



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

August 18th, 2023

Quack Quack



Mallard ducklings move into larger enclosure.

In just the first 8 ½ months of 2023 we have already received 249 Mallards and in 2022 we received 236 for the whole year. Needless to say, they are one of the most common species we get, and the preponderance of patients are orphans. While most people will call this species a “duck,” Mallards are a distinct species whereas the term "duck" may also include other types of waterfowl. Adding to the confusion, their young are called "ducklings," the males are "drakes" and the females "hens". Their distinctive plumage and vocalization (only the female Mallards will “quack;” the drakes vocalize a grunt-whistle only when alarmed) are well known and easily identifiable.

A hen’s clutch has an average of 12 eggs and she incubates them for around one

month, usually laying just once a year. Although the ducklings can leave the nest and swim with their mother just one day after birth, young Mallards cannot fly for another 50-60 days, which accounts for the large numbers that we receive each year. When in danger, the mother will fly and escape, and the ducklings may be left to fend for themselves. Unattended babies have a very low survival rate as they are vulnerable to a wide variety of predators such as dogs, cats, fish, other birds, and even other Mallard mothers who will kill orphans if they get too close to her own clutch.

If we receive a single Mallard, we will place them in an enclosure with both a mirror and feather duster. This tricks the orphan into thinking that they are not alone and decreases the risk of habituation. Mallards are most apt to imprint within the first 12-36 hours of birth, though they are vulnerable to imprinting up to 14 days from hatching. It is very important to discourage young Mallards from imprinting on humans in order to increase their likelihood of survival in the wild.

Other than calls about baby Mallards without their mothers, the most common calls we receive about Mallards are how to keep them out of pools and what to do once they’ve nested. The Federal and State Migratory Bird Act protects active bird nests so once a hen has laid her eggs, there is nothing to be done until the birds leave. It’s important to provide a way for them to leave by opening a gate or pathway as the young birds are unflighted. Far better is to deter the birds from making a home in your pool. Place pool toys in your pool or use a cover to dissuade the flying birds from recognizing the body of water from above. Clear brush from around your pool so the nesting females will not be tempted to lay their eggs.

The US Fish and Wildlife Services estimates that there were 179,000 Mallards in California in 2022, down 25% from 2019. There are 7.22 million in North America and the Fish and Wildlife services keep tabs on the populations to determine how long the hunting season is and how many animals each hunter is permitted to kill and to ensure that the bulk of the population is preserved. There is evidence that Mallards have been hunted as far back as the neolithic age.

Calling someone a “duck” has been used as a term of endearment since the time of Shakespeare and we’ve made our own contribution to Mallard lore by adding them to the emoji canon in 2016. 🦆