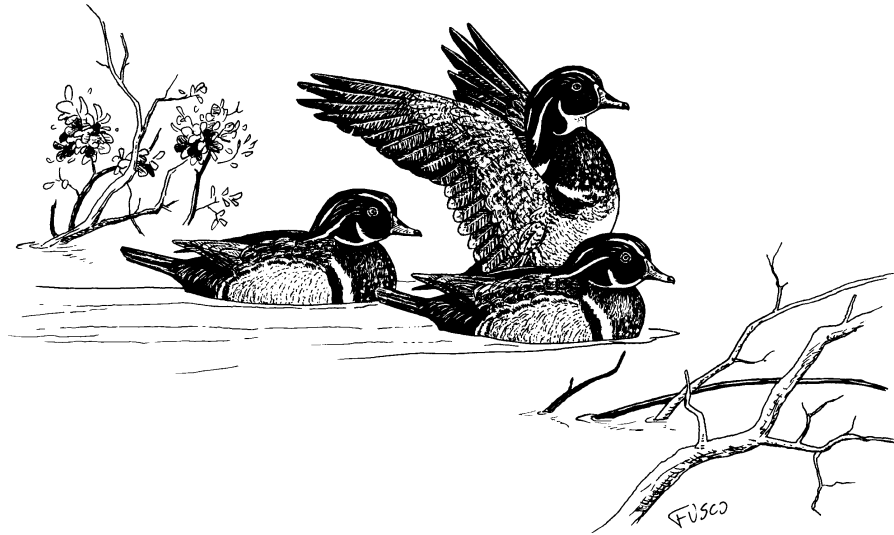


WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

INFORMATIONAL SERIES

WOOD DUCK

Aix sponsa



Habitat: Freshwater wooded swamps, marshes, ponds, and streams that are usually surrounded by or adjacent to upland forest. The most important wetland habitats for both adult and young are shallowly flooded areas with dense cover. Forested swamps (red maple, dead timber), shrub swamps (spicebush, blueberry, button-bush) and emergent marshes (cattail, rushes, bur-reed) are preferred habitats.

Weight: 1.5 pounds

Length: 15 to 21 inches

Food: Plants (watermeal, duckweed, wild rice, pondweeds, smartweeds), seeds (especially watershield), aquatic insects, and other invertebrates (snails, clams). Adults feed on acorns during the fall and winter, searching for them in flooded swamps, bottomlands, and oak forests.

Identification: The wood duck is a medium-sized dabbling duck. The male is slightly larger than the female. Both sexes have a noticeable crest that extends outward from the back of the head. The male's plumage of green, purple, bronze, and white and its bright red eyes makes it one of the most impressive of Connecticut's waterfowl. The female is rather drab in comparison, mostly gray and light brown, with a white teardrop-shaped eye ring. In flight, the wood duck is identified by its rapid wingbeat, light underbelly, and long, rectangular tail. Flight is swift and direct and usually not much higher than the treetops. The wood duck is highly vocal and has a number of calls. The male's call is a drawn out "ji...ihb" or "jeeb" while the female's flight call is a squealing "oo-eek, oo-eek."

Range: From Nova Scotia and Minnesota south to Florida and Texas. In the west, from British Columbia to Washington and south through California. Also found in Cuba. Wood ducks winter in California, the southeastern and Gulf states, and Cuba.

Reproduction: Wood ducks are present in Connecticut from March through November. They return from their wintering grounds in mid-March. Wood ducks nest in tree cavities but cannot excavate their own nest hole. The hen will use cavities wherever they can be found but will usually select ones located in close proximity to water. A scarcity of natural cavities may limit a wood duck population. Nest boxes placed in suitable habitat are readily accepted by wood ducks.

Nesting may begin as early as March 20, although most nests are started in April. The average clutch size is 12 (range, 10-14) and incubation lasts 30 days. Sometimes more than one female will lay eggs in the same nest. Broods hatch as early as the first week in May and as late as the fourth week in July.

Nest success in tree cavities is about 50 percent, but it can be as high as 80 to 90 percent in nest boxes placed on posts over water in suitable habitat. Raccoons may be a significant predator on tree cavity nests, while

flooding may cause nest failure in nest boxes. Wood ducks are highly productive. If the first nest fails, the female will attempt up to two re-nests to bring off a brood.

Twenty-four to 36 hours after hatching, the young are called from the nest by the female and are led to suitable brood-rearing habitat. Dense aquatic or shoreline cover that provides food and shelter from predators is the best brood-rearing habitat. The young are capable of flight 56 to 60 days after hatching.

History in Connecticut: In the early 1900s, the wood duck was considered in danger of extinction in North America due to market shooting, habitat loss, and hunting seasons that extended into the breeding season. With the implementation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918 between the United States and Canada, market shooting was outlawed and judicious season lengths and bag limits were instituted. These changes, together with the construction and placement of nest boxes during the last five decades, have resulted in a dramatic comeback of wood duck populations.

Interesting Facts: Local resident wood ducks congregate in flock sizes of 10 to 50 and sometimes up to 200 in wooded swamps during late summer and early fall. Migrant wood ducks that originate from Ontario, the Maritimes, New York, and other New England states begin to arrive in Connecticut in mid-September, with

peak arrival in October. Both resident and migrant wood ducks migrate rapidly out of the state during November. Most are gone by mid-November, although some linger into December during mild weather. Connecticut's breeding population of wood ducks winters south of Maryland along the Atlantic Coastal Plain, with North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia being the most important areas.

Conservation and Management: The recovery of the wood duck is an outstanding example of successful wildlife management. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has maintained nearly 1,000 nest boxes annually on state and private land since 1953. This program has been very successful. Box use averages 50 percent and nest success 80 to 90 percent. Wood duck nest box plans are available from the Wildlife Division.

Wood ducks require high quality wetland habitat with low human disturbance. Heavy human development pressures in Connecticut have a negative impact on wetland habitat and the wood duck population. Some very valuable wetland habitat is currently owned and managed by the DEP and private conservation organizations. However, wide-scale habitat protection can only be accomplished with strong enforcement of freshwater wetland regulations, incentives for open space preservation, and an environmentally aware public.



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