

A Tribute To Harold The Duck — *What Lesson Can We Learn From His Death?*

On Tuesday, January 19th, a very concerned gentleman arrived at Happy Trails with a pathetic-looking white duck in a blue plastic tote. He had called an inquired if we would be able to take in an injured domestic duck. We decided we had room, and prepared for the arrival of our new feathered friend.

The duck was not in great shape. However, Tom, the duck's rescuer, said that the duck had improved a great deal from when he first picked the nearly-frozen animal up out of the snow. The duck was unable to even lift his head at first. Now, I looked down into the blue tote at a duck who was sitting straight up and rather curious about his surroundings.

How did a domestic duck come to live near this big public pond of water? The only answer is that the duck had to have been placed there.

Let me explain that big, fat, white domestic ducks don't fly. They can't. They cannot choose on their own to fly to a big body of water. They walk and they waddle from place to place, and the Pekin breed is often the type of duck that is usually raised for its meat. They are not known for being fragile or graceful, and there is simply no way that this duck could have arrived at an open pond without a person having put it there.

Now, why is it a bad thing for someone to dump a duck on an open pond? It's a duck, right? They like water and they like to swim! Well, that's only part of the equation. Yes, domestic ducks do like water and they do like to swim. **But** (and there are



quite a few “buts”), let's think the situation entirely through. The duck is dumped on the pond, usually in the late spring after it was purchased as an Easter pet. The fun and the novelty has worn off. The duck is growing and getting bigger. The cardboard box you kept it in isn't big enough any more. Keeping it in your bathtub is no longer funny, and it's starting to smell up the house. You don't know any farmers — you live in the city! You come up with what you think is the ideal situation for the duck — you'll take it to a nearby pond or lake and let it go! The duck will be happy, but most importantly, you'll be rid of the duck and have felt good doing it!

Let's investigate further. The duck manages to survive the summer, because a lot of people walk near the pond. Some throw bread and crackers to the ducks and birds in the area. Wild mallards fly in and you believe the duck will have friends. The duck doesn't need a shelter since the weather is so warm. If it needs to get away from anybody or anything, all it

has to do is swim out into the middle of the pond or lake. Easy.

But fast forward to fall. Less and less people are coming out to walk by the pond. The leaves are falling and the air is getting very cold. Bugs are disappearing and the green grass is being replaced with mud and dead weeds. The food source for the duck is beginning to dry up, and he can't fly away.



Winter is coming on, and the snow begins to fall. It's hard enough trying to find food on the ground, let alone having to dig under the snow for even a small morsel. Any wild feathered friends have flown away for the season, or decided to head off to another area. The duck is left there by himself, with no food available.

It gets worse. The pond begins to freeze over, and there is no water to swim in, or to drink for that matter. Now, without food *or* water, the duck faces yet another challenge — how to get away from predators and how to stay warm. The temperature dips down to 8 degrees. The wind chill is 10 below. There are no buildings close by, nothing remotely warm. The duck tries to nest underneath some brush

that no longer has any leaves or warmth, but it's the only thing he can find. However, tucking his feet up under his wings to keep warm is impossible because along comes a stray dog. It tries to catch the duck, as the duck tries to run across the thick, deep snow, flapping his wings for added speed, unable to get off the ground. Though the duck was able to evade the dog this time, he is exhausted. His feet are even colder, and he can finally tuck them up under his wings. Still, there is no food or water for nourishment.

What next? Trying to rest is again interrupted by a visit from a local wildlife predator, a hungry coyote. The pond is frozen over — there is nowhere to swim to safety. He is too tired to run or flap his wings any more, though fear drives him away from his predator. The coyote chases him with leaps and bounds until another small animal catches his attention, and he bounds away in another direction. The temperature continues to drop and the wind chill continues to pierce through the down under his feathers and he begins to shake. The webbs of his feet are very thin membranes and are beginning to freeze. As frostbite sets in, it is excruciatingly painful, and it makes walking back to his nest under the brush very difficult.

The snow continues to fall, and he has to stop many times to try to tuck his feet up under his wings.

This scenario continues to play out repeatedly for several days.

The ducks become weak and lethargic, and his body starts to shut down.

Most ducks that are dumped on ponds are eventually killed by predators or freeze to death.

Who responsible for this tragedy? Is it the people who decide to purchase these small lives without giving a second thought as to what they would do with them when they grow up? Or is it the busi-

nesses that sell the small animals because they can make a quick buck a few weeks before a major holiday?

Don't be misled — the majority of the people who buy baby ducks and chicks at Easter aren't people who live in the country and can provide the right environment for these animals. The majority of these chicks and ducklings go to people who live in the cities — people who have no business buying an innocent life and who have no concept what accepting responsibility for another living being means. Dumping the growing animal on a local pond or lake is convenient, quick, *and next year, we'll get another one!*

So, back to Harold. Harold rallied with us here at Happy Trails for several days, but then, his poor, weak little body couldn't continue to fight. He began to not eat,



and finally, to not drink. The internal damage had been done, and his system began to shut down. On Friday night, we took him from under his heat lamp in the Feathered Friends barn and brought him onto the back porch where it was warm. We made him as comfortable as possible in a thick bed of straw, and offered him water, even dipping his beak into the water dish for him. He simply wouldn't drink.

During my last check on him in the middle of the night, about 3am, Harold had crossed the Rainbow

Bridge. It was a sad realization, for he was a very sweet duck who had suffered a great deal. His webbed feet were not soft and pliable like a normal duck's feet, but were hard and stiff like crumpled-up cardboard. They had frozen into crippled appendages. It was impossible for him to walk, and painful for him to move. Is it enough to hang onto the fact that a person who cared enough about this lone duck had brought him in out of the cold and brought him to a sanctuary? Or that we tried to make him comfortable and show him warmth and offer him food and water? *I don't think so.* I personally think we need to go that one step further to help all the creatures who are in the same situation as Harold. He is not alone in his plight of being abandoned.

Together, let's see if we can stop this craziness, for the sake of Harold. Don't let Harold's death have been in vain.

Please help us spread the word that baby chicks and ducklings belong in a safe environment, enjoying a life of sitting on green grasses and having food and fresh water provided to them all year long. They don't belong in a cardboard box in someone's bathroom until they graduate to the garage where the family dog is greatly interested in them. If the baby duck or chick even survives it's first weeks with an uneducated family, it then ends up dumped somewhere where it cannot fend for itself all year round.

Harold the duck is simply one of many abandoned ducks that arrive at Happy Trails throughout the year. He is one of the unlucky ones who could not survive the winter. There are many more Harold's out there — many who have no-one to tell their story, or to bring them in from the cold.

Please help encourage everyone you know, especially those folks who live in the city and shouldn't be bringing home ducks and chickens anyway, to do the right thing and think about the life of the animal and the responsibility that comes with it. Share this article with everyone you know. Do this to help end the suffering of the animals.

Do it for Harold.