

## **The resilience of mallards, and us**

By Allyson Mills

Thrashing waves greet the concrete steps along Lake Mendota as I push through the windy terrace, careful not to walk in the splash zone. Near the marina, a mallard sits in the water, unperturbed by the foot-high waves. She stays still, bobbing up and down over the water's turbulence. I am very much not still, wriggling my arms further into my too-thin sweater in an attempt to warm up again. Despite this, I don't scare the duck, who appears peaceful. She continues bobbing for a while. Grateful for the trees' shield from the wind, I continue along Lakeshore Path. After a few hundred feet, the mallard flies past, water flicking off her mottled brown feathers beating wildly against the wind. I assume she finally got sick of the choppy water.

At the Porter Boathouse, dozens of mallards congregate on the right-hand pier, peacefully sitting in the brunt of the storm. Rain pelts down and the wind ruffles their feathers, but they seem perfectly calm, a sharp contrast to the gulls' loud social on the left-hand pier. The mallards maintain their peaceful resolve, and I suspect that all of them had endured wind, rain, and waves similar to the female mallard from the terrace. Yet she and the rest of the herd found each other. Sitting on the pier, each duck seemed content in the presence of one another, even through the storm and squawking of the gulls.

We can learn a lot from mallards' strength in community. When mallards migrate south, which the herd on the pier will begin soon, they fly in a typical "V." In this formation, no single mallard is the leader. Rather, they alternate, each taking a turn when the previous leader tires. Like geese, ducks fly in this formation to conserve energy. Each duck's wings reduce wind resistance for the following duck. This is pivotal in determining whether a flock makes it through migration; a 1970 study found that "a group of 25 birds has 71 percent more range than a lone bird, and the vee position is optimal" ("Formation Flight of Birds"). By creating updraft for the following duck in this formation, each bird increases the flock's resiliency as a whole. The distance mallards must travel during fall migration is astounding: more than 700 miles ("Do Ducks Migrate (All You Need to Know)"). Throughout their lives and especially during migration, mallards depend on their communities for survival. The collective becomes greater than the sum of its individual parts. Without flocks to fly with, the difficulty of migration would be immeasurable for these ducks, and many would fail to make the journey.

Humans can take inspiration from the resiliency of mallards when it comes to how our own communities cope with the climate crisis. Alone, the task feels hopeless and daunting. We doom-scroll on our phones alone in our beds, anticipating the next disaster; we isolate ourselves by thinking "this will never happen to me..." until it does. One positive outcome of disaster is its power to bring communities together. Most people who care about climate change are invested in working to do something about it, through lobbying, joining climate action organizations, educational programs, and other community engagement efforts. Combined with the collective

grief we carry about humanity's negative impacts on the environment, burnout is almost inevitable for those working on the front lines to confront the climate crisis. The magnitude of the issue can make our efforts seem inefficient or even hopeless: How can one person *do* anything? I've questioned this myself and found that one person *can't* do anything—not by themselves, at least. Like ducks, our resiliency and capacity for coping with the climate crisis is strengthened in community (perhaps by 70 percent).

The emotional strain of the climate crisis is intense for anyone who cares, particularly among young adults and college students. We inherited a global crisis we never asked for. We carry the psychological burden of a world undone by pollution and global warming: in addition to classes, this can cause an immense amount of stress. Young adults, including millennials and Generation Z, are among the first groups of people to have grown up in a society where climate change was unavoidable. With the invention of social media, the climate crisis became apparent as we saw our world suffer at the hands of capitalism. The greed rampant in our consumerist society inflicts wounds on the earth and by extension, ourselves. To heal from these wounds, we have to acknowledge the grief and pain caused by these environmental injustices. Our grief and anger motivate us to fight for change. When we fail to acknowledge these emotions, we are less equipped to deal with the ongoing challenges the climate crisis will present throughout our lives. However, while grieving is helpful in processing the earth's and humanity's collective loss, it will not heal it alone. As Robin Kimmerer writes in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, "it is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again."

Rather than asking "what I can do," we instead should be asking what we can do. How much more influential would our efforts to combat the climate crisis be if we worked in a "V" formation rather than working alone? Like ducks, humans increase our resiliency and capacity for improvement when in community with each other. We each have skills and knowledge with the potential to create an updraft for the generation following us. Our generation is working hard to help ensure humanity's future through climate and sustainability initiatives. Social media has aided in increasing global awareness on climate issues. Greta Thunberg became the face of youth climate action, increasing visibility of young activists, and young adults continue to create their own organizations and activism projects within their schools and communities.

This commitment to enacting positive change can be witnessed in abundance within UW–Madison. In our individualist society, student organizations on campus help provide social support and allow for students to embrace solidarity with each other and the environment. Despite possessing increased awareness of climate disasters through media since childhood, we are also among the first generations to be educated on issues related to sustainability at all levels. With the knowledge college students possess and continue to learn regarding the climate crisis, we are now tasked with doing the best we can with what we have.

There are countless examples of student-led groups on campus spearheading these efforts. For example, F.H. King educates the community on sustainable agriculture and provides students with sustainably grown food. The Food Recovery Network combats food insecurity while reducing food waste. The Environmental Law Society exposes the student community to people and careers related to environmental policy, law, and science. Helios works to increase clean energy use on campus through community outreach, project development, and project implementation. Madison Lakes Alliance helps educate students on limnology and conservation of Madison's bodies of water. Re-Wear It Wisconsin engages students in topics on sustainable fashion and conscious consumerism. Our student chapter of the Wisconsin Society for Conservation Biology educates and engages students with conservation initiatives throughout the state. Campus Leaders for Energy Action Now is working to commit UW-Madison to 100% clean energy by 2035. The Audubon Society works to provide students with opportunities to engage in the observation and conservation of birds, including mallards. These are just a handful of the nearly 60 student organizations on campus committed to sustainability and conservation. All of these organizations provide social support for students to discuss and process the effects of the climate crisis. The nature of these student groups is that they inherently follow the mallard-favored "V" formation. Students graduate, and leadership is passed down to the next class of students to ensure each organization can continue its mission. Students in these groups form extracurricular communities to address the climate crisis and enact positive change within their local and global communities.

Just as ducks migrate, we too are in a process of migration, our communities continuously flapping our wings towards a more sustainable future. Individually, we can do the best we can to learn about the environment and how to ensure our shared future in the ways most meaningful to us. However, like mallards, we are strongest in community. If our communities make the commitment to work with and for the earth, the work we do now will create an updraft for the generations to come. Our work today will reduce the resistance caused by unsustainable practices and climate deniers for those who follow us. We have knowledge, motivation, and each other. These give us immeasurable power in addressing the climate crisis throughout our lifetimes.

The task is daunting. However, we can look to the mallards who braved the storm on the pier of the Porter Boathouse. In community we can address our collective grief, protect one another, and work to save our future.

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