

## *Is there a Mother Duck on your Roof?*

# City Wildlife's Quack FAQs

### **Has a mother duck built her nest on your balcony or roof -- or in your courtyard?**

If so, you are not alone. Mallard ducks are prevalent in DC and are attracted to balconies, green roofs, and courtyards for their nests.

### **Why did she pick my building?**

Chances are, your location provides some of the things she is looking for in a nest site:

- Planters or plants that are low to the ground, but dense enough to provide shade and to hide the nest;
- Protection from predators, such as raccoons, hawks, owls, rats, cats, or dogs;
- Nearby access to water: a pool, fountain, stream or pond (generally within a few feet to 1 mile from the nest);
- A flat area, out of the wind.

### **Why is this a problem?**

When the ducklings are only 1-2 days old – or as early as a few hours after the last egg has hatched -- their mother needs to lead them to water in order to feed. But at this age, they cannot fly, so if they have nested on a roof or balcony that is more than 2 stories above the ground, the mother will not be able to lead them off without injury or death to the ducklings from the fall. If the ducklings are in a fully enclosed courtyard, they may be trapped since they cannot fly out. Without help, these ducklings will starve or be abandoned by their mother.

Other obstacles include high roof parapets or railings that are too high for the ducklings to jump over.

It is a myth that the mother duck can carry the ducklings over these barriers, she cannot.



Female mallard duck and ducklings

**Why didn't she figure this out beforehand?**

Some of the situations we create in our buildings are relatively new: green roofs, courtyards enclosed for security, and non-native plantings that can grow dense on balconies. The mother ducks are programmed to look only at the nest site and the proximity of the water source. They do not think about how they will get their ducklings there. (That's why we see ducklings being led into traffic by their mother. They are focused only on getting those ducklings to water!)

**Can't she bring food to them?**

No, the ducklings are *precocial*; that is, they are born fully developed and ready to eat on their own, so the mother duck does not know how to feed them. Also, a typical clutch can be 10-12 ducklings -- and sometimes as many as 15 -- and they eat a lot, so there is no way she could bring them all enough food even if she knew how.

**What if we feed them for her?**

This is not recommended for a number of reasons:

Feeding ducklings for 60 days until they can fly is technically challenging. Several duck chow products are made, but they are not geared to wild ducklings, so they must be supplemented with natural foods (such as insects and water plants) and nutritional supplements to produce an appropriate diet.

Also, the constant intrusion by human beings will be stressful both for the ducklings and the mother, and it will alter the natural training that the mother would provide her ducklings in the wild. At worst, the ducklings may become *habituated* to humans, which will severely jeopardize their chances of survival in the wild.

### **Well, ...so what should we do?**

The best outcome for these ducklings is to get assistance in relocating them *with their mother* to a suitable water body, possibly the one she chose when she selected the nest site, if it provides the necessary food and is safe from predators.

A suitable water body will have nutrients, sufficient cover for the hen to hide with her ducklings, and a ramp out of the water, if it water body is enclosed with a ledge. The family should not be put in pools or fountains or any water body with a rim that prevents the ducklings from getting out of the water, since their mother will lead them out of the water at night and during the day to preen for waterproofing

### **Who can help me with this?**

Eventually, City Wildlife will, but we have not yet opened our Wildlife Rehabilitation and Information Center serving the District.

In the meantime, please call DC Animal Control at (202) 576-6664 and ask that an officer come out to help you relocate the duck family.

### **What can I do to prevent another duck from nesting on my site?**

It is important to prevent these situations from occurring, since they are upsetting to both people and ducks, as well as time-consuming for the DC's busy Animal Control officers. Moreover, few wildlife rehabilitators are willing to take ducklings from DC since they are handling so many of them from their own jurisdictions.

So here's what to do to prevent ducks from nesting on your property:

- Net or cage your plants to prevent nesting. (Unfortunately, ducks can nest all summer long.);

- Install spikes or other deterrents under plants that might be attractive for nests.
- Cut back your plants so that they do not provide enough cover for a nest.
- Destroy the nest prior to production of the first egg. (This is legal and more humane than letting the eggs hatch in unfavorable circumstances.)
- Oil the eggs (called *addling*) to prevent them from hatching, or remove them. (However, this requires DC and Federal authorization, which must be applied for well in advance and is best done by a professional. Contact [www.fws.gov/permits](http://www.fws.gov/permits) or [info@citywildlife.org](mailto:info@citywildlife.org) for more information.)
- Allow breeding to occur if the nest is already established.



Female Mallard (left) and Male Mallard (right)

**Spread the word.**

This document is available on the City Wildlife website: [www.citywildlife.org](http://www.citywildlife.org) and can be forwarded to anyone you know who has problems with ducks nesting on their property.

City Wildlife is a non-profit organization whose goal is to provide wildlife rehabilitation services and assistance with wildlife in the District of Columbia. Please support City Wildlife so that we can meet our goals and help with issues such as this.

Thank you for helping our city's wildlife!

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