



Wood Ducks

Wood Ducks in the Red River Valley

Wood ducks nest regularly in the corridor of the Red River. Unlike most other ducks, they build nests in hollow trees, and they are one of the most beautiful and colorful birds in North America.

Description and Identification

Male: Bright red eyes and orange-red bill
Iridescent blue, green and purple highlights
Trimmed with white stripes, scallops

Female: Basic brown markings, marked only by spotted underparts and white eye masks.

Conservation Efforts

Almost totally a North American species, the wood duck was one of the first to benefit from modern conservation methods. As early American settlers moved westward, clearing the forests and draining the ponds and swamps where these birds lived, wood ducks steadily declined in numbers.

Early in this century some people believed the wood duck was in danger of becoming extinct, and steps were taken to halt the decline. Restrictive hunting regulations and the wood duck nest boxes have helped wood ducks make a population recovery. Placed near suitable waters, the nest boxes help to compensate for the lack of old trees with natural holes.

Nesting Box Plans

Plans for construction of wood duck nesting boxes are available from River Keepers at 325 7th St S., Fargo, ND 58103, or at local book and wild bird stores.

Habitat

Wood Ducks inhabit small ponds, lakes, and rivers in densely wooded country. They nest in trees, roost in trees and even perch on waterlogged stumps. They fly through and among the trees with agility, like true woodland birds, and are seldom found far from shady areas and damp banks overhung by waterside trees.

At night they gather on open water where they are safe from predators.

In this area, wood ducks typically return from wintering grounds in the southeastern United States around March. They find mates at the wintering grounds, and the males follow females back to their home ground.

Habits

The nest is situated in a tree hole, or in a nest box, usually at a considerable height and close to water. The female selects a nest hole with an entrance about four inches across and a cavity at least 23.5 inches deep and about 12 inches across. These dimensions make it safe from predators, especially raccoons. The male helps her search for a suitable nest hole, and stands guard outside while his mate lays eggs.

One white egg a day is laid, early each morning for 9-14 days. Wood ducks average 12-14 eggs, which hatch in about 30 days. Once the clutch is complete the male remains at the feeding grounds while the female performs the incubation. The eggs are covered with down when she leaves the nest each morning and evening as she takes about an hour to feed, usually alongside her mate. It takes about 30 hours for the brood to hatch.

The next day the young ducklings throw themselves out of the nest and follow their mother to water. The ducklings are cared for by the female, but they may drift away from the brood as early as ten days after hatching.

For More Information:

- Henderson, Carrol L., Minnesota DNR. Wild About Birds, The DNR Bird Feeding Guide. Minnesota's Bookstore, Dept of Administration Print Communications Div. St. Paul. 1995.
- Gooders, John, & Trevor Boyer. Ducks of North America and the Northern Hemisphere. New York: Facts on File. 1986.
- River Keepers, 325 7th St. S., Fargo, ND 58103-1846, 701-235-2895, www.riverkeepers.org