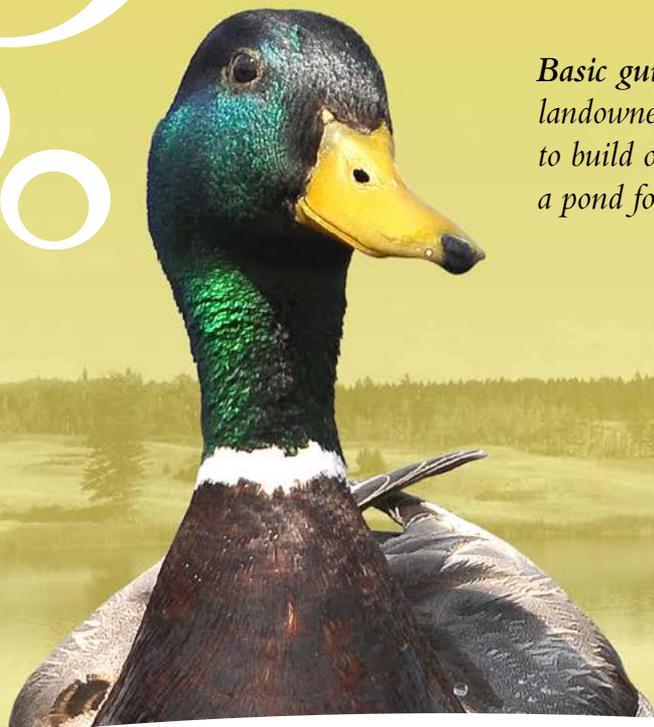


Think Like A Duck

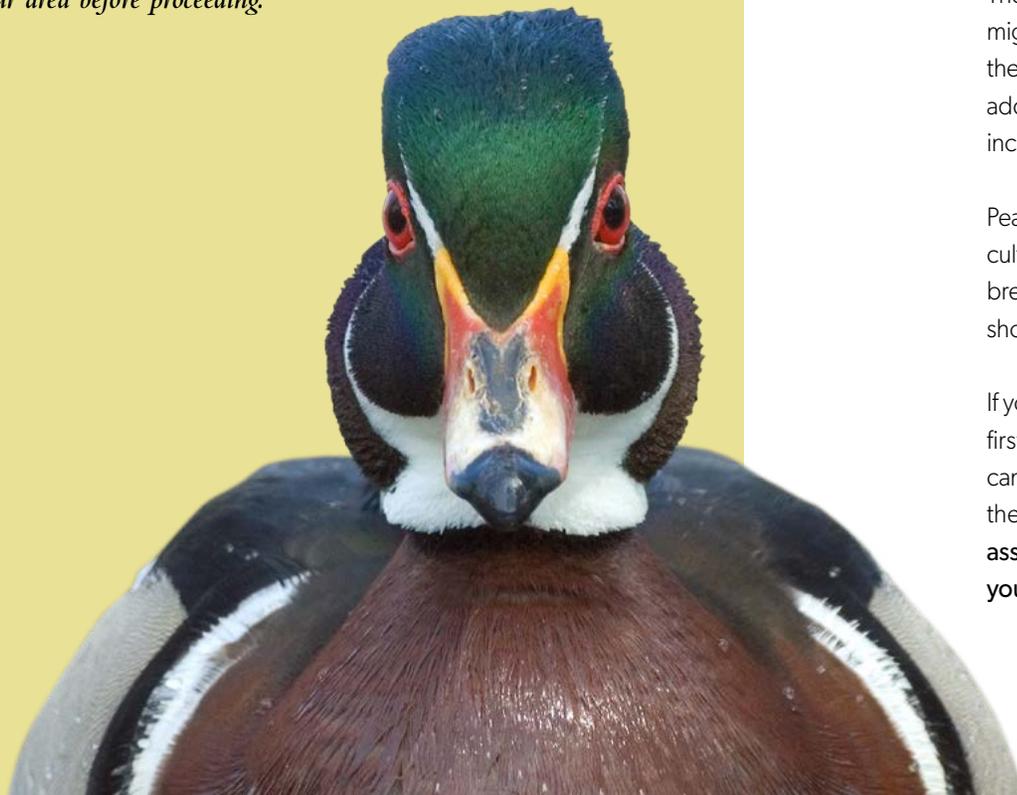
*Basic guidelines for
landowners wishing
to build or renovate
a pond for ducks*



Ducks Unlimited Canada
Conserving Canada's Wetlands

ducks.ca

This guide is intended for landowners who have small, isolated ponds or marshes in their yards or on hobby farms. If your project area is connected to a stream, affects other landowners or has restrictions due to safety hazards, soil types, community plans, covenants or agricultural land reserves – you need to check with the local authorities in your area before proceeding.



