

BIRD CARE & CONSERVATION SOCIETY  
**CARING FOR WILD BIRDS IN CAPTIVITY SERIES**  
**(ADELAIDE AND ENVIRONS)**

**CARING FOR DUCKLINGS**  
**IN CAPTIVITY**

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## **1. Species:**

The most common species of ducks in the Adelaide region are Pacific Black Duck (*Anas superciliosa*), hybrid Pacific Black Ducks and Australian Wood Duck also known as Maned Goose (*Chenonetta jubata*).

Hybrid Pacific Black Ducks are ducks which have some Mallard Duck in them. Mallards are a wild duck from the Northern Hemisphere which were introduced here over seventy years ago and have interbred with the Pacific Black Ducks. They are slightly heavier in build and may have orange beaks and/or orange legs. The male of the Hybrid Pacific Black Duck usually has a green head.

Other species which may occur include Chestnut (*Anas castanea*) and Grey Teal (*Anas gracilis*). Teals are a smaller duck than the Pacific Black. Male Chestnut Teals have a green head and chestnut coloured body, and red eyes. The grey Teal also has red eyes and a predominantly grey mottled body.

The ducklings of all these species appear very similar. Look in field guide for accurate identification of adult ducks.

## **2. Identification of ducklings:**

Pacific Black Ducklings are black to dark brown on the head, neck and back with a yellow face and a black line through the eye. They have four small yellow patches on their backs. Hybrid Pacific Blacks have similar markings.

Wood Ducklings are grey with a paler face and underside and a dark brown line through the eye. They have a short beak with a reddish tip to it. They have four light grey patches on their backs. They stand more erect than the Pacific Black Duckling.

Chestnut and Grey Teal have the same shape as a Pacific Black Duckling but have similar colours to the Wood Duckling.

The species of duckling can be hard to recognise and behavioural clues may need to be used instead.

Teals will be restless and jumpy, and prefer a meat oriented diet such as meal worms.

### **3. Initial rescue:**

Ducks often nest in unsuitable places such as by swimming pools in peoples back yards.

Wood Ducks and Teal have both parents in attendance while Pacific Black Ducks have only mother.

Ducks tend to have numerous off-spring which can run very fast and get through very small spaces. Parent birds may fly away if frightened and not return which all make for difficult rescues.

Ideally you need more than one person. You will need a net and two boxes, one for the babies and one for the mother. If you can lure the ducks into a garden shed or enclosed verandah it will make capture easier. Sometimes a trail of bread will be effective.

Catch mother first then the babies. If she is put in a cage she may act as a lure to the babies. If releasing on to water ways release the babies first and then the mother.

*If you release the mother first she will tend to fly away and you'll be left with the babies!*

### **4. Housing:**

Ducklings need housing in two stages. When they are very small they can be kept in a confined area such as a large box lined with newspaper but this can only be very temporary. They grow rapidly and will soon need larger accommodation. Ducklings are very messy!

Orphaned ducklings will need a heat source for the first three weeks day and night unless the weather is very hot then you need only supply heat at night. A heat source can be a wrapped up hot water bottle or wine cask inner (take care that it doesn't go cold overnight), a lamp, ideally an infra red chick brooder lamp, or a light globe. An ordinary light globe fitted into an earthen ware flower pot makes a safe warm spot for the ducklings.

Ducklings do not do well on underfloor heating because they need to be able to move away from the heat source when required.

Ducklings are shy creatures and they like privacy. In the wild they would probably be hiding in banks and hollows so you need to provide them with a dark place to hide in.

A wooden box with an entrance cut in it and turned upside down is ideal. If you use cardboard or polystyrene they will probably peck their house to pieces.

*Ducklings are stressed very easily and should be kept in a quiet environment away from household activity ie noise, pets and children.*

If possible set up an outside aviary for the ducklings. On the floor of the aviary put clean straw, hay or wood shavings. Set up the heat source and their house at one end and their water container at the other so that their sleeping area remains dry and warm.

## 5. **Feeding:**

Ducklings know how to feed themselves from day one and do not require force feeding in any way.

They will enjoy bread crumbs but not too much bread should be given, one slice per day maximum for ten ducklings. Crumble it up finely so there are no big pieces they might find hard to swallow. Pacific Black Ducklings and Chestnut Teal will enjoy meal worms.

Ducklings also like a weed patch. This is a plastic kitty litter tray or similar low sided container filled with earth and weeds dug from the garden. This will need to be changed regularly. Fresh weeds of various kinds need to be given every day.

Chopped lettuce is also enjoyed by most ducklings. Duck starter crumble or chicken crumble should be supplied ad lib. Soaked wheat is also a welcome addition for most ducklings. Duck weed is loved by most ducks if you can find a supply.

Initially place food on a flat surface such as an icecream container lid rather than in a bowl. A bowl can come later when they are used to the food you are giving them. If they leave any food uneaten throw it out and put in fresh each day. Do not put fresh crumble on top of old crumble.

Duck Starter Crumble, Chick Starter Crumble, and wheat can be obtained at most Fodder Stores. Mealworms can be supplied at some Fodder Stores and Pet Shops.

Fresh water must be constantly supplied. Again a kitty litter tray makes an ideal water container. put a stone in it so the ducklings can easily get out. Also make sure the ducklings can easily get in. Ducklings like to splash in water from day one.

*Ducklings can drown if they get into tall containers like saucepans or high sided bowls and have no way to get out.*

The water should be changed at least twice a day. Ducklings need to be able to put their heads under water to keep their eyes healthy.

When ducklings get bigger and begin to have their feathers coming larger bowls such as washing up bowls or baby baths can be supplied but always make sure the ducklings can get out safely.

If your ducklings do not appear to eat duck starter crumbs or lettuce suspect that they are Teals and try them on a more meat oriented diet such as mealworms, Puppy Pal and water other than tap water- which may have living creatures in it (ie, creek or dam water). Worms and beetles from the garden may be enjoyed too. A variety of food needs to be offered.

Ducklings enjoy mud and like to dabble in it so you can add some water to your weed and soil container.

## **6. Release:**

When your ducklings are fully feathered arrange to have them banded by contacting the Bird Care and Conservation Society (see telephone white pages).

Banding is done for the Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme which enables research on bird populations and distribution etc to take place.

After banding release into a safe area where other ducks of their species are present.

*It is not advisable to try to keep wild ducks as pets and ducklings should be handled as little as possible.*

## **7. Status**

Native ducks are protected and if you are not a member of the BCCS you will require your own Permit to Keep and Sell. Also (including BCCS members) you will require a rescue permit which can be obtained at no cost from The Department of Environment and Natural Resources, telephone (08) 8204 8700 to arrange this.