

## SHORT NOTE

### Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) eating California quail (*Callipepla californica*) chick

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At 1320 h on 7 January 2014 I watched a female mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) consume a California quail (*Callipepla californica*) chick at Tui Terrace, a lawn area in the Zealandia sanctuary, Wellington. Initially the female mallard was associated with another female and a brood of 7 ducklings, all 9 birds coming to me as I sat on a bench. The female and her ducklings remained near me while the other female moved under a seat along the bush edge of the lawn. Within a minute I noticed that she was attempting to eat a relatively large food item, and having some difficulty in doing so. On moving closer, I identified the food item was a California quail chick, approximately 9 cm long including its rear-projecting feet. The first attempts to swallow the chick head-first failed, the mallard placing it on the ground, pecking and shaking it, before trying to ingest it again. After several such attempts over 1-2 minutes, the mallard finally managed to swallow the chick, although it took approximately 20 seconds to do so.

Whether it had preyed upon the chick or scavenged a dead chick could not be determined. The mallard is an omnivorous and opportunistic

feeder and occasionally is known to eat birds (Cramp *et al.* 1977; del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The mallard can re-nest up to the end of December in New Zealand (Heather & Robertson 2015), but young ducklings have been seen in Zealandia as late as 20 April (*pers. obs.*, 2015), so it is possible, but less likely, that this female might still lay a clutch. Laying females, in particular, are known to seek animal matter in their diet. For example, Swanson *et al.* (1985) found that during the breeding season, laying females ate 71.9% animal matter and only 28.1% plant matter, non-laying females ate 37.0% animal matter and 63.0% plant matter, while males were recorded to have eaten a similar 37.6% animal matter and 62.4% plant matter. Whatever the mallard's breeding state, feeding on the relatively large avian food item described here is unusual.

California quail and their broods occur in the sanctuary (Bell 2015) where I have seen them regularly at the Tui Terrace site and where they appear relatively tame and tolerant of the public. While noting that both species involved in this instance are introduced and widespread, were this to have been a case of the mallard preying upon the quail chick, then this duck could have a significant local impact on survival of California quail chicks there.

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