Introduction

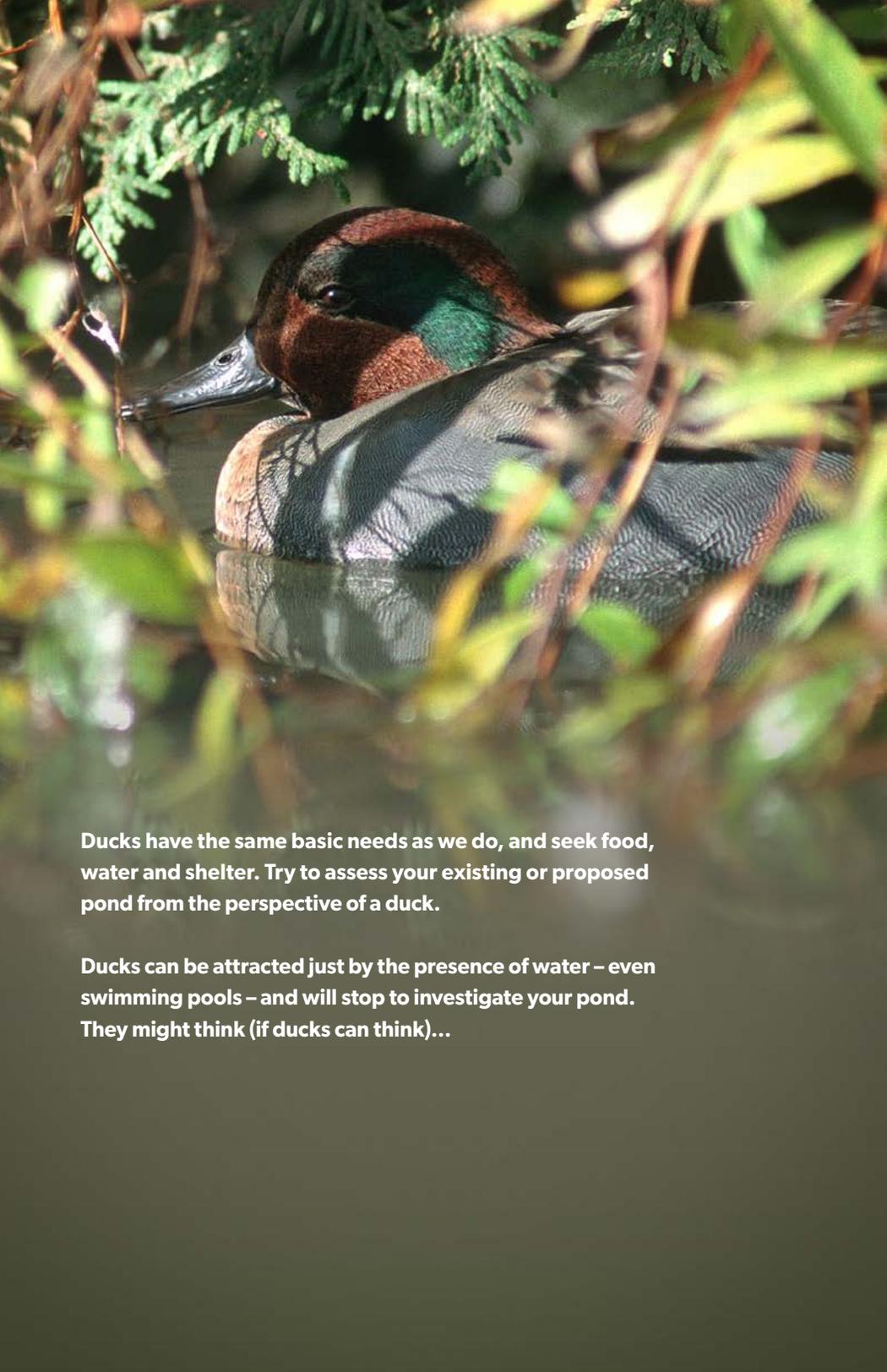
Coastal areas are important feeding areas for nearly all B.C. waterfowl during the non-breeding season, due to a mild climate and abundant food available in local estuaries. They support relatively low densities of nesting ducks, but still provide nest sites for common local species such as mallard, wood duck and blue-winged teal.

