

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*



Folk Name: The Bride, Summer Duck

Status: Resident

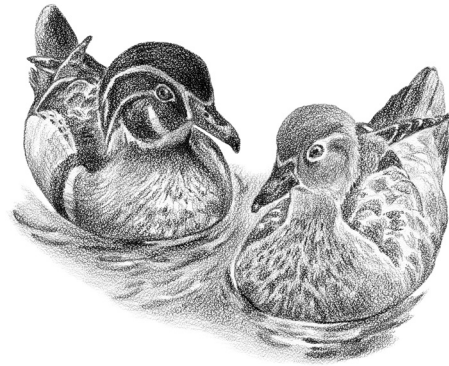
Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Lakes, ponds, creeks, river bottoms, forested wetlands

The Wood Duck is simply spectacular. It is a treasure that can only be found on the quiet backwaters of our creeks, lakes, ponds, and forested wetlands. The drake has often been called the most beautiful duck in North America. Henry David Thoreau once described it as a “glowing gem” floating upon the water. Author Washington Irving dubbed it “one of the most beautiful of waterfowl, remarkable for their gracefulness and brilliance of plumage.” A piece published in *The Charlotte Observer* in February 1906 praised the Wood Duck as: “the handsomest plumed and finest flavored” duck of all.

The Wood Duck is one of only three ducks found year-round here in the Central Carolinas. The English adventurer John Lawson was the first to report finding it in this region. His men killed several for food near Charlotte, around February 2, 1701, and Lawson wrote: “in these Creeks, several Ducks of a strange kind, having a red Circle about their Eyes, like some Pigeons that I have seen, a top-knot reaching from the Crown of their Heads, almost to the middle of their Backs, and abundance of feathers of pretty Shades and Colours.”

The “Summer Duck,” as it was once called here, is well known for its very shy and retiring nature—which was born out of the need for survival, as it has long been prized by duck hunters. For many years, they were hunted relentlessly providing sportsmen both a thrilling challenge and a tasty reward. The Wood Duck’s meat is considered a delicacy, they make handsome taxidermied trophies, and

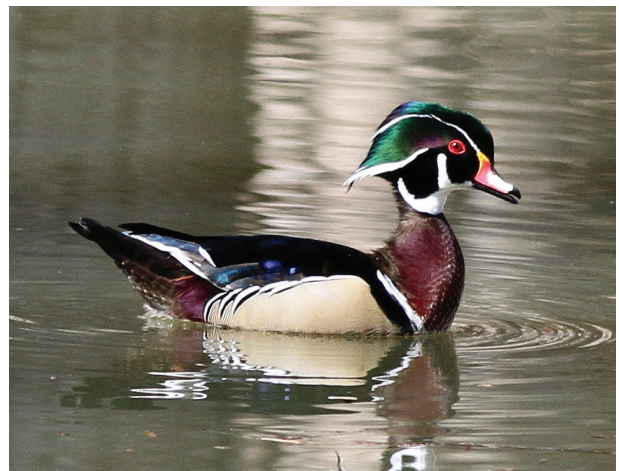


their feathers are a favorite of trout fisherman for use in fly tying. The *Carolina Watchman* paper in Salisbury shared this piece around the turn of the twentieth century:

These are busy days for the taxidermist, and his little tricks are the amusement and amazement of the amateur hunter. A successful gunner brought in a beautifully-marked wood duck and wanted it mounted. “Save the body,” he remarked, after the preliminaries were settled. “Impossible,” said the taxidermist. “See this table. It has arsenic on it, and I am afraid some of the poison might adhere to the flesh; you are poisoned, I am blamed. It would not be safe to give you the body.” That stereotype reply usually results in the customer yielding the point—and the duck. The latter is either eaten by the taxidermist and his family, or he passes it along to some friend with his compliments. The experienced hunter lays down the law: “See here; no fooling. Skin my duck on a piece of clean paper and send me the body. D’ye hear!” There is no further controversy.



