



## Quick QUACK Facts on Mallard Duck Biology

All Species Kinship (A.S.K.) routinely responds to calls from the general public and businesses regarding the perplexing behaviors of one of our most frequently seen wild friends: Mallard ducks. These ducks can be seen walking down sidewalks, despite high traffic. They can be found nesting in small closed courtyards and even within tiny flower pots. So what gives? If the duck *chose* the location for her nest, why isn't it always the "right" spot?

### Why did the Mallard pick my property?

- In highly urbanized environments there may be lacking natural green spaces in close proximity to water.

There is a good chance that your location provides some of the characteristics an urban bird seeks out for nesting:

- Vegetative cover: planters or plants low to the ground, but dense enough to provide shade and to hide the nest. Remember, in a highly urban environment, green cover may be minimal therefore landscaping items become more attractive nest sites.
- Protection from *some* types of predators. A rooftop nest may provide safety from most small mammals, however can easily expose ducklings to flying predators, like raptors. Alternatively, a closed courtyard minimizes the chances of mammal predators, but still exposes birds to raptors and humans. A planter may be attractive because it is off the ground.
- Nearby access to water: a pool, lake, stream, pond or decorative fountains within a few feet to 1 mile from the nest. Many times however, water is not within direct proximity to the nest site in urban environments. Many closed courtyards totally lack natural water sources, as do rooftop structures.
- An area that provides decent protective shelter from wind and weather extremes.

### We enjoy watching wildlife up-close! What is the problem?

Did you know that ducklings are led to a natural water source by their parent as early as a few hours after hatching? A natural water source contains the food they need to have proper growth and good nutrition. At this young age ducklings cannot fly so they *must* walk on foot to the water source. If ducks have nested on a balcony or rooftop more than two stories above the ground, the hen will not be able to lead them to water without risking injury or death to the ducklings due to the fall. And remember, in most urban areas pavement is the surface the ducklings would have to fall onto. Ducklings can scald to death on hot asphalt rooftops. If the ducklings were born in a fully enclosed courtyard, they are trapped since they cannot fly out. Without help, ducklings will starve to death or be abandoned by their mother.

Other obstacles may also impede safe transition to a natural water source: railings, ledges or high roof parapets are too high for ducklings to jump over. Ledges on artificial pools or fountains often have the same challenges.

It is NOT TRUE that Mallard parents can carry ducklings over barriers; we've all seen ducklings not be able to hop curbs and instead fall into storm drains.

## Why would momma Mallard pick the wrong nesting site?

Evolutionary adaptation can take decades or more to occur. Our landscape practices continue to change, especially in urban environments. Green roofs, closed courtyards and non-native street landscaping can look really appealing in a sea of cement where natural nesting sites may be limited or may appear to be more predator-rich. Perhaps momma is able to acknowledge some of the benefits of nesting in highly urban locations, like increased predator protection, while not being aware of the severe trade-offs, like lacking food and water. Mallards will tend to pick a nesting site close to water, but if the water is on the other side of brick walls, she has not factored in the challenge of getting the ducklings from the nesting site to the water. Waterfowl in general, have an amazing built-in navigation sense for water. When you see ducklings being led across busy streets it is because momma duck knows exactly where the water source is and the quickest route to get to it. You should never disrupt a hen with her ducklings because doing so can make birds stressed. You run the risk of separating the flock, or injuring the young. Instead, stop traffic so that they can safely cross the road.

## Can't she deliver food to her ducklings?

No; ducklings are born fully developed and ready to eat on their own (precocial). The mother duck does not know how to feed them. Instead she shows them how to *find* food in the water.