The Central Interior, with its rolling grasslands and dense forests, provides some of the most productive waterfowl habitat in the province. Mallard, ring-necked duck, bufflehead and Barrow's goldeneye are common species in this area.

The Southern Interior also provides important habitat for breeding and migrating waterfowl. Wetland conservation is especially important in these dry climates that are facing high land development pressure. In addition to the species noted above, waterfowl to see in this area include gadwall, redhead and ruddy duck.

Peace River Country is a rich and fertile landscape with valuable agricultural land and wetlands. The wetlands in this region support many breeding waterfowl including mallard, American wigeon, northern shoveler, blue and green-winged teal, and common goldeneye.

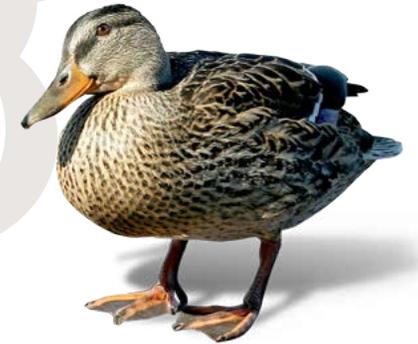
If you want to make your pond or marsh more attractive to ducks, you first have to assess whether it functions already. As a landowner, you can design your pond to ensure that it provides food and nest sites for the species in your region. **The following are basic guidelines for assessing whether your pond will attract ducks, and what to do if you want to improve the habitat it provides.**



Ducks have the same basic needs as we do, and seek food, water and shelter. Try to assess your existing or proposed pond from the perspective of a duck.

Ducks can be attracted just by the presence of water – even swimming pools – and will stop to investigate your pond. They might think (if ducks can think)...

Where's the food?

