

Understanding and Helping the Wood Duck with Nesting Boxes

The wood duck is considered by many to be the most beautiful of all the American waterfowl. A number of years ago for various reasons, their population dropped to very low levels. But through the efforts of federal and state agencies, dedicated sportsmen, and conservation organizations they have made a dramatic recovery. However, there are still some problems for wood ducks. The most significant are the continued loss of wetland habitats and the wooded areas around them plus the lack of suitable nesting sites. Unlike most ducks they prefer to nest in a hole in a tree. The concern is there just aren't enough trees around with cavities. Biologists have determined that wood ducks will nest in artificial structures and often will prefer them and return to them in subsequent years. Female wood ducks tend to seek nesting sites close to where they were hatched thus it may take some time to seek out locations far from established populations. Once a nest site has been selected in the spring the hen will start laying an egg a day. A wood duck clutch usually consists of 9 to 15 eggs. Incubation begins after the last egg is laid. The eggs hatch in about 30 days. After 24 hours the hen will fly out and call the ducklings from the nest. In 5 weeks they are quite independent from the hen. Their diet consists largely of insects, aquatic invertebrates, small fish and other high protein animal matter. After 6 weeks they switch to vegetative items primarily aquatic plants and algae. Wood ducks are a type of dabbling ducks that forage on the surface of water and the forest floors for food as opposed to diving to the bottom to feed. Young wood ducks mature in a year and begin the courtship ritual and breeding cycle once again.

Locating a duck box

Though wood ducks may nest a distance from water, the ideal location for a nest box is in or at the edge of a permanent body of water near areas that provide adequate cover and food source for brood raising. Consider rural marshes, smaller lakes, beaver ponds and flows, and slow moving streams with backwater pools. Optimum brood water habitat is an interspersed area of open water (25% to 50% of area), flooded shrubs (30% to 50%), herbaceous emerging plants (40% to 60%) and flooded trees (up to 10% of the area). The location should hold water through August in a normal summer. Farm ponds usually do not make good sites for duck boxes because they often have steep sides and deep edges with little emergent vegetation for the ducklings to hide from aquatic or aerial predators. Boxes should be placed one per acre of suitable area. They should be placed in at least 3 to 4 feet deep water. Nest boxes should be placed so there is at least a 40 foot flight line in front of the box that is free from any obstacles. If the box is placed near the shoreline, be sure to aim the opening toward the open water.

Erecting a Nest Box

Wooden pressure treated 10' to 12' long 4" x 4" post or 2" diameter metal pole can be used to mount the nest box. The bottom of the box should be at least 3' to 4'

above the surface of the water. Consider any potential future flooding conditions. Erecting off shore boxes can often be more easily done in the winter by driving the support through a hole in the ice into the mud below. If mounting on a live or dead tree, consider providing an anti climb guard to prevent predators from reaching the box.

Wood ducks do not collect nesting material. Once the box is mounted it should be lined with 4" to 6" of wood shavings. Do not use sawdust, leaves, or grass. The nest must be cleaned out each winter. This will ensure a dry sanitary base to attract a hen in the New Year. Maintaining the box is often easier from a solid ice surface.

Note: Occasionally a wood duck box may be used by merganser ducks, owls, woodpeckers, starlings, kestrels, wasps and golden eye.

You can help insure the future of the wood duck in our area by installing nesting boxes in suitable locations.