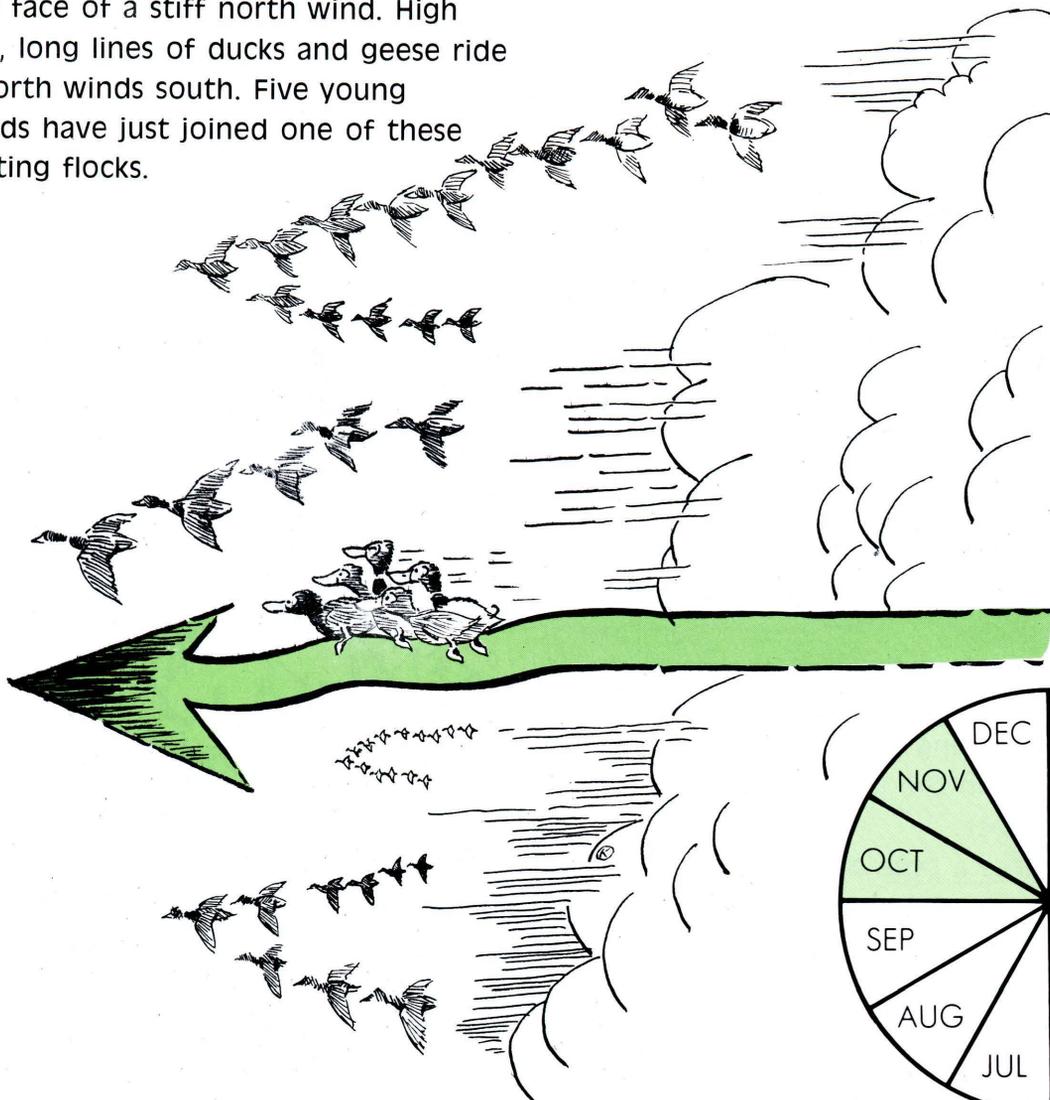
Late summer is a time of preparation for wild ducks. Lots of food and plenty of exercise make up their daily routine. Small flights of ducks whistle overhead as wing muscles are strengthened for the 1,500 mile-long flight to the wintering grounds.



Activity in the marsh is intense as ducks bob and tip for food. Marsh plants, rather than insects, now make up much of their diet.