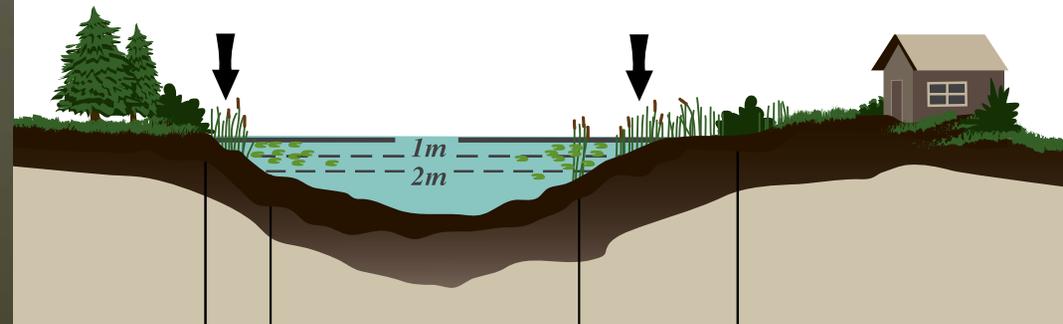


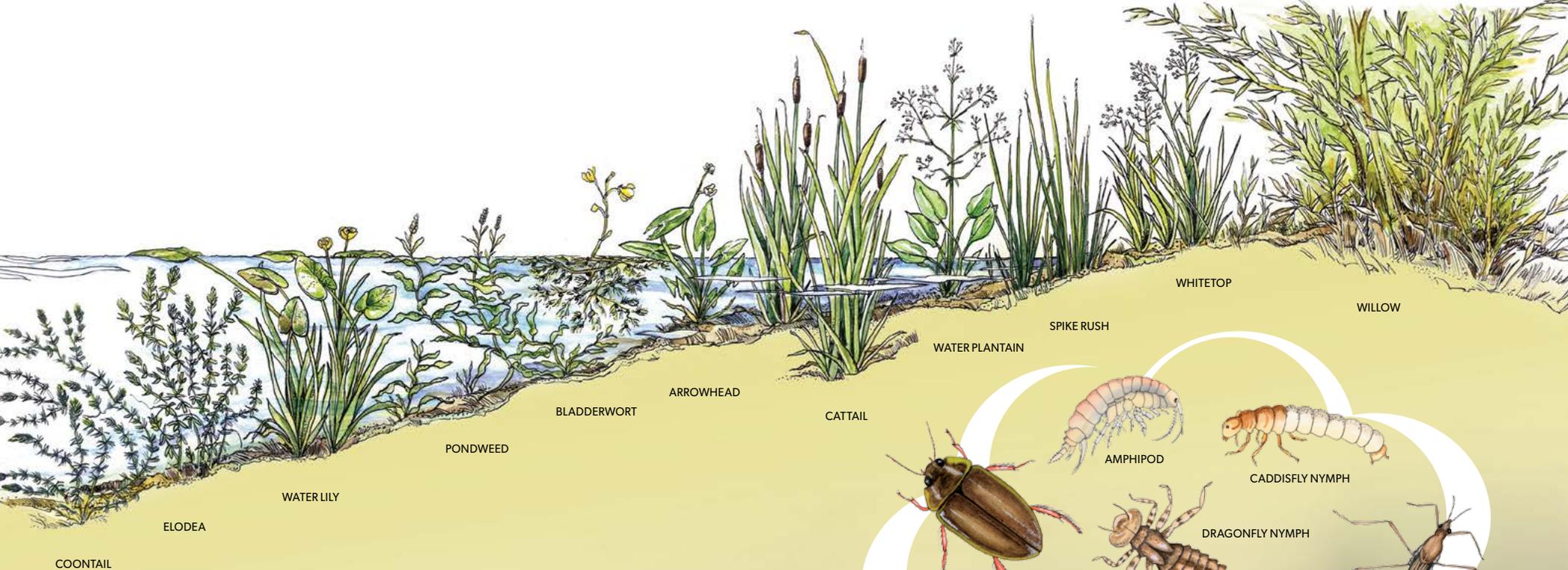
Does your pond have a section of shallow water less than one metre deep? This is the food-producing zone of a pond.

Pondweeds (underwater), sedges (grass-like) and other aquatic plants all grow in this shoreline-to-one-metre zone. These plants are eaten directly by ducks and are home to aquatic insects, snails, duckweeds and algae – all of which are also eaten.

These will occur naturally if your pond has shallows exposed to lots of sunlight, and if the water is clear. Similarly, if you have just dug a pond, dormant seeds may have been brought to the surface and could germinate in the next growing season.

Be patient, and wait for things to develop.





