

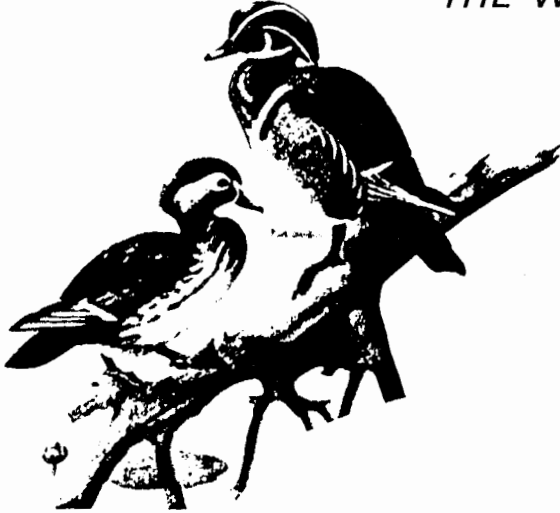
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Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is presently a staff member of the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum of Natural History. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.

THE WOOD DUCK



Of the 38 species of North American ducks, the Wood Duck is without a doubt the most beautiful. When in breeding plumage, the crested drake is adorned with iridescent green, blue and purple, giving him a metallic sheen. The female is also a beautiful bird, grey brown with a light colored breast, but drab in comparison with the drake. The wood duck's scientific name, *Aix sponsa*, is partly related to its beautiful plumage — *sponsa*, which in Latin means beautiful.

Based on its feeding habits, the wood duck is placed in a sub-family of ducks called dabbling or puddle ducks in contrast with the diving ducks. The puddle ducks are built somewhat differently than the diving ducks. The puddle ducks' longer legs are located nearer the center of the body, which better enables them to walk on land. Diving ducks are better adapted for diving and swimming. The wood ducks and other puddle ducks take off from land and water with a quick steep climb while diving ducks with shorter wings and heavier bodies must patter along the surface to gain enough speed for lift off.

Puddle ducks often feed in shallow ponds and are able to tip tail up and head down while they probe the pond floor for insects, tubers and other food. Vegetable matter makes up about 90% of the wood duck's diet. Among their favorite food is duckweed, sedge seeds and tubers, grasses, pondweeds and acorns. Acorns are swallowed whole and are crushed and ground into bits by the bird's gizzard. The young are especially fond of mosquito wigglers and other insects and spiders.

Wood ducks usually nest in hollow trees or limbs from 3 to 60 feet above the ground or water. They often utilize old woodpecker holes or partially rotted trees. From 3 to 15 pale brown to white eggs are laid in the down-lined nest. The male leaves after the eggs are laid, leaving the female with the sole responsibility of rearing the young. The eggs are incubated approximately 28-31 days. Within a day or two after hatching, the young jump from the nest to the ground or water. These one or two-day-old ducklings apparently can plunge from heights up to 60 feet with little or no injury. The ducklings are excellent swimmers and guided by their mother they immediately begin feeding on insects and tender vegetation.

These young wood ducks will not acquire the skill of flying until several weeks after hatching. The adult wood duck is a master of flight. It is able to maneuver around the trees in a dense forest at speeds exceeding 30 miles per hour. They are also able to fly directly into their nesting hole without perching before entry. This is accomplished with no harm to themselves or their delicate eggs.

Wood ducks are secretive and are rarely seen entering or leaving their nesting holes, apparently to avoid alerting a predator to the location of the nest.

Wood ducks that spend the summers in northern Wisconsin and southern Canada migrate to the southern United States and Mexico for the winter.

Distinctive field identification characteristics of the wood duck are its large crested head, short neck, long square tail and brilliant markings. Only a careful, quiet and alert observer can be expected to get a glimpse of our "crown prince" of ducks here in northern Wisconsin.

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