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Photo: Dave Menke, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Wood Duck

Aix sponsa

by Z. Turnbull and S. Sells

The wood duck is so beautiful that its scientific name, *Aix sponsa*, means “water bird in bridal dress.” Being so beautiful (and tasty!), by the 1880s, the once-abundant wood duck was disappearing quickly due to hunting and habitat loss.

In the 1910s, wildlife managers acted quickly to help save wood ducks. Laws were passed to protect migratory birds, hunting was controlled, and habitat was protected. Wood duck nest boxes were created in the 1930s. Slowly, wood duck



Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Bird watchers and other people who spend time outdoors love wood ducks' beauty.

populations have increased, and today populations are at healthy levels.

Wood ducks are very popular for hunting. In fact, there are more wood ducks harvested each year in the United States than any other game bird except mallards. But not just hunters appreciate wood ducks. Bird watchers and other people who spend time outdoors love their beauty.

Common predators of wood ducks are raccoons, gray and red foxes, great horned owls, some snakes, and minks. In a group of 10 newly hatched wood ducks, usually only one or two survive past their first 2 weeks. Predation is a main cause of such low survival rates.

Dump nests occur when one or more females follow another to her nest and add their own eggs to the first female's eggs. When this occurs, there may be 50 or more eggs. They usually are abandoned, leading to a decline in successful hatchings in the area. Dump nests are more likely to occur if there is high predation, a lack of suitable nesting sites, or if artificial nesting sites are too close together.

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Species description

Both males and females are medium-size ducks. During the non-breeding season, males are grayish and have a white throat, dull reddish bill, and iridescent blue wings.

During the breeding season, nearly every feather on a male wood duck is radiant. His head is mostly green, but also contains red, white, yellow, and black. His bill is red, white, and black. His chest is bright brown and splotched with white markings, and his sides are a coppery gold color. His back and parts of his wings range from black to iridescent purple-blue.

Female wood ducks are much less colorful than males. Their heads have a purple-bronze sheen over gray, a dark bill, and a white throat and chin. Their bodies are olive-gray on top with a gray-brown, tan-streaked breast, a white belly, brown sides, and a tail that is dark on top and white underneath. Look for a teardrop-shape white area around the female's eyes.

Vocalizations, or calls, of the wood duck are unique. Males whistle in a series of up and down notes while swimming. When females are alarmed, they make a shrill squeaking sound that sounds

like a very loud "whoeeek."

Wood ducks use courtship displays to find mates. Males display their

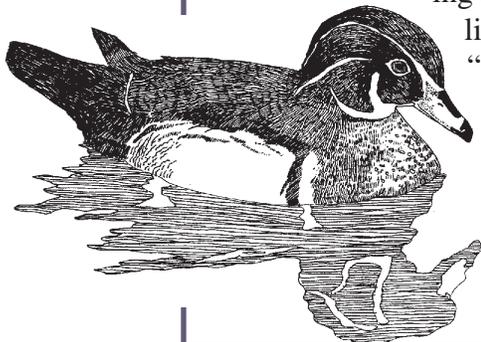
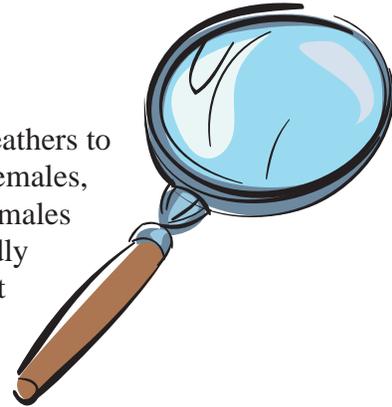
bright feathers to attract females, while females call loudly to attract males.

Following courtship, wood ducks begin breeding between February and April, depending on how far north they live. Males mate with only one female during the breeding season. Wood ducks often return year after year to the same nesting site if the last brood was successful.

Females lay 10 to 15 creamy white, 2-inch-long eggs in a nest cavity. After incubating for approximately 30 days, the young hatch.

The mother cares for the ducklings on her own. When she calls them out of the nest, they jump toward the opening of the nest with their sharp claws. Once they reach the opening, they flutter to the ground. The mother leads them to water, where they stay with her for about 8 to 10 weeks until they are able to fly.

Wood ducks are omnivores, which means they eat plants and animals. They eat fruits, seeds, tubers, leaves, and needles from trees and plants. They also eat spiders, ants, beetles, flies, bony fishes, and many kinds of insects, but gradually switch to eating mostly plants as they get older.





Where they live and why

Wood ducks are found throughout much of the United States and parts of Canada and Mexico. Most wood ducks breed in the northern parts of their range and winter in Mexico, but many live year-round along the west coast from Washington to California, in the southern U.S., or in Cuba. They are not found in some areas of the Southwest and Midwest.

Wood ducks live in a variety of habitats associated with water. They are found in wooded areas along lakes, rivers, creeks, and wetlands. They also use beaver ponds



Photo: Pat Welch

Wood ducks live in a variety of habitats associated with water.

and farm ponds. They nest in cavities (holes) in trees, and they need large trees or nest boxes within a half mile of water.

Creating habitat



Creating a large pond or restoring wetlands is the best thing you can do to create wood duck habitat. See *Create a Garden Pond for Wildlife*, listed under “Learn More!” Many state and federal agencies can assist you with wetland restoration.

Leave older trees and snags (standing dead trees) to provide nesting sites for wood ducks. Hardwoods such as oak, ash, and sycamores are great because they grow near water and provide many cavities. You might plant these trees to provide food and eventual nesting sites.

You also can provide artificial nest boxes for wood ducks. They are simple to make and sometimes are available at little or no cost from local wildlife agencies. Naturally finished boxes of rough-cut lumber are best. The young ducklings have sharp claws for climbing out of the nest box, but you should use a chisel to roughen the surface for them to grip.

Fill the box with about 3 inches of saw chips. Install a predator guard to keep out hungry animals.

Place boxes within 30 to 150 feet of a shoreline away from roads or large obstacles since ducklings must move to the water after hatching. Place boxes on metal poles 8 to 30 feet above ground. If placed over water, boxes should be at least 4 feet above the highest water mark.

Do not place boxes closer than 600 feet apart and hide them from one another. Monitor boxes to make sure exotic species have not moved in. Replace the nesting material each year before wood ducks arrive to breed.

You also can attract wood ducks by planting things they like to eat such as seed-producing trees (oak, maple, and hickory). Plant or preserve species such as grapes, water lily, pondweed, duckweed, button brush, and wild rice. Do not use pesticides and be careful not to attract wildlife to areas where there are a lot of pets.

Photo: Dave Menke, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Wood ducks have some of the largest eyes of any duck.

Fun facts

-  Wood ducks have some of the largest eyes of any duck.
-  Ducklings can jump from nests as high as 290 feet without injury.
-  The wood ducks' shrill sound gave rise to the nickname "squeaker."
-  Wood ducks are one of the only ducks in North America that commonly perch in trees.

Learn more!

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