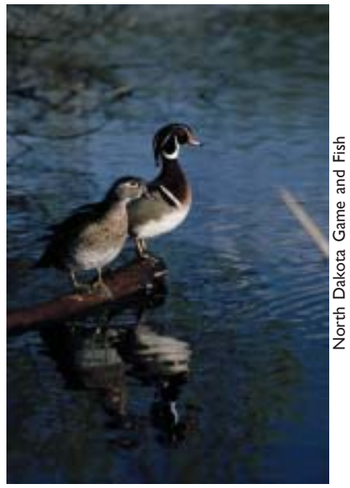
Wood Ducks



North Dakota Game and Fish

Wood duck pair.

Aix Sponsa

The wood duck is native to North America. The male drake can be identified by the white-striped crested head, white throat, red and white bill, and dark chest and body. The female has a white eye-ring, white throat and thin crest. It is less colorful than the drake. Wood ducks are about half the size of a mallard duck and almost identical in size to the hooded merganser. The eye of the wood duck is the largest of any waterfowl. This is advantageous for flying in low light levels and allows woodies to perceive details that would not register with smaller eyes. Also, the wood duck has a longer tail then most of the dabbling ducks which enables it to effectively fly through tree mazes located throughout its breeding habitat.

The wood duck is a chatty bird, especially as it feeds in the woods, when it squeals, clucks and squeaks. Woodies make long series of whistles—hoo-hett, hoo-w-ett, a chich-a-waugh, a cheep-cheep, and a mellow peet-peet. The call of a mother to the young is a soft and prolonged pe-ee, pe-ee. The chicks respond with a mellow pee, pee, pee.

Habitat

Wood ducks have evolved to use nearly every typed of freshwater wetland, river, stream, lake, farm pond, beaver pond, marsh, swamp, ditch or other water area that occurs near hardwood timber. Wood ducks nest in cavities or holes made by other birds in dead or dying trees. Wood ducks nest regularly in the Red River Valley. Occasionally they can even be seen in established urban neighborhoods where they have found a large tree with a nesting cavity. Spring canoeists and boaters on the Red will often see the hen and ducklings swimming in the Red. If the hen thinks you are too close she will use the "broken wing" deception in an attempt to lead a predator away from her ducklings.

River Keepers

Birds and animals use big holes in trees for homes and make smaller holes to search for food.

Reproduction

Early in the spring the drake locates several prospective nesting cavities. He then brings the hen to each site. After looking at them all she makes the final decision as to where she will lay her eggs. The male never enters the cavities. Woodies begin laying eggs in late March. The average clutch size (total number of eggs laid per female) is 10 to 15 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. She covers the eggs with down from her chest when she leaves the nest each morning and evening to feed, usually alongside her mate. The ducklings are not fed in their nest so within a day of hatching the hen leads her ducklings to water. The ducklings climb out of the nest and flutter down to the ground, where the mother duck is calling to encourage them. The young are rarely hurt falling down from the tree cavity which can be as high as 20 feet off the ground.

River Keepers

Volunteers maintain one of River Keepers' wood duck nesting boxes located along the Red River.

Cavity Replacement Program

Humans have cut and removed trees throughout the Red River Valley to use for firewood, make room for homes, and prevent the spread of Dutch elm disease. The dilemma is that within North Dakota and Minnesota, over 40 bird species utilize dead and dying trees. To mitigate the removal of dead trees, humans have created nesting boxes or birdhouses. Wood ducks have benefited from the efforts to increase nesting habitat. However, providing nesting structure does not eliminate the need for preserving and managing wildlife habitat. Rather, it enhances present habitat and increases personal opportunities for wildlife observation. River Keepers manages a cavity replacement program to create nesting cavities along the Red River for desirable native species. Located throughout the Living Lab are many artificial cavities, or nesting boxes. A database has been developed that tracks location and utilization rates of the replacement cavities. River Keepers utilizes adult and student volunteers for the installation and maintenance of these structures.

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