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WEEKEND BREAK

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LUCKY DUCKLINGS

Newborn mallards become overnight guests before heading to the Wildlife Center of the North Coast

By **RON BALDWIN**
 For *The Daily Astorian*

“What’s that?” my guests chimed in unison as they walked out the door.

“What’s what?” I said as I peered through the doorway.

There, in the middle of my driveway in Chinook, was what looked like a little pile of dryer lint. But the pile’s quick little moves finally gave it away as a pair of mallard ducklings huddled together in the brisk, late spring breeze.

“Oh, uh, hi there little duckies,” I said. “Where’s yo mama?” A search of the immediate area produced no adult. Within seconds, a ridiculous superhero persona came over me.



Ron Baldwin

“We’re gonna save the duckies!” I was feeling more heroic by the moment, but first we had to catch them. I can just imagine what four adults look like from the street chasing these little guys around in the tall grass. Newborn mallards are tiny and incredibly light, but they sure can scurry.

“He’s going your way! Cut him off!” “Stop you little devil!” “I got this one!” “He’s headed for the street!” “No ya don’t — come back here little fella!”

At last, I have them. “Hold these,” I told my companion as I thrust two wriggling piles of fluff into her hands.

“What do I do with them?” she asked as the pair struggled — a blur of beeping, squirming, fluttering, downy wings the size of your little finger.

“Just hold on to them. I’ll get a box.” Meanwhile, the guests bailed like refugees.

“Well, so long. Gotta go. Good luck with your duckies.” They drove off.

The first box proved to be inadequate; the little devils jumped right out with little effort, and the chase was on again. Finally, I brought out a plastic storage tote and loaded the little guys on top of some shredded newspaper. I placed a dish of water in the corner, and the critters must have thought it was a swimming pool since they dived right in.

‘Ducky Daddy’

After I rigged up a hot water bottle with a towel, I topped it with a fuzzy Toucan doll. The ducks weren’t impressed, and continued to beep, beep, beep and make dives from the top of the bird doll, which they managed to climb with those impossibly big feet.

One given I have learned over the years: If there’s going to be a miracle or a disaster, it’s going to happen on the weekend when no one is working or responsible for anything. Also, just because you think you have an emergency doesn’t mean anyone else thinks you have an emergency.

Through a call to the Wildlife Center of the North Coast in Olney, however, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that they accept animals for rescue, though, 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. What this meant, daily, is that I would have to throw out everything else in my life



Ron Baldwin photos

TOP: An orphaned duckling. ABOVE: Pauline Baker, rehabilitation coordinator at the Wildlife Center of the North Coast.

for the next 16 hours and concentrate on the care of two small creatures I had just met.

Animal experts often recommend that you handle orphaned animals as little as possible, especially ducklings, since ducklings tend to imprint on you. In other words, these guys could start to think I’m their daddy — not good.

This sounds like solid advice, but you try to resist those little beepers. They could have charmed Godzilla. The cuteness factor was off the charts: bright little black eyes, pale yellow and gray striped torsos, gray-black bill, tiny fluttering wings and big, black feet.

By now, my companion had begun

to address me as “Ducky Daddy.” How embarrassing.

“I’m not going softie,” I tell her. “Anybody would do the same.”

“OK, Ducky Daddy.”

Overnight guests

Through the evening Scrabble game, the ducklings kept up a semi-constant beeping, interrupted by thumps of what sounded like colossal leaps across the tote. For a while we were able to direct our attention elsewhere. The beeps lessened and the thumps stopped altogether. The house became quiet, Sunday night quiet.

At 2 a.m. my eyes popped open. Totally silent. I put on my robe and stumbled down the stairs to check the duckies. They’re sleeping peacefully under the wing of the stuffed bird doll now. I sat down in the chair next to the box and just stared at them, transfixed. I soon found myself in that spot between wakefulness and sleep where things are sort of hazy. I shook it off and returned to bed only to awaken again around 4 a.m. and go through the same routine. One of the pair untucked its head from under its wing and looked at me like, “What?”

With morning sunlight came soft, almost purring beeps from the tote. Don’t tell me they’re beginning to like it here, I say to myself.

After several cups of coffee and some mental handwringing, it was time to load the tote with the now-squirming ducklings into my old VW bus and drive to Olney, south of Astoria, with my companion. The ducklings’ beeps were not so shrill this morning. At least for now they seemed less stressed. Me, too.

At the Wildlife Center

The ride to the Wildlife Center in the 46-year-old beast suited the ducklings just fine. The engine whine seemed to sooth them. The beeps even sounded happy. As we bounced along the Wildlife Center’s long driveway, I started to realize I’ll probably never see these little guys again. I teared up a little, but was able to hide it.

The Wildlife Center is a group of buildings off Oregon Route 202. I parked in the lot, entered the office and was greeted by Pauline Baker, the rehabilitation coordinator, a friendly young gal. Her attitude inspired my confidence that everything would be all right for my ... er ... the duckies.

“Sure, we can take them. Bring ’em on in,” Baker said. It’s obvious from the outset that this was the right choice — sadly, the only choice — for these birds.

“We get lots of them every year,” she explained. “I’ve probably got a dozen or so out there right now.” Thousands of baby seabirds are orphaned each year in our region. The majority are not as lucky as these two.

Baker cradled the birds in her hat and thanked me, saying I did everything right and the birds have a good chance of survival.

As I drove off, I felt my eyes start to mist over. I am not going softie, I told myself, sniffing. Anyone would have done the same.

Ron Baldwin is a musician, photographer and writer living in Chinook, Wash.

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