## But we love ducks *so much* that we can provide them food and water! Problem solved!

This is not recommended for a variety of reasons:

- Store-bought diets are not natural diets for wild ducks. Cracked corn and bread is a diet that will cause serious nutritional deficiencies that can actually disable wild birds for life. In captive-settings wildlife rehabilitators must use nutritional supplements, insects, plant matter and a special processed diet to keep birds healthy. This is expensive and is only a last resort used to be used when a momma duck gets hit and killed in the road leaving behind surviving ducklings. Under those circumstances there is no other option. Still, wild birds can only be rehabilitated by those with a federal permit.
- You will have to provide access to food and water for 60 days until the ducklings can fly away on their own. This will be time-intensive and expensive. You don't get weekends off or vacation days; they need food and water every single day. Water access must be safe enough so that ducklings can safely enter and exit the water. A tired duckling trapped in a water source will drown.
- Remember, these are WILD ducks. The constant intrusion by well-meaning humans is stressful for any species of wildlife. Since you cannot adequately prepare the wild ducks for survival in the wild, their parent must. How can momma Mallard teach them how to forage when there is no natural water source available? She can't. If ducklings become so used to close human presence, they may attempt to view *all* humans as safe once they fly away. This can cause conflicts when ducks won't leave someone's backyard pool or lawn and start creating lots of fecal waste.

## Well...what should we do to help the ducks?

The best chance the Mallard has for survival is if you are *pro-active* and learn how to *humanely* discourage them from nesting in the first place. This is also a great way to avoid stressful situations with humans. Often times urban Mallard nesting sites raise conflicts in the workplace. There are always a few people that want to keep the ducks as "pets," but there are also those that are unequivocally against interfering with wildlife. Plus, everyone becomes upset when they see ducklings needlessly orphaned or killed due to "human intervention gone bad". The good news is that All Species Kinship (A.S.K.) can help you!

## How to prevent nesting:

If momma Mallard ALWAYS visits the same planter, shrub or corner on your property, you can anticipate that she will be back again this year ready to lay. Remember, it takes a significant amount of time for animals to go through evolutionary changes; eventually she will opt for better sites. Since you can spot the types of nesting sites momma Mallard likes, do what you can to make these sites, and those similar to them, unattractive. Hurry!

- Net or cage off corners that are attractive nest sites. Cage/net planters. This makes nesting in these areas unavailable.
- Install spikes, faux predators that move, like bobble-head owls, wind socks, reflective wind-mills (toys), or place a battery-operated radio left on 24/7. Place items near the sites the Mallard has nested in before. Try a variety of techniques and **move them around**.
- Cut back plants so that they do not have as much appealing cover.
- Bring a dog into the courtyard and he will naturally deter the Mallard from nesting. Remember though, dogs need food and water access and should be closely monitored. A dog is an extension of your hand and you are therefore responsible for his actions.
- Gently disturb momma Mallard if she is looking for place to nest. Do NOT touch her, but approach quietly until she flies away. Do this repeatedly every time she lands.
- If she already has begun creating a nest, remove it if there are NO eggs in it. This is more humane than allowing ducklings to hatch in a place where they won't survive. It is *legal* to remove a duck nest *only as long* as there are **no** eggs in it.
- Allow hatching to occur if there are eggs in the nest. It is a violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act to destroy eggs or to disturb a mother duck that has laid eggs without a permit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Permits to addle or remove eggs from nests can only be done so with a permit from US Fish and Wildlife Service. These permits must be applied for well in advance of the need and other steps to discourage nesting must be taken prior. For permit info: [www.fws.gov/permits](http://www.fws.gov/permits).

### **Help! Momma Mallard has already laid her eggs/ducklings have been born and they are trapped!**

You need *qualified* assistance to safely capture the ENTIRE family unit, momma Mallard included, to a nearby natural water source. Call your local wildlife rehabilitator or All Species Kinship @ 877-596-7776. If you call someone and they intentionally separate the family unit or take the ducklings into their capacity to "raise them," they are not qualified!

What is a natural water source? Fountain pools or other chemical-filled reflection ponds are not suitable relocation sites. Find a water source full of insects and plant matter with plenty of plants and trees. There should be a water source very close to your property. Remember, water bodies with ridges or lips around the edge will not be good locations because the ducklings won't be able to enter/exit without a ramp. You can make a ramp in special circumstances, but it is best to call for on-site specific advice.

***Educate others by passing this info onward. Good intentions can lead to needless deaths.***



**Mallard ducklings found by A.S.K. after we had been called to a closed courtyard where someone had already attempted to capture ducklings. The person accidentally broke their necks because they weren't properly trained in handling wild waterfowl.**

*Portions adapted from City Wildlife's "Is there a Mother Duck on your Roof?"*

