

Ripple Effect #39

WOOD DUCKS IN THE VALLEY

Though the crisp chill of winter is still here, spring is not far off. A sure sign of spring will be the return of the Wood Duck to the Red River Valley. In this area, Wood Ducks typically return from wintering grounds in the southeastern United States around March.

The Wood Duck, considered one of the most beautiful of all waterfowl, is one of only a few North American ducks that build their nests in hollow trees. Wood Ducks inhabit small ponds, lakes and rivers in densely wooded country. Wood Ducks regularly nest in the corridor of the Red River. They nest in trees, roost in trees and even perch on waterlogged stumps. They fly through and among trees with agility, like a true woodland bird, and are seldom found far from shady areas and damp banks overhung by waterside trees. At night they gather on open water, safe from predators.

Nests are situated in tree holes or nest boxes, usually at a considerable height and close to water. The female selects a nest hole with an entrance about four inches across and a cavity at least two feet deep and about 12 inches across. These dimensions make it safe from predators, especially raccoons. The male helps her search for a suitable nest hole and stands guard outside while his mate lays eggs. One white egg a day is laid for 9-14 days. Wood Ducks average 12-14 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. The eggs are covered with down when she leaves the nest each morning and evening for about an hour to feed, usually alongside her mate. It takes about 30 hours for the brood to hatch.

The next day, the young ducklings throw themselves out of the nest and follow their mother to water. The ducklings are cared for by the female, but they may drift away from the brood as early as ten days after hatching.

The Wood Duck was one of the first to benefit from modern conservation methods. As early North American settlers moved westward, clearing forests and draining ponds and swamps where these birds lived, Wood Ducks steadily declined in numbers. Early last century, some people believed the Wood Duck was in danger of becoming extinct, and steps were taken to halt its decline.

Restrictive hunting regulations and the construction and placement of Wood Duck nest boxes have helped Wood Ducks make a population recovery. Natural cavities for nesting are scarce and Wood Ducks readily use nest boxes provided for them. Placed near suitable waters, the nest boxes help compensate for the lack of old trees with natural holes.

Plans for construction of Wood Duck nesting boxes are available from River Keepers at www.riverkeepers.org or at local book and wild bird stores.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

