

Are there ducklings in your swimming pool?

Have you just discovered a mama duck and her ducklings in your pool?

If so, you are not alone. The Mallard is a common species in DC and the mother duck will often nest near swimming pools because she thinks the pool will be a good habitat for her ducklings. She doesn't realize that it's not.



Why isn't a swimming pool good for ducks?

Many reasons. First, there is no food in your pool for ducks. They eat on their own from birth, feeding mostly on aquatic vegetation and insects they find by "dabbling" in the water. When the mother selected her nest site, she was unaware that your pool would not provide the nutrients she is accustomed to finding in water.

Second, if the ducklings can't get out of your pool, they will drown. Ducklings are not born waterproof, so they need to get out of the water periodically to dry off and preen. Pool decks are generally about 6 inches above the water level -- too high for these tiny ducklings to jump out – so pools are inherently hazardous for ducklings. (Some people think the mother can lift them out with her bill, but she can't.) Please raise the water level or place a temporary ramp in your pool so

the ducklings can get out. A board about 10 inches wide covered with a wet towel for traction will provide easy access out of the pool for the ducklings. Allow the bottom edge of the towel to sit in the water.

Third, pools contain chlorine, which can irritate the skin and eyes of animals.

And finally, not everyone wants ducks in their pool. Some folks love them, but others think they are pesky or dirty -- or even dangerous (which they aren't). If people intend to swim in the pool, however, in will become progressively more cloudy and unhygienic as the ducklings grow older.

Where did these ducks come from, anyway?

Mother ducks often nest in dense shrubs or groundcover near water sources, and they are so silent and hidden that you may never have noticed them in your yard. Or they could have nested nearby in your neighborhood and walked their ducklings to your pool after they hatched.

Their nest is just a shallow indentation in the ground, which the mother duck lines with her feathers. She will lay one egg a day (10-15 eggs on average), and incubate them for 22-26 days after the last egg is laid. She remains on the nest day and night, leaving a few times a day for periods of about 45 minutes to meet with her mate and feed. All the eggs hatch together on one day, and within 24 to 48 hours the mother will lead her ducklings to water to start swimming and eating. For the first 48 hours the ducklings don't need food because they are still sustained by the yolk sac.

Won't they just leave on their own?

It's possible, but not likely. Keep your gate open for at least 48 hours after the ducklings are born. In some cases, the mother duck will simply lead her ducklings out of your yard to a better water source, and once she leaves, she usually won't return. Beach balls moving in the breeze, loud radios and human activity can provide added incentives for the ducks to leave.

In most cases, however, she plans to stay at your pool until her ducklings can fly (about 8 weeks old).

Actually, I love the ducks. Can't I just raise them in my pool?

In theory, yes. It's not illegal. But this isn't a good idea for several reasons:

The ducklings can't survive on their own in your yard because there isn't enough food. So you would need to feed them good quality duck food, specially ordered, and once you do, they will want to stay in your yard for 8-12 weeks until they are fully flighted. They grow very quickly and will soon become almost as large as their mother. At this point, their droppings become a nuisance and will spoil your pool for human use – at least for the season.

Also, it's not good for the ducks to become accustomed to humans (or domestic animals), and ducks quickly become bonded to anyone who feeds them. "Habituation" to humans alters the duck's natural instincts to flee from predators, and this puts them at risk in the wild because not everyone is kind to ducks. (Think of hunters, for instance, or foxes.)

Well, ...so what should we do?

Each situation is different, but in many cases, the ducklings must be removed from the pool area. The primary goal is to keep the family together, mother and ducklings. If there is a natural waterway nearby, they can sometimes be herded from the pool area and redirected to the waterway. Other times, the ducklings and their mother must be captured and relocated to a better location. This should be done by a professional animal control officer or other permitted specialist.

Who can help me with this?

In the District of Columbia, please contact City Wildlife at (202) 882-1000 or DC Animal Care and Control at (202) 576-6664 as soon as you see any ducklings. If you know there is a nest on your property, please let City Wildlife know and they can advise you. City Wildlife is open from 9 am – 5 pm daily; DC Animal Care and Control is staffed 24 hours/day, 365 days/year. We will do our best to help both you and the ducks.

What if the mother can't be caught?

If the mother can't be caught, the ducklings will be brought to City Wildlife's Rehabilitation Center to be raised and released when they are flighted.

How can I prevent ducks from nesting at my pool in the future?

There are several things you can do to prevent duck nests:

- Net or cage your plants to prevent nesting. (Ducks begin nesting in the spring but 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.
- Gently disturb the mother duck if she seems to be looking for a place to nest. Do not touch her, but rather approach her quietly until she flies away. Do this repeatedly each time she lands.
- If she has already prepared a nest, remove it if there are not yet 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 *as long as there are no eggs in it.* Allow brooding 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 with eggs without a permit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

• Apply *methyl anthranilate* as a repellant. *Methyl anthranilate* is a harmless chemical related to grape juice that has been proven effective in repelling ducks when fogged every three weeks around nesting areas. "Liquid Fence" is one commercially available product that contains *methyl anthranilate*. Two disadvantage of *methyl anthranilate* are that it smells strongly of grape juice and washes off with the rain.



Female Mallard (left) and Male Mallard (right)

Thank you!

This document is available on City Wildlife's website: www.citywildlife.org. 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 with a donation so that we can meet our goals and help with issues such as this. And thank you for caring about these ducks.

City Wildlife 15 Oglethorpe Street, NW Washington, DC 20011 info@citywildlife.org www.citywildlife.org (202) 882-1000