

Wood Ducks in Mississippi



The wood duck, the state duck of Mississippi, is one of three waterfowl species that nest annually in Mississippi. A few decades ago, wood ducks were on the brink of extinction in Mississippi from habitat loss and overharvest. Regulated hunter harvest and habitat management have brought this beautiful waterfowl species back to sustainable levels.

Unlike most other ducks, wood ducks nest and lay eggs in the cavities of hollow trees and artificial boxes especially erected for the species. Along with the mallard, wood ducks are some of the most abundant ducks in Mississippi, and they make up a large percentage of waterfowl harvested in Mississippi each year. They are also excellent table fare.

Description and Identification

The male “woodie” is easily recognized by his white throat and chin strap and his bright green and purple feathers. The female, like most female ducks, is brownish; she has a white throat patch and a prominent, white eye-ring. Male and female wood ducks have well-defined head crests and long, dark, square tails that are marks of identification in flight. Woodies increase from 1 ounce to 1 pound in 6 weeks and generally weigh about 1½ pound when mature.

They are known as “the bird of the shadows” because of the heavy cover they use. Their large eyes allow them to see better than most other birds.

Habitat

For wood duck populations to thrive, they need habitat conducive to nesting, feeding, and rearing young. They normally nest in natural cavities, usually within one-half mile of a suitable water area. The closer the nest is to water, the better, but the nest may be as far as 4 to 5 miles from where the female normally feeds and rests.

Suitable nest cavities, at a minimum, must provide room for the hen to incubate her eggs easily. The cavity entrance can vary from 5 to 70 feet above the ground.

Good brood-rearing habitat may consist of water, heavy vegetation, and low-hanging bushes. This

combination produces an abundance of insects and plant matter to feed the ducklings. It also provides protective cover for young ducklings. Scientists at Mississippi State University have reported that wood duck duckling survival was greatest in wetland areas with abundant scrub-shrub, such as buttonbush, privet, and willow.

Feeding areas vary from flooded bottomland hardwoods with acorns and other hard-mast production to marshy areas that provide native aquatic and semi-aquatic vegetation and seed production.

Life History

Although wood ducks naturally nest in cavities, they will readily nest in manmade boxes. These nesting boxes, along with protection from overharvest, are the main factors contributing to population increases.

The female wood duck does not build a nest but nests atop decayed wood in the bottom of the cavity. She lays one egg each day, usually in the early morning. When she leaves her nest, she covers the eggs with the loose material in the bottom of the nest. Later in the egg-laying cycle, she adds down plucked from her breast to the nest each day until she has finished laying.

Generally, she lays 5 to 19 small, round, dull-white eggs. The average number is around 15; however, as many as 70 eggs, several layers deep, have been found in the nests of wood ducks. The large number of eggs occurs when more than one female lay in the same nest. This is called a “dump” nest and is the result of having more breeding birds than nesting cavities.

The eggs hatch in 27 to 30 days. Some 24 hours after hatching, the female calls to her young from the ground or water. The downy young ducks use their sharp claws and hooked nail at the tip of the bill to climb out of the nest, and then they jump to the ground or water. The nestlings are so light, they literally float to the surface without being injured. The female gathers her brood together and leads them to the nearest water. They remain with her until they can fly, which is about 8 weeks later.

In Mississippi, nesting can start as early as January and continues until it peaks in April or May. Much of the late

nesting is caused by re-nesting females whose nests are destroyed by predators.

Molt

The male wood duck leaves the female before the eggs hatch and joins other males in secluded areas locally or elsewhere. Wood ducks lose their flight feathers (cannot fly) and are quiet and inactive during the molt so as not to attract predators.

Food

The main diet of young ducks is insects. Adult wood ducks are primarily vegetarians, although they eat some insects. Foods for adult woodies include dogwood, acorns, button bush, coontail, duckweed, lotus, pondweed, swamp privet, water lily, and wild rice. Animal foods include a diversity of aquatic invertebrates.

Predators

Raccoons, snakes, and opossums eat wood duck eggs. Other birds, such as starlings and woodpeckers, puncture the eggs, and squirrels crack them. Raccoons and bobcats are probably the worst enemies because they often trap and kill the female wood duck on the nest.

If the female is not killed, she will re-nest in another location. If a nest is not disturbed, the same bird will come back and use the cavity subsequently. Snakes, mink, raccoons, turtles, owls, hawks, herons, alligators, bullfrogs, and fish (for example, bass, gar) prey on young ducks. Inclement weather also takes its toll.

Management

When duck food is scarce, plant brown-top and Japanese millets on exposed mud flats, beaver ponds, sloughs, or farm ponds and fields. Flood the area to attract wood ducks and other waterfowl species. For more information on habitat management for wood ducks, see Extension Publication 1864 *Waterfowl Habitat Management Handbook for the Lower Mississippi River Valley* (<http://extension.msstate.edu/publications/waterfowl-habitat-management-handbook-for-the-lower-mississippi-river-valley>).

One of the best ways to boost the number of wood ducks is to provide adequate nesting sites protected from predators. For more information on how to build nest boxes, see *A New Nest Box for Wood Ducks* (<http://www.fwrc.msstate.edu/pubs/nest.pdf>).

Additionally, a properly constructed nest shield should improve nest success. Place boxes in or near water at least 5 feet above the water line; avoid locations where flooding could cover boxes. Locate boxes within or adjacent to scrub-shrub vegetation (for example, buttonbush). Research has shown that duckling survival is greatest in these habitats, where hens and young have dense cover from predators.

The publication *Wood Duck Broods in Dixie: Striving to Survive Early in Life* (<http://fwrc.msstate.edu/pubs/ducklings.pdf>) provides more information on nest box placement to improve duckling survival.

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