

## The Wood Duck



*My tread scares the wood-drake and wood-duck on my distant and  
day-long ramble,  
They rise together, they slowly circle around.*

- Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

Order: Anseriformes

Family: Anatidae

Genus: Aix

Species: Sponsa

Other common names include *woodie*, *summer duck*, *acorn duck*, *swamp duck*, or *squealer*.

The species name, *sponsa*, means ‘betrothed,’ referring to the ‘wedding suit’ plumage of the male.

### Appearance

The male wood duck is known for his complex, vibrant plumage – a mix of iridescent maroon, green, purple, and white. He is the most colorful sort of duck in all of North America.

The female is mostly grey-brown, with white underparts and a blue speculum (that patch on the wing).

For a duck the wood duck is of average size, with a length of 45 cm (15 inches), but with a long wingspan of 77 cm (29 inches). Most wood ducks weigh a little over half a kilo (1.25 lbs.). Both the male and female have rather short necks, but long, square-looking tails.

### Feeding & Grouping

The wood duck is a *dabbler* duck. To *dabble* while on the water is to tip your head under in search for food, while sticking your backside up in the air for all to see. While ducklings feed almost entirely on plant life (water insects, pupa, new midges), mature wood ducks will go after algae, watermeal, and duckweed, in addition to the more familiar dishes of acorns (in season), grains, seeds, mulberries, and wild grapes.

Wood ducks are active during the day, spending most of their time in the water. Despite the male's flamboyant coloring, they tend to be rather secretive, hiding under vegetation until you approach closely.

You will usually find wood ducks in pairs, or possibly in flocks of four to fifteen. If you are lucky enough to happen upon a fall or winter roost site, however, the group could reach into the hundreds.

Courting and pair bonding begins in the fall, from late October. Older males pair up earlier than the young ducks. Wood ducks tend to retain their mates longer than most of their fellow ducks.

### **Breeding & Nesting**

From February to July female wood ducks (hens) will set out in search of a nest. The ideal is to find a hole in a tree, anywhere from 1 to 18 meters of the ground. Rotted out oaks, willows, and sycamores are preferred when available, hopefully close to the water. Old woodpecker holes also sometimes do the job. In these tree cavities the hen will add a layer of her own grey-white down feathers in preparation for her eggs. No outside materials are brought in.

Meanwhile the male is busy defending the surrounding area, an activity known as 'mate guarding.'

The hen lays 10 to 15 creamy white eggs, each about two inches wide, one per day until the batch is complete. Incubation runs from 28 to 37 days. The male offers no help.

Once in a while 'dump' nests are found where 30-50 eggs from different females will all be piled up together. These usually fail, simply because they are too hard to incubate. One guess as to why this happens is what when several nests are close together, the females can have trouble remembering which nest is their own and lay in the wrong one.

24 hours after the ducklings hatch, the mother will call them from the nest. With little peeping calls they make their way to the edge of the tree cavity. Sometimes the cavity can be deep inside a tree, and baby wood ducks have a special sharp tooth on their beak to assist in the climb up and out. At the edge, they pause for a moment, and then dive plummeting to the ground!

Mothers prefer nest trees over water to make the landing a little easier for the ducklings, but even over land they emerge unhurt. If they do land on land, the hen will immediately lead them to water to begin swimming lessons.

### **Flying**

In flight, wood ducks' rather broad wings are swift and agile. This helps them swerve through the branches on their way to the nest. Wood ducks have clawed feet specially adapted for perching, so they can easily fly right up and land on a tree. In flight the head is held above the body, the bill pointed down at an angle.

### **Habitat**

Ideal environments for the wood duck are quiet, undisturbed creeks, swamps, woodlands, rivers, floodplains, or lakes. They can often be found around deciduous woods and beaver ponds.

### **Geography and Migration**

Wood ducks fall into three largely distinct groups in North America. The Atlantic Flyway in the east runs from northern Nova Scotia down to the tip of Florida. The middle group runs from Quebec and Ontario down to southern Texas. Finally, on the west coast wood ducks are found from southern British Columbia, down through Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana, on through the northern two-thirds of California.

The pacific population mostly winters in Mexico, while others may head for Cuba or the Bahamas. In mild winters, some may forgo the travails of travel and just stay put.

On the whole wood ducks are very loyal to their home turf, returning to the same spot year after year, often within a half mile of where they were born!

### **Humans & Wood Ducks**

Heavy hunting and habitat destruction by our species nearly caused the wood duck's extinction in the early 1900s.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act signed by the U.S. and Canada in 1918 finally gave the wood duck some protection. Since then, thanks to rigid hunting restrictions, captive breeding, and habitat management (including artificial nest sites), the wood duck population has rapidly recovered. They now number well over a million.

Threats remain, however, particularly in the form of habitat destruction, as more swamps are drained and forests are logged. Another threat arrived with the introduction of the European starlings, which compete with wood ducks for nesting sites. A third major threat is snapping turtles, which snack on the sky-diving ducklings.

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