

## Duckling Dilemma

by Nancy Eilertsen

First comes love, then comes marriage, next comes Mama Duck with the baby carriage. Of course in nature, this translates to a rash of calls in March about a pair of mallard ducks in backyard pools and “can we please send someone out to catch them?”

Healthy mallards that fly into backyards, office complexes, school yards, shopping centers, etc. can also fly out again. It's illegal to capture healthy protected wildlife without a permit. It's also fairly impossible to catch a flighted duck, healthy or otherwise. “If you don't come out and catch these @#%&\* ducks, I'm going to shoot them!” is another familiar phone call. It's illegal to shoot migratory mallards. You would need a hunting license and you would need to be in an area where hunting is permitted. This rules out the majority of calls that we receive....about 100% of them. One irate homeowner did damage to his pool after taking a few shots at the visiting ducks. A more serious concern is a stray bullet or pellet that could injure or kill a child or a pet in someone else's yard.



Instead, discourage ducks by chasing them off, don't feed them, or leave pet food outside. Once you feed them, you've given an invitation to stay. Wave a pool net or towel at them but be as consistent as possible.

Since the mottled brown coloring of the female mallard provides excellent camouflage, people often don't realize the duck is nesting in their yard until they wake up one morning to a dozen or so little puffballs swimming in their pool. We can get up to 20 calls a day during April, May, and June concerning ducklings in swimming pools. There are only a few people who are experts at catching both the mom and babies so the family can be transported to a suitable lake. Patience is a virtue plus there's little choice.

We've had calls from people who are sobbing; they've watched the ducklings drown over a several day period because the babies couldn't get out of the pool. It never occurred to them to make a ramp for the ducklings. This should be a no-brainer. Making a ramp or filling the pool up to the top is your first priority; if the babies can't get out of the pool, they will eventually drown. Use a board, screen, lawn chair or other device. It will usually take a long time for the babies to understand and use the ramp but they eventually figure it out. Unless the pool has just been shocked, the chlorine isn't as much of a problem as the fact that there's not a good food source for the ducklings. On a lake or pond, they'd been eating small bugs and algae. A trip to a local feed store for some game bird starter will keep the ducklings nourished or try dry dog or cat food soaked in water until spongy. Depending on the amount of calls coming in and the availability of volunteers who can rescue ducklings, it might take a few days so be prepared.