

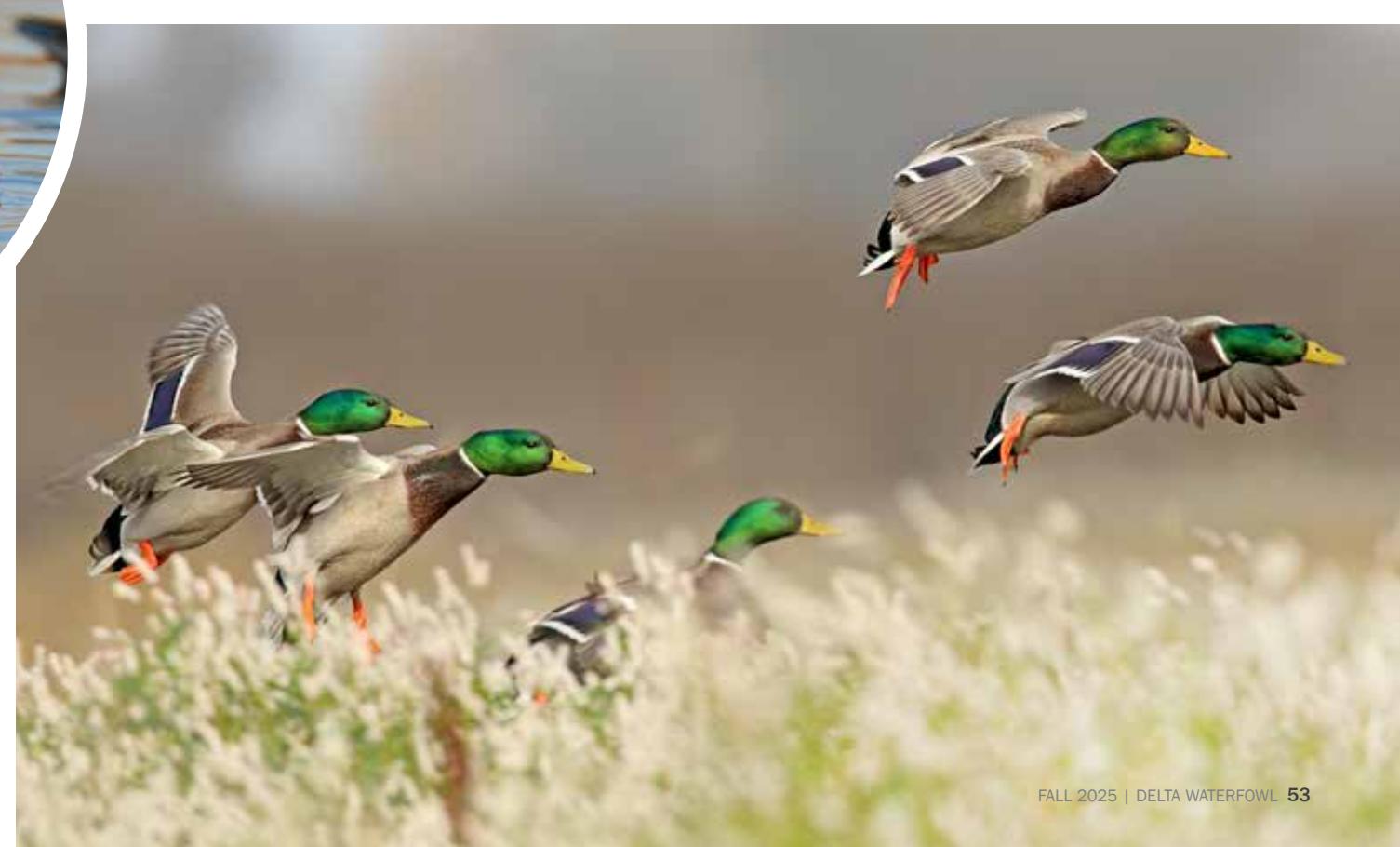
# Not Just Ducks

The iconic mallard stirs the soul in ways other birds simply cannot

PHOTOS BY GARY KRAMER  
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There's something about a mallard that hooks the heart in ways that no gadwall or grouse or scarlet tanager ever could. Maybe it's the impossibly iridescent green head, glowing like emerald fire when those first orange rays of a new hunt catch it just right. Maybe it's the way its primaries slice the air—you can't say how, but your ears know the cadence of a greenhead's whistling wingbeats from all other birds—or how it sharply banks and cups and drops from the heavens with





such stomach-churning speed that your shotgun feels suddenly foreign to the touch.

To the uninitiated, they're just ducks. But when a hen you passed up lands in the decoys and barks gravel-throated wisdom to drakes towering above—and they "*dweet*" back to her while flashing lovely tail curls, chestnut breasts, and cobalt blue wing patches rimmed in white—you bear witness to perfection wrapped in fat and feather.

No matter the setting where a greenhead's grace appears, be it dropping down into a timber hole, tracing the bends of a trout stream with fighter-jet precision, circling a frosty cornfield, or seeking the refuge of a hole you've sledgehammered into the ice, the feeling is the same. There's always that pause—those fleeting seconds when a



past regret or future worry couldn't possibly seep into thoughts, when it's just you and the mallards and cupped wings stretching and blood-orange feet reaching.

We all have our favorite ducks, but mallards make most everyone's top three. They are possibly the purest and loveliest representation of why we're so invested in this curious business of duck hunting. They are a treat for the eyes and music to the ears. They are freedom—in flight and in their unburdening of our hearts. ▲

Renowned photographer Gary Kramer's latest book, "Waterfowl of the World," is available at [garykramer.net](http://garykramer.net).