Wood Duck eggs in nest box. (MCPRD Staff)



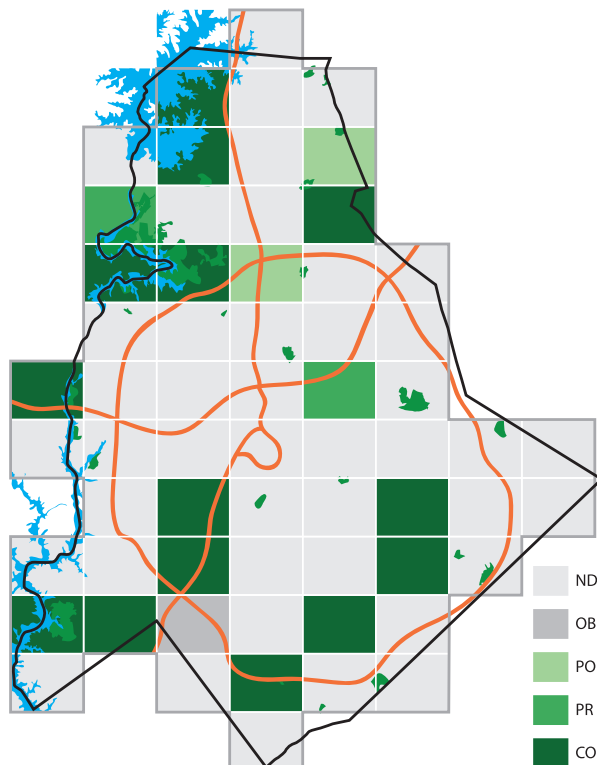
Male Wood Duck in Matthews, NC. (Will Stuart)

Hunting of the Wood Duck, along with other waterbird and waterfowl species, increased dramatically around the end of the nineteenth century and duck populations were decimated. One congressman noted in a speech to Congress, in May 1900, that: “The prairie chickens have nearly disappeared and the American wood duck is being rapidly exterminated.” National and state laws were implemented to help protect all of these birds and over a period of decades, populations slowly rebounded. In 1970, Milby Burton, a South Carolina ornithologist, wrote: “Fifty years ago, the Wood Duck, if not on the verge of extinction, was certainly at a very low ebb. ... At one time it was placed on the prohibit list for duck hunters...because of these stringent laws, it has made a remarkable comeback.”

Today, duck hunters themselves are largely responsible for the recovery and continued survival of this strikingly handsome duck. The Wood Duck nests in tree cavities and the number of natural tree cavities in suitable nesting habitat has declined over the years, as the shorelines of lakes and ponds have been developed throughout the region. Groups like Ducks Unlimited have sponsored successful Wood Duck nest box programs that have given a dramatic boost to local Wood Duck populations. Building, installing, and monitoring these nest boxes is hard work and members of these groups should be commended for their conservation efforts.

Pete Hogeboom is one Ducks Unlimited volunteer who played a major role in assisting Wood Duck breeding in several counties along the Catawba River corridor. He installed and monitored hundreds of nest boxes for more than a decade. He recorded detailed monitoring notes including egg laying dates, clutch size, nest outcomes, and more. Most ducklings hatched and left the nest in April and May. Reports of 16–18 ducklings per nest were not uncommon. In South Carolina, Wood Duck has been the

number one species harvested during duck season over the past two decades, and the Wood Duck ranks as the fourth most harvested duck from the Broad River region, south of Chester, over the past 12 years. A comprehensive nest box project has played a vital role in maintaining a harvestable population statewide.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/2, CO/14)

Wood Ducks at Charlotte’s Wing Haven:

“Years ago a friend gave the Clarksons a pair of Wood Ducks that couldn’t fly. Though the original female was killed by a cat, a replacement later hatched young ducks in the garden. Now, the first pair is gone, but the present generation fly free, returning to the Clarkson’s sanctuary, Wing Haven, each year to mate and rear families.”

“Is the male Wood Duck the most beautiful bird on earth? On a pool in the Clarkson’s garden a female Wood Duck gave her answer when she gracefully stretched her neck to ceremonially sip water before her mate. It was near the culmination of a series of ritualistic displays we were watching through the window. Before too long her eggs will be hatching in a box the Clarksons have provided and the downy young will be tumbling out to the water to start life in the middle of Charlotte.”

—Carolina Bird Club Newsletter, March 1968