COONTAIL

ELODEA

WATER LILY

PONDWEED

BLADDERWORT

ARROWHEAD

CATTAIL

WATER PLANTAIN

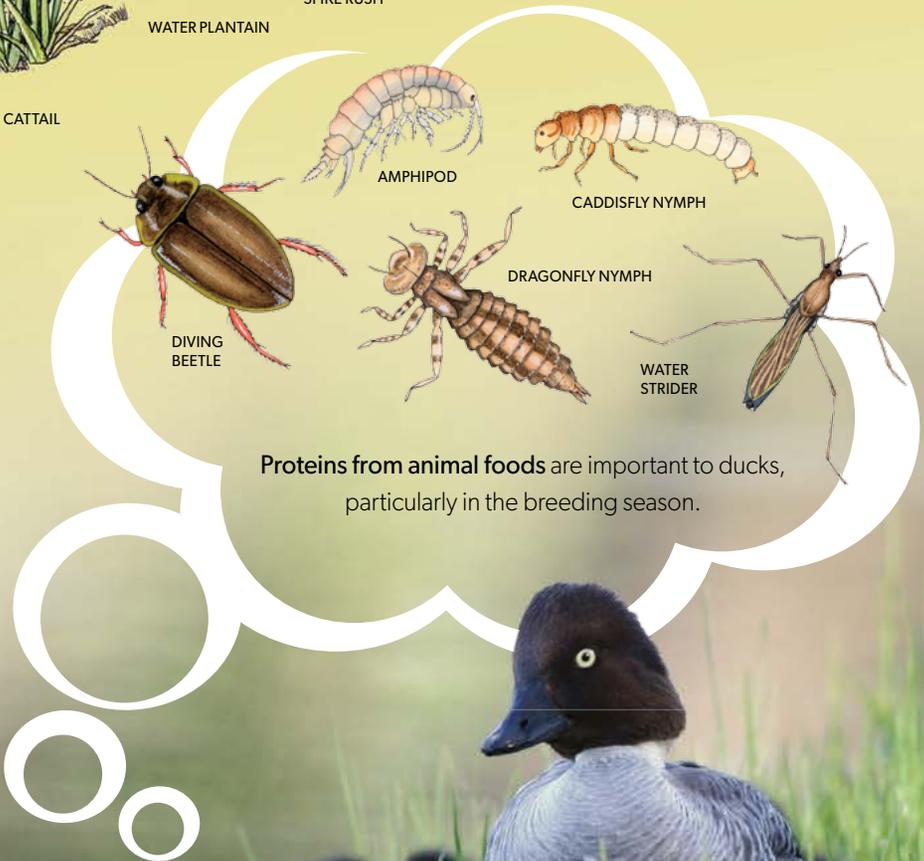
SPIKE RUSH

WHITETOP

WILLOW

Common shallow marsh food plants

Water lilies, some pondweeds and round-stem bulrush can grow in depths of up to two metres. These can be attractive cover in a pond. Lily leaves in particular, are favourite spots for duck broods to hide and search for beetles. If transplanting lilies into a small pond, it's a good idea to keep the roots contained in pots until you see how much water surface the leaves will cover, so you can move them if necessary.



Proteins from animal foods are important to ducks, particularly in the breeding season.



Are there other restaurants nearby?

If you have geese, wigeon or swans nearby, and want them to use your area, you can provide a good quality short-grass (lawn) near the pond to graze on. Their diet consists mainly of greens, particularly in spring and summer.

Low-lying areas next to the pond can be cultivated and left to "grow weeds". Smartweed seeds are popular with ducks, and are generally common in the soils of rural areas. Wintering birds eat a variety of leftover crops, worms, grubs, weed seeds and grass seeds from agricultural areas.

TRUMPETER SWAN

AMERICAN WIGEON

CANADA GOOSE



SNOW GOOSE



Where do we sit?

Ducks like to sleep and loaf in favoured spots. They pick places safe from predators and other disturbances. In a natural setting, you'd see them bunched up asleep on the mud, out from the shoreline, on a fallen tree extending into the water, or on items that act as islands away from the shoreline.

Does your pond have any of these features already? Or is it steep-sided, round and totally manicured?

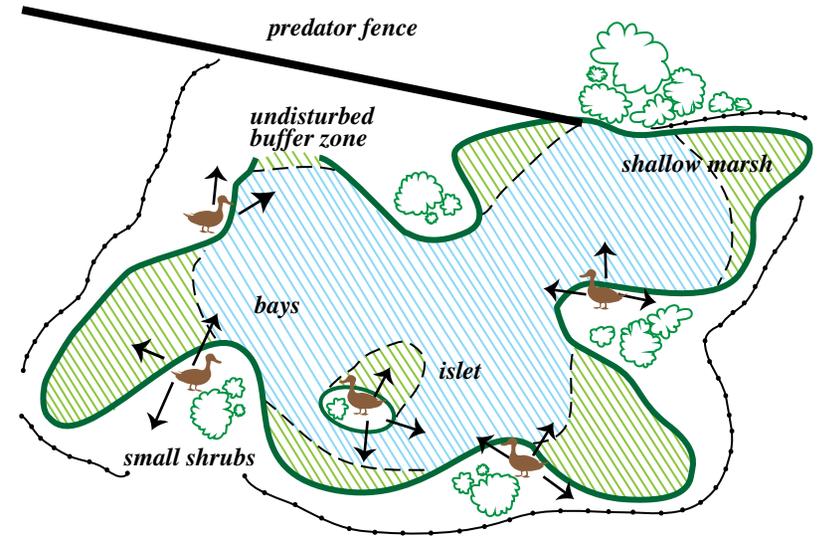
Leave some shoreline with an easy slope, and create a special spot or two in the sun somewhere out on the pond. Even a raft will do.



If we stick around, where do we nest?

A small pond will not support many nesting pairs, but you can provide a variety of suitable sites to choose from. Many dabbling ducks (like mallards) don't always nest right in the water. Instead, they seek quiet, secluded sites along the shore, on small islands or even in adjacent grasslands – site choice depends on many factors. Does your pond lack...

Nest material and cover (patches of tall grass)? Leave lowland areas around the pond undisturbed.



Privacy? An irregular shoreline helps keep duck pairs out of one another's line of sight. Try reshaping your sections of shoreline to create small bays.

Protection from hawks? Some mallards nest in blackberries, snowberries or under other low bushes. Plant small shrubs requiring low maintenance.

