



Do You Know.....ABOUT DUCKLINGS?

By Brittany Davis, Staff

In the spring, the Center gets inundated with young Mallard ducks as concerned citizens find them wandering aimlessly by themselves or traveling en masse across a busy intersection. Although we take in all the babies that come through our door, most of the ducklings we receive did not actually have to be rescued.

Some background information: Once home from migration, Mallards will pair off and scope out different water sources and nesting sites. Although nesting sites are usually within view of a water source, with increasing human encroachment of natural habitat, Mallards are now choosing nest sites that are within a half-mile radius as the crow flies of available water. A few days after the nest is finished, the female will start laying her eggs, about one per day, rearranging the nest after each additional egg. Mallard hens will not truly incubate their eggs until they are finished laying, usually around thirteen eggs. Incubation lasts for 28 days with the hen spending roughly 22 hours of each day on the nest. The drake (male Mallard) will stay in the vicinity while the hen incubates and will stand guard during the brief moments when she leaves the nest to grab a quick bite to eat. The first-laid egg is usually the first to hatch, with the rest following in the next six to ten hours. In the first day, the hen stays at the nest site with her newly hatched ducklings as it can take up to twelve hours for their down to dry.



Mallard ducklings resting in a laundry basket while their cage is being cleaned.

Leading babies to water: Ah, the tricky part. By this time, the drake may have moved on, or he could have stayed behind to help, depending on his overall agenda (“Ensure the further survival of the progeny I know exists or try my darndest to father more?”). Mallard ducklings are precocial, meaning they are born with down feathers and able to walk and swim after a couple hours. Since the ducklings are unable to fly and most hens do not have a driver’s license, walking is the only way to go. Although Mallards may choose what may seem like some strange nesting sites, they do have a plan of action. The hen has already chosen a water source and has her walking route mapped out. As precarious of a pavement jungle we humans have created, most Mallard hens are able to navigate their way to their pond of choice.

Where you come in: If you notice scads of ducklings crossing a road with mom, just slow down, stay in your car, and allow them the time they need to finish crossing. If you see scads of ducklings crossing a road with no mom, look a little harder; most of the time she is already on the other side of the road waiting for her children to catch up. ONLY if there is no mom anywhere or you notice her injured or deceased should you step in and gather everyone up.

Any time you see a single duckling with no visible family you should step in. Occasionally, ducklings will hatch after mom and siblings have already left. These ducklings are true orphans and will need a rehabilitators care.

While we here at the Center applaud all the efforts that caring citizens put into helping their wild neighbors, sometimes the best thing to do is nothing. If you ever have any questions or concerns regarding wildlife, please do not hesitate to give us a call.

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