



Wood Duck

Wood ducks (*Aix sponsa*) were historically one of the most abundant waterfowl in North America, but due to habitat destruction and unregulated hunting in the late 1800's they were pushed to the brink of extinction. Today their numbers have risen again thanks to protection from the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, as well as the introduction of nesting boxes. These boxes were first introduced in 1937 by the U.S. Biological Survey (now called the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). In the initial trial, fifty percent of the boxes were used; today it is estimated that 100,000 – 150,000 wood ducks are produced from nesting boxes each year. The success of wood ducks in Rhode Island is a result of restoring natural nesting habitats, in addition to providing supplemental nesting locations through the wood duck box program. The future of wood ducks depends on the support of individuals who are willing to provide a secure home for these beautiful birds and gain the satisfaction of contributing to their survival.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Wood ducks can be found throughout much of North America excluding the arid southwest. Migrating individuals overwinter in California, the southeastern and Gulf states, and Cuba. Wood ducks prefer slow-moving or shallow waters with plentiful aquatic and emergent vegetation. Forested swamps, marshes and areas with floating woody debris are ideal for nesting and loafing wood ducks.

Behavior: Wood ducks are very secretive birds, making them difficult to observe, except in the springtime when they are searching for suitable nesting sites. Aside from a male defending his mate from other drakes, wood ducks are not usually territorial. During

late summer and early fall, they will gather in flocks of 50 to 100 individuals. Both the drakes and hens have large red eyes which enable them to navigate through trees with dexterity. Wood ducks not only have the largest eyes of any waterfowl but also the greatest sense of smell, and they are one of the most agile waterfowl when traveling on land. Wood ducks have many nest predators including mink, rat snakes, and raccoons. Hawks, snapping turtles and otters are common predators of adults and chicks.

Food Habits: Wood ducks are “dabblers.” To reach aquatic vegetation and invertebrates, they dip their heads down in to the water, lifting their rear ends skyward. Chick's diets consist of insects, aquatic invertebrates, small fish and aquatic plants such as algae and duckweed. The adult's diet is similar to the chick's but also includes nuts, seeds, berries and tubers.

IDENTIFICATION

Wood ducks are small ducks with short wings and a broad tail. The head appears “boxy” with a thin neck. Males (drakes) are iridescent blue, green and purple with a slick head crest and white chin strap. Females (hens) are much less colorful. Their feathers are white, brown and grey with a white circle around the eye.

Length: 18.5 - 21 in

Wingspan: 24 - 28 in

Weight: 1- 2 lbs

Lifespan: 1 -3 years

Reproduction: Before their arrival to Rhode Island between late March and April, male wood ducks perform a courtship ritual in their southern wintering grounds. This courtship entails the drake showing off his vivid colors and encircling the female. He then follows the hen, sometimes for days, on a search flight for a suitable nesting site on the breeding grounds. The hen often returns to the same location from which she was hatched to rear her own chicks. Once the perfect tree hollow or nest box is found, the female lines the nest with down (soft feathers) and lays between 8 and 15 eggs. She incubates the eggs until they hatch, simultaneously, about a month later. One or two days after hatching, the chicks leap from the nest and begin learning to forage for food.

Disease: As with other waterfowl, wood ducks can carry [Avian Influenza](#) and other diseases. Feeding waterfowl increases the risk for disease transfer. **Never feed wildlife, it is harmful to both humans and wildlife.**

REGULATORY STATUS

Wood ducks are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. “The Migratory Bird Treaty Act makes it illegal to take, possess, import, export, transport, sell, purchase, barter, or offer for sale, purchase, or barter, any migratory bird, or the parts, nests, or eggs of such a bird except under the terms of a valid Federal permit.”

The law requires that each waterfowl hunter sixteen (16) years of age and over must carry on his or her person a valid Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (“Federal Duck Stamp”) signed in ink across the face. Waterfowl hunters must also possess a RI State Waterfowl Stamp, signed in ink across the face, or a State Waterfowl Stamp Certification obtained through the web-based online licensing system www.ri.gov/dem/huntfish.

Those wishing to obtain a RI waterfowl stamp may do so at the Division of Fish and Wildlife, Great Swamp Field Headquarters located at 277 Great Neck Rd, West Kingston, RI 02892. For further regulations see *RIGL 20-14*.

DID YOU KNOW...

- Wood ducks can fly up to 30 mph.
- Female wood ducks are called hens and males are called drakes.
- Hens will “dump” their eggs in another hen’s nest if an area becomes over-crowded.
- Some wood ducks will nest over land, up to a half-mile from water.
- Chicks leap up to 50 ft out of their nest cavity just one day after hatching.
- Hens make a high pitched “oo-eek” call, while males make a drawn out “jweep sound.
- The oldest recorded wood duck was at least 22 years old.



Wood duck nest box along the Wood River, Mary Gannon

Wood ducks provide food and sport for hunters, and hunting permit sales generate funds for state wildlife conservation and management. In addition, revenue from hunting license fees and federal excise taxes on sporting arms and ammunition is distributed back to Rhode Island in the form of grants from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program. These grants are used for land acquisition, facility maintenance, wildlife management, and all of the programs established for management and hunting in the state.