Protection from ground predators (eg. dogs, cats, mink, raccoons)? Fence off some of the shoreline and back meadow to prevent predator access. Some protection can also be provided in the form of small islands away from the shoreline. Islands do not have to be big, but slopes need to be accessible for waterfowl.



Are there any special nest sites?

Some ducks nest in tree cavities and old woodpecker holes. You can accommodate and encourage these cavity-nesters by putting up artificial nest boxes.

Wood ducks, bufflehead, hooded mergansers and both species of goldeneye will use nest boxes. Dead trees can also provide nest sites for flying squirrels and other wildlife. Preserving stands of dead trees is recommended, as long as they do not pose a safety hazard.

WOOD DUCK



COMMON GOLDENEYE



HOODED MERGANSER



PIED-BILLED GREBE

Some ducks and other wetland birds use dense clumps of marsh vegetation in deeper water. Canvasbacks are a good example of ducks that nest out in a meter or so of water (called “over-water nesters”). They pick clumps of sedge and build up dry plant debris dense enough to support an incubating hen without the nest sinking into the water.

AMERICAN COOT



Other over-water nesters include pied-billed grebes, coots and ring-necked ducks. Grebes and coots use small sticks, pondweeds and floating vegetation to create a raft on which to nest. Plants such as floating smartweed and marestalk are often used because of their hollow stems and dense growth. These patches of irregular vegetation also support amphibian egg masses, and contribute oxygen to the water.

RING-NECKED DUCK





AMERICAN BITTERN

What happened to the open water?

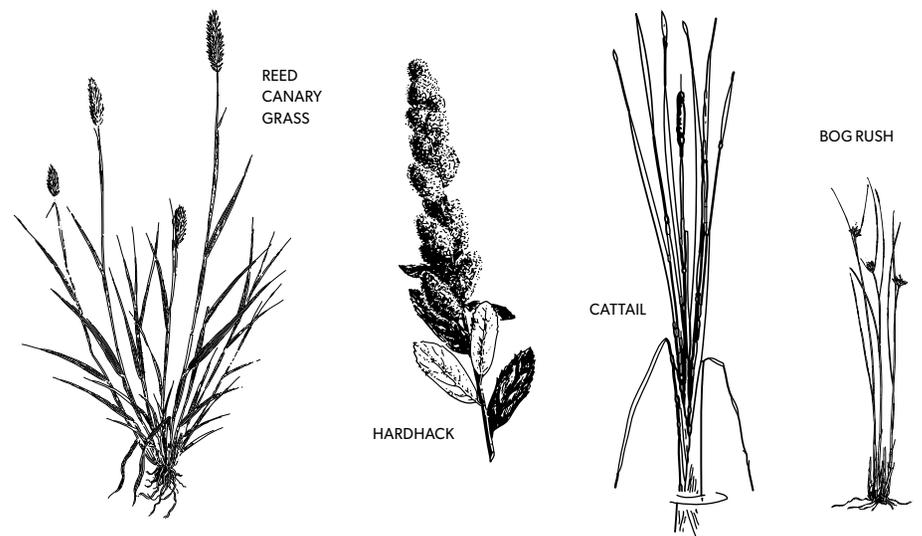
Shallow marshes are often taken over by dense shrubbery and thick marsh vegetation – a natural process called *succession*. Although this growth may reduce the open water available for some species' needs, for other more secretive species, like bitterns, this is good. The dense vegetation protects them from disturbances and provides good cover and nest sites. **The best way to retain some open water is to create some deeper areas in the pond.**



In small marshes, a little conservative plant control can keep the balance between plants and water. Openings in tall vegetation can be created by mowing plants or cutting them below the water line. Pondweeds and excess algae can be raked out to temporarily create more open water. Marshes sometimes require more mechanical treatments or management of water levels, but sites need to be evaluated for the pros and cons of this before proceeding.

Special note: extra care is required when removing purple loosestrife, an invasive marsh plant native to Europe.

Marsh plants often requiring control:



Contact Information

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Phone 250-374-8307

Email b_harrison@ducks.ca

Peace Region Office

Phone 250-786-0220

Email d_kroeker@ducks.ca

Additional Resources

The Wetlandkeepers Handbook : a practical guide to wetland care.
1996. Co-published by: Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Habitat and Enhancement Branch, Province of B.C., Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, B.C. Wildlife Federation.

Available online at www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/Library/240212.pdf



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