

# Found Orphaned Ducklings?

If you have rescued "orphaned" Mallard ducklings, they will need immediate care from a licensed rehabilitator who will raise them to be wild and return them to their environment when they are ready.

Because they are usually kept very warm (under Mother) when they are tiny chicks, the ducklings need to be placed in a warm, safe environment while they await transport and care at a facility. This can be accomplished simply by placing the chicks in a tall cardboard box with a 60 watt light bulb overhead and newspapers on the floor. To be safe, they should not have water or food in the box as improper feeding methods can cause serious or even fatal problems. Baby ducks should never be force fed in a captive situation and is usually fatal to them.

## Mallard Duck Lore

*To be sure that a rescue is the proper course of action, you will need to know about duck behavior and breeding habits before you begin. Often, well meaning humans try to rescue ducklings with disastrous results. To distinguish between when it is the right and the wrong time to rescue, consider the following before interfering with breeding Mallards and their families.*

Male and Female mallard ducks pair bond. That is to say that they "mate for life". While promiscuity is seen among ducks, particularly among young individuals, the mallard pair will generally stay together through their lives. If death befalls one of the pair, the remaining partner can usually be seen in visible grieving behavior. Often, when one of the pair is killed, the other remains faithful and stays with the dead mate - sometimes to its own peril!

In spring & summer, the mallard pair will select their nest site and take up residence away from their social group. In urban environments, plant borders around swimming pools, shrubbery borders around shopping centers and ornamental fountains are sometimes an attractive location for a "house hunting" mallard couple. The food supply is abundant (plants, greenery, snails & bugs), there is plenty of water (pool, fountain, automatic sprinklers), and a place to hide (under shrubs, in small nooks).

The pair will accomplish their breeding in nearby water and at this point, the pair will be seen in the breeding area and also in the area that they have chosen for their nest. When the female is ready to begin egg laying, she will seem to “disappear” during the day and the male will be seen alone in the general area. Mallards usually lay 6-12 eggs but sometimes more! During the laying period, the pair will still be seen together or alone at different times. The female lays one egg each day until she has completed her laying task. She then begins to incubate the entire clutch of eggs by sitting on them most of the time, only taking very short breaks for quick meals and morning swims (the humidity aids in the incubation process). The male does not incubate the eggs and does not stay with his mate at this point in the breeding ritual. Rather, he will find a position nearby and wait for the hatch to occur. During this period, he guards the area and chases away any unpaired males who might attempt to breed with his mate or disturb their nest site. The pair seems to disappear during incubation and is frequently thought to have moved from the site. Then suddenly, Mom reappears with babies! It is interesting to note that the female is so exquisitely camouflaged and sits so still when she is on her nest, she is virtually invisible from only inches away!

The eggs hatch in roughly 30 days. Even though they were laid on different days, the eggs all hatch at the same time because the incubation begins at the same time when the female commences her sitting.

When the ducklings hatch, they are already fed. They huddle under mother while the remainder of their “yolk sac” is absorbed by their bodies and will not need to eat until the second or third day after hatching. The ducklings are precocial. They feed themselves from birth and are never fed by their mother.

**It is at this particular time that nearly all baby ducks (with Mother) are found by the public and thought to be in trouble. The male is rarely seen as Mom leads the babies to find food and a place to live. “Dad” watches the move from his vantage point and continues to protect his mate from rogue males. His role is critical now, as the female will not leave her ducklings and risks her own safety to protect her young. Preserving the family unit is essential to the survival of the ducklings, their mother who protects them and her mate whose role it is to protect her.**

Mallard hens with trailing babies are not an uncommon sight during breeding season. Traveling duck families have stopped traffic, delighted children and amazed onlookers as they trail down busy streets searching for the right place to call home. The Male is always following the movement though he is not usually seen. When Mom and the babies stop to roost, he will join them and then stay with his mate again. The babies will always be with mother until they are nearly ready to venture off on their own. She may occasionally leave the ducklings if frightened away by people or animals. She will quickly return to her frantically awaiting babies.

The ducklings will stay with mother until they are ready to fly. The group disperses as the grown ducklings are attracted to other flocks and fly away as pairs or singles. They are able to fly at around six to eight weeks of age. The original pair usually stays together as lifelong mates.

## **Problems with Ducks**

**Babies are found alone:** Mother may have been spooked away and has not returned. Keep the babies protected and wait from a nearby location to see if the mother returns. She will usually return within a half hour if the area has become quiet again and the threat is gone. She is very protective of her babies and will not go far or stay away for very long. If mother does not return to her babies, the chicks should be rescued and taken to a licensed rehabilitation facility like Pacific Wildlife Project

**Babies are in water with no mother:** If mother is not present, the babies tend to stay in water for extended periods of time. Mother keeps her babies warm by sitting on them and only allows brief swimming sessions before returning to the nest. If the babies are in the water for extended periods, they will become cold. Their body temperature drops dangerously and babies will succumb to hypothermia. In addition, they do not produce preening oil, to waterproof their own feathers. They get this oil when they huddle against mother. That oil only remains on their feathers for short periods and must be restored frequently. It is important to note the important role that the mother duck plays in the duckling's survival and development.

