

A Duck Tail

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On a warm Wednesday in July I received a box containing a badly injured duckling. After being plucked from the strong jaws of a snapping turtle off the shore of Lac Labelle in Oconomowoc by warm hearted individuals, no one was sure what to do with the little injured bird. Luckily for this duck, Walter, one of the employees at Spinnakers, a nearby restaurant, knew just what to do. After all, he is a nephew of the Center's own Susan Verden! Within minutes the duck was brought to the Center for evaluation. And there he was, sitting awkwardly, in shock and a lot of pain. At that moment, I would have never guessed the outcome of his stay at the Center.

The initial exam revealed an extensive injury. His leg hung behind him and he had lost a lot of blood. There was evident feather and tissue damage, and the large beak bite of the turtle had gone deep into the duck's thigh muscle. The good news was that no bone appeared broken, but the threat of possible nerve damage still existed. After treating his wounds and bandaging the leg, the volunteers and I began setting up his cage for the night. As we worked, this duck's determination surprised us all as he began quacking quizzically and preening his feathers. He looked around the room and continued to pick at the bandage with his beak, like nothing had happened. Demonstrating willingness to fight as hard as he could to get back into the wild, we were more than happy to oblige. As days passed, his wounds began to heal and feathers grew back. With the help of a customized bandage on his leg, he soon regained the use and feeling in his foot and began walking again.

Meanwhile in the waterfowl enclosure, another duckling struggled to overcome a different obstacle. A pre-release mallard had injured his leg earlier in the summer and was removed from his group to allow the injury to heal properly. Upon his reintroduction to the rest of the ducks, we discovered in dismay that he was no longer accepted. The others plucked his feathers and chased him away from food dishes and out of the waterhole. Exiled from the group, and missing a few feathers, he found himself once again in the ICU. We tried to figure out a solution for this ostracized duckling. Days passed and both ducklings were healing nicely, but they were lacking the companionship ducks often enjoy and rely upon in the wild.

Would these battered birds find comfort in one another? After all they had been through; they had a lot in common!

It was worth a shot. The ducks were introduced and a cage was set up for them to share. Immediately they began softly "talking" to one another through a series of muffled noises and feather preening. Soon, we found them sitting side by side, sharing the warmth of the heat lamp. Over the next few days the two became inseparable, spending all day and night beside one another. The ducks spent their bathtub water-exercise time happily splashing about and shaking their tails. Their bond was so strong each would panic and vocalize their displeasure when the other was out of sight for weighing and wound care. Often the "snapper duck" would fiercely defend the "outcast duck," pecking away if anyone came too close. As long as they were together, they were content. We had hoped they would bond, but had no idea how strong the bond would become.

When all wounds were healed and the weather was right, it was time to release the ducks back into the wild where they belonged. The pair was released, together of course, at a very happy new home in a local pond, and hopefully they still swim side by side.



The duck pair enjoying their water-exercise time.