

Is there a duck in your planter?

Is there a mother duck nesting in your planter or tree square?

If so, you are not alone. The Mallard duck is a common species in DC and will often nest downtown or in very congested areas, as long as they are within a mile of water. Most of the nests occur between April and July.

Why did she pick this planter?

The ducks always pick spots that are hidden and away from predators. She has selected your planter or tree square because it has low plants or shrubs that will hide her as she nests. These spots are often safer for the ducks than more secluded sites because the presence of people scares her natural predators away. She has decided that people are preferable to predators, who could eat her eggs.



I can't see any eggs. Are there any?

The mother will leave the nest several times a day to get her own food. She is usually gone for about an hour each time. During this time, you may see eggs, but she often hides them completely with grasses and feathers from her breast. In addition to hiding the eggs, the feathers and grasses keep the eggs warm. Typically she will lay from 10-15 eggs, one egg each day. After the last one is laid, she will start incubating them for 23-29 days until they hatch. They will all hatch in one day.

There's no water here. Where is she planning to go?

Within 48 hours of hatching, the mother duck will lead her ducklings to the water source she has selected. After that, they don't return to the nest. The water is usually within ¼ mile of the nest, but it can be up to a mile away, and her mate may be waiting for her there. The water source can be a stream, river, or lake, but it is sometimes a fountain or pool. In these cases, the mother may later relocate the ducklings to a more suitable water source where there is more food.

Won't they all get killed by cars? There are wide streets and lots of traffic here.

There are indeed many hazards in the city. However, the ducks are adept at avoiding traffic, and they often move their ducklings to water at dusk or early morning when there is less traffic. Most drivers will see and stop for a duck family crossing the road, but there are other dangers, too. Some ducklings may fall into grates or storm drains, or get attacked by crows or gulls on their journey to water.

Should we help them across the streets?

Yes, if it is safe for you to do so, you can help by stopping cars as the ducks cross the street. You can also help by covering grates or guiding them away from barriers that might prevent the ducklings from keeping up with their mom. (These tiny ducklings can only jump about 4-5 inches, and some barriers are too high for them to climb.) However, you should let the mother duck determine her general direction and not steer her to a different route. She knows where she is headed: "Mother knows best!"

What should we do if we are monitoring a nest?

A monitor's primary job is to be sure the duck is left alone and undisturbed. Don't provide food or water, and generally it is best NOT to put a sign up, since that only attracts more attention to the nest. You can check on the nest daily, or several times a week to be sure the duck is still safely incubating her eggs. You can be alert to anyone harassing the duck or trying to steal her eggs. And most important, you can provide information to well-meaning people who want to help, but who sometimes try to do so in inappropriate ways.

What happens if there is an emergency?

Occasionally the ducks do need our help. If the ducklings are trapped, or if the mother is sick or injured, situations like this do require assistance. For help or information, call:

City Wildlife: (202) 882-1000 (daily, during the hours of 9-5)

DC Animal Care and Control: (202) 576-6664 (24 hours a day)

Thank you for caring about these ducks!