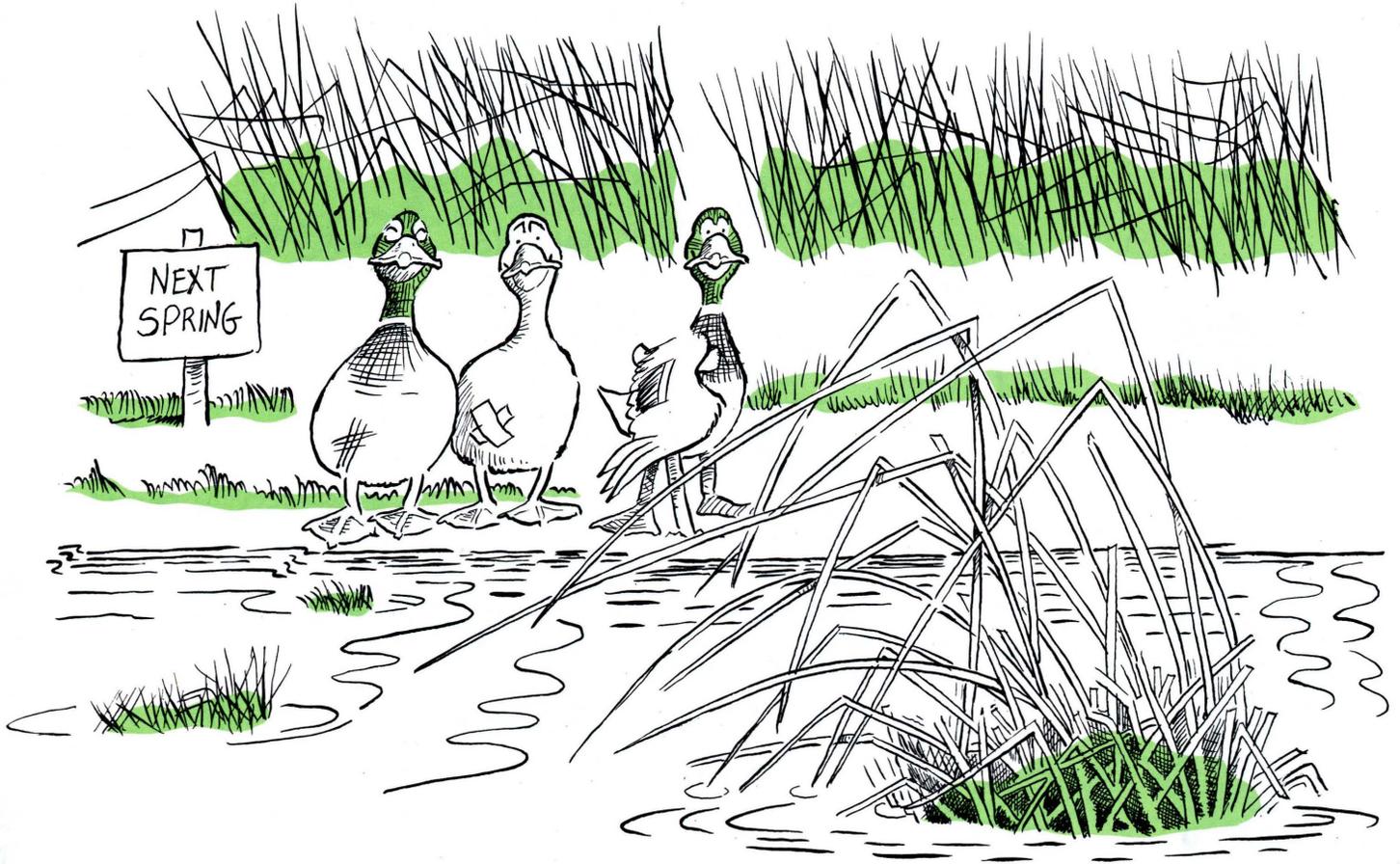


A feeling of restlessness stirs the marsh. Temperatures are sliding downward in the face of a stiff north wind. High above, long lines of ducks and geese ride the north winds south. Five young mallards have just joined one of these migrating flocks.

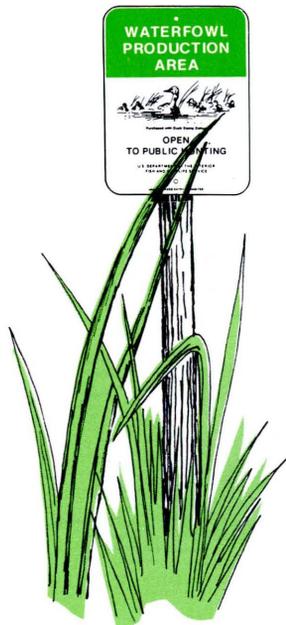


Their journey south will present new hazards; only three of the five will fly north next spring. Yet, for these three and the other ducks that will accompany

them, a native grassland and a prairie marsh await. It is a place—a special place—reserved to meet the needs of wild mallards and other wildlife.



Fortunately, this marsh has been purchased by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, along with many other similar areas—called Waterfowl Production Areas—in the upper midwest. These prairie grasslands and wetlands are of immense value to nesting ducks and hundreds of other species of wildlife. Although they are only remnants of the original prairie, they offer a glimpse of the openness, beauty, and abundant wildlife of native prairies.



Isn't it nice to know that somewhere on this planet, a prairie grassland and marsh have been reserved for wild mallards and other wildlife? A place where mallards can replenish their kind during the summer months. A place where future generations of wild mallards can lift into a fall sky to ride the north winds south to the wintering grounds.





