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14,000 ducks fill the bill for charity

Plastic swimmers speed along South Platte

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The South Platte River turned to duck soup yesterday, as

14,000 brightly colored plastic birds raced through the water for charity.

The current was swift and the competition was fierce but the ducks never showed the strain: Their gaily painted smiles stayed in place as they bobbed and weaved, oblivious to the fact that they were often floating backward, down the mile-long course to Confluence Park.

The first Original Denver Duck Race was led by "Mamma Duck," a papier mache creation the size of a small raft. But the real workhorses might have come from a child's Easter basket. They fit comfortably in a person's hand and had to be fitted with small weights in their bellies so they wouldn't flip upside down.

The ducks endured indignities throughout the day. At the beginning of the race, they were piled helter skelter in a big truck, then dumped off the West 13th Avenue bridge and into the river.

What looked like a giant yellow puddle on the water dispersed as the speediest ducks made their way down the middle of the river and the laggards lingered in calmer waters at river's edge.

But there was no escape. If they lollygagged too long, the ducks were prodded back toward midstream by human volunteers carrying big sticks. And if that didn't work, the humans just picked the ducks up and hurled them back into the water.

None of the ducks was talking after the contest, but the several hundred humans who gathered to watch them were somewhat bemused by the spectacle.

"Weird," said Eddie Garcia, 11, of Englewood, who had planned an afternoon of crawdad fishing before he learned of the race.

He and his stepbrother quickly abandoned that plan. "We wouldn't catch nothing anyway," he said.

Bob Klingler was playing with his nieces and nephews outside the Denver Children's Museum when the duck flotilla passed by. "I knew it was a good year for ducklings, but gee," Klingler said.

It was a pretty good day for the sponsoring Denver Active 20/30 Club, a Denver men's group that organized the race. Club members recruited sponsors, most of whom donated \$5 each to back their favorite ducks. The club raised \$50,000 for several area charities, including the Colorado Christian Home for children. The humans who sponsored the 30 swiftest ducks won prizes. The day's grand prize, a new Toyota 4-Runner, went to Calley Vickers.

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