**Babies are in a pool and cannot get out:** Hypothermia will result if

babies are in a pool for more than a few minutes. Mother will stay in the pool with them (to protect them) if they cannot get out and it appears as if she is voluntarily allowing them to swim. She will exit the pool as soon as the babies are given a means to get out of the water. Construct an exit ramp for the babies with a board, lawn chair or other hard form (surf boards work too). Cover the makeshift ramp with a towel so the duckling's feet will not slip and they will be able to climb out on the surface. Leave one end of the escape ramp in the water and one end out. Be sure to screen skimmer or filter openings that may trap helpless ducklings with suction.

**The Duck Family is in the Pool!** Because baby ducks swim for very short periods and they are small, their waste does not have a significant effect on pool cleanliness and most pool filters will function effectively to clean their "mess". As the babies get bigger, their waste will become a problem in the family swimming pool and they should be excluded.

Pool covers are an effective control for uninvited pool guests. They are also safer for other wildlife (baby birds) that may fall into it. Other measures to discourage ducks from pools include; floating alligators or beach balls (they must be moving continuously); sensor sprinklers or sprayers strategically placed; monofilament barriers (installed by professionals); music, radio or strobe lights activated by sensors.

Some professional companies specialize in exclusion devices for wildlife. Companies like **Critter Catchers** safely install devices to protect property and animals.

**Duck Family in the Yard:** Many people find their backyards home to "unplanned" ducklings that one day seem to appear out of no where. Because duck pairs tend to mate in or near water, they find that back yards with nearby pools make an inviting home location for their future family. In addition to the "private lake", dense shrubs become cozy nesting sites and vegetation, snails, and bugs provide an ample food supply.

We receive many such calls from people who find themselves host to new duck families. Here are some guidelines that may help you through the situation.

The family will live in your yard until the babies can fly. That will be approximately eight weeks.

1) Ducks are protected under State migratory bird regulations, Waterfowl Act, and Federal Migratory Bird protection laws. It is unlawful for any person to capture, possess or relocate ducks (and other migratory birds) except by permit. Organizations like Pacific Wildlife Project, who are already permitted to possess wildlife for rehabilitation, cannot also hold permits to capture and relocate any wildlife.

If you feel that relocation is the only option in dealing with your temporary tenants, you must call a relocation service. These companies are commercial concerns and charge fees for repairs (if necessary) and relocation. Commercial relocation should only be done in dire circumstances and the capture of both the male and female is necessary.

**Do not capture the babies and drive them to a new place. Dad will not be able to follow and it is almost certain that unpaired males will kill the babies and mother if she arrives without her mate. Babies without mother are rarely adopted by other ducks and are commonly killed by resident ducks.**

***If you are willing to allow the duck family to remain in your yard, there are some good things about it.***

A: No charge.

B: Baby ducks are a great conversation piece, a wonderful learning opportunity and provide endless hours of viewing and photo opportunities.

C: They eat lots of bugs, roaches, snails and slugs. (After my ducks wiped out the snail population, I did not have snails in my yard for over six years!)

D: You will get lots of fertilizer for free

E: It's a small sacrifice to share your habitat with the previous owner.

Some things you should know:

Although it is not common for ducks to nest in yards with resident dogs, it does occur.

Dogs should be maintained in an area where it is not likely that there will be a confrontation. Cats would not be likely to bother Mother Duck (she will bite) but may attack a baby if it wanders too far from mother (also not likely).

Mom & babies will forage for food in the yard. As the babies cannot fly, Mother will stay in the yard with them and look for food. Ducks "dabble" to find food. They add a mouthful of water to dirt and sift the wet dirt for bugs. They can make a big mess near your pool since that would become the water supply. Some residents opt to provide a food & water supply in an area of the yard away from the pool so that it does not become fouled. Some commercial poultry food and a fresh bowl of water are sufficient. Temporary garden fencing can be put in place to prevent access to the pool. Mom (and Dad who will sometimes appear) can fly over the fence easily and will still swim from time to time. The babies will not be able to get over it unless the holes are large enough for passage.

Pool chlorine will not harm the ducks if the level is safe enough for humans.

Pools usually do not get soiled from the occasional swim activity of a pair of adults or from babies when they are small. Pools will become overloaded with feces if the ducks are allowed to continue swimming when there are several babies grown to the juvenile stage (4 weeks).

NOTE: babies should not be allowed to swim for more than a few minutes as they will get too cold. If they are in the pool for longer than 30 minutes, they may not be able to get out easily. Use the recommended method above if this occurs.

Call a licensed rehabilitator like Pacific Wildlife Project if any babies become injured, appear lethargic, or if they have been without Mother for over three hours.

You may be able to open a yard gate to allow the duck family to move out to better quarters. To do this, it is recommended that you wait as long as you can to give the babies the greatest survival chances. Open your gate and gently herd the family out. Move slowly so Mother does not become spooked and fly away. Dad will watch from his vantage point and join them later. If you wish to escort the ducks to a greenbelt or other area, recruit the help of a friend to help you slowly guide the family down the street to the new location.

### **The Best Solution: Prevention!**

Prune shrubs early in spring before nesting season.

Buy a pool cover- and use it.

Use motion devices to discourage uninvited swimmers. Sprinklers or

sprayers on motion sensors, beach balls, and inflatables can be effective if they are moving in the water.

Be observant! If you see duck activity in your yard, take steps immediately to disturb the quiet environment they will look for. Use a radio, go outside frequently or leave the dog in the yard at times during the day to discourage drop-ins.

**Pacific Wildlife Project**

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