



Mallards and their ducklings

Breeding season: spring through summer

A week before egg-laying, the female exhibits persistent quacking- she is looking for nest sites- this occurs mostly in the evening- she is in the lead and the male is waiting nearby. If this behavior is observed, you may find this is a good time to deter her from laying her eggs. As the last egg is laid the female starts to incubate. She sits very tightly, and her brown plumage blends her perfectly to the background. She rarely leaves the nest apart from short breaks to feed and stretch her legs. About 28 days later the eggs hatch together. This takes about 24 hours.

The ducklings stay in the nest for at least 10 hours while they dry and get used to using their legs. Then, usually in the early morning, the female leads them to water. Bad weather may delay this exodus, but the sooner the ducklings get to water to feed, the better their chances of survival. The nest is abandoned, although if it is close to the feeding area, the family may continue to use it for brooding and roosting.

Traveling to water

If the nest is some way from water, this first journey can be the most perilous time in a duckling's life. Where a nest is high up (up a tree or on a balcony) the birds must first jump to the ground. Being very light and covered in down they usually come to no harm during the fall. If the landing area is very hard and there is cause for concern, placing something soft like straw or a blanket underneath will cushion the fall.

Next, they will have a long and potentially hazardous walk before they can reach water.

The mother duck knows where the nearest water is to take her young to, although it may be a couple of miles away. In most instances it is best to leave her alone, because interference can cause extra stress and risk the mother panicking and abandoning her brood. In many instances keeping an eye from the distance and shepherding the family across a danger point, such as a busy road, is all that is needed.

Ducks should be discouraged from building their nests where the ducklings will be at real risk on hatching. Such instances would be in backyards near pools, especially if the property is not close to any parks or golf courses that have water. There is normally no second chance for abandoned ducklings, their best chance for survival is with their mother. If you try to catch the mother, she may panic and fly away. She may not return to her young.

In a few situations the duck nests where the ducklings will be at real risk on hatching. In such cases the birds could benefit from being caught and taken to water, but this must be well planned and prepared. If there are absolutely no other solutions but to move the mother and her babies, please consider the following points:

- Count the ducklings carefully before you start - it is surprisingly easy to lose one or two.
- First, catch the mother; an easy way is to gain her confidence over the weeks that she is sitting. Put out food for her in a pet carrying basket with the door wedged open. She will get used to feeding inside. When her young are ready to leave, give the normal meal, making sure that the door can easily be closed on her. Once she is inside, cover the basket so she is in darkness and unlikely to panic. If this fails or you are too late to begin feeding, try throwing something over her, such as a coat or a towel. Hold the duck

around her body, pinning her folded wings to her sides. Ducks are relatively docile as long as you can stop them from flapping their wings.

- Chasing should be kept to a minimum because the ducklings, which normally stand together in a tight bunch, may panic and scatter, making it difficult to find them again later. Get someone to watch where the ducklings go while you catch the mother.
- Collect the ducklings carefully into a **second box** and count them. Do not be tempted to place them in with their mother because she might try to escape in the process.
- Handle the duck and ducklings as little as possible. However gentle you are, the whole experience will be very stressful for them.
- Keep the boxes together during the journey so the mother is constantly aware of her young.
- When you get to the water, let the ducklings go first on an open bank where they can stand, be seen by the mother and get in and out of the water easily.
- When you release the mother, make sure she has seen the ducklings before letting her go. Place the box she is in carefully on its side so that the opening faces the ducklings. Stand behind the box so that when it is opened she can walk straight out to her family.
- Please note that a new mother with her babies in a new area will be vulnerable to attack from resident ducks and other predators. This is hard to witness, but is almost inevitable. Mallards hatch approximately 12 ducklings and usually only 2 survive until fledging. Nature has planned for this attrition and this is why the Mallard begins with so many babies.

Growing up

Young ducklings can feed themselves as soon as they reach water, but must learn what is edible. They depend on their mother for warmth for a few days. She broods them regularly, particularly at night, as they easily chill in cold weather.

The down of the ducklings is not naturally waterproof. They get the waterproofing for their down from their mother. She also protects her ducklings from attacks by other mallards. Ducks do not tolerate stray ducklings close to their own brood, and females kill small strange young they encounter. Ducklings take 50-60 days to fledge (fly) and become independent. They are able to breed when they are a year old.

Orphans

The journey to the water is hazardous for the whole family, and on occasions, the mother dies, or part or all of the brood becomes separated from her. When faced with a handful of endearing duck orphans, think carefully before you take on the task of rearing them.

Rearing ducklings is a long, messy, time-consuming process. It takes at least two months to raise a brood. It is best to pass the youngsters on to an expert rehabilitator. It is against the law in California to raise native wildlife unless you are a licensed rehabilitator with the California Department of Fish and Game.