

Thanks, Moms

By Tom Dickson

With Mother’s Day just around the corner, I’ve been thinking a lot about a hen mallard that raised her brood on the pond outside my office a few summers ago.

I first noticed her in early June, swimming with nine tiny hatchlings closely behind. The hen’s nest must have been tucked behind a sofa-sized stand of cattails along shore, because the pond is otherwise surrounded by asphalt and mowed grass.

That first day she voraciously gobbled down duckweed as she swam, famished from sitting on the nest 20 to 23 hours a day during the previous four weeks (I learned all this later from online research). The hatchlings stuck close, seemingly stunned to find themselves in water when just a day earlier they’d all been encased in eggshells.

The next day the babies began to enjoy their newfound freedom and swimming skills, venturing away from the hen a few yards. Some even flapped their stubby

“wings.” Mom continued to feed, but after catching sight of me hiding behind a tree, she rapidly swam into the cattails, her brood chirping in alarm as they followed.

Then I noticed: There were only eight ducklings.

Feral cats roam this area. I never spot them during daylight, but in winter I see their tracks, disappearing through holes in the chain-link fence surrounding the property. Also lurking are ravens, crows, and Cooper’s hawks—any of which can kill a tiny duckling.

So it went for the next few weeks. Seven, then six, then five. I worried about the disappearing duck family, especially the harried hen. She was eternally vigilant, swimming about the pond to corral this or that wayward duckling and bring it closer to the group. She never seemed able to relax.

Life is tough for wildlife, especially the moms, who not only have to survive themselves but also protect their vulnerable prog-

eny. A doe, flush with hormones, will chase off a dog, a coyote, or even a wolf to protect her hidden fawn. Female killdeer will fake a broken wing to lure a fox or other predator toward themselves and away from their eggs or chicks. Wildlife biologists tell me it’s common for a mother of any species to risk her own life to protect her young.

I suspect that more than a few human moms reading this are nodding in recognition.

Many years ago, I was having breakfast with my own mom after returning from six months of bumming around southern Africa. I asked her how she could bear to let me go hitchhiking so often, starting back when I was in college. I’d thumbed across the United States, through the United Kingdom and Europe, and most recently from Zimbabwe to Botswana to South Africa.

“Honey, all I can do is hope I raised you to have some common sense, and then cross my fingers that you return home safely,” she replied. “You’re going to go anyway, so I’d rather have it be with my support than without it.”

My wife and I don’t have kids, but I’ve always thought the scariest thing about being a parent must be “letting go”—seeing your child venture into the world, either walking to school on their first day of kindergarten or heading out to explore the Kalahari Desert.

I thought about that while watching the hen mallard and her young. The world can be a dangerous place, far more so for a duckling than a human. But I guess at some point even a mother mallard has to let her little ones go off on their own, hoping she taught them enough skills to survive.

As for the brood I watched that summer, the remaining five ducklings ended up surviving. One late August morning I found that the entire family had all flown off. Whew.

It’s doubtful the hen is still alive. Ducks usually only live a few years at most. She could have been killed by a fox, a hawk, or even a waterfowl hunter like me. But if she is still out there, I’d like to wish her—and all the other moms out there, including my own—a happy Mother’s Day. 🦆

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