

## Wood Duck

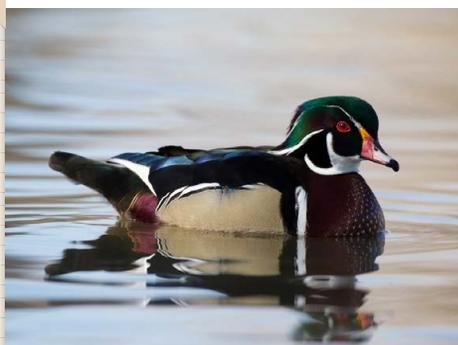
*Aix sponsa* | ORDER: ANSERIFORMES | FAMILY: ANATIDAE

**IUCN** Conservation Status: Least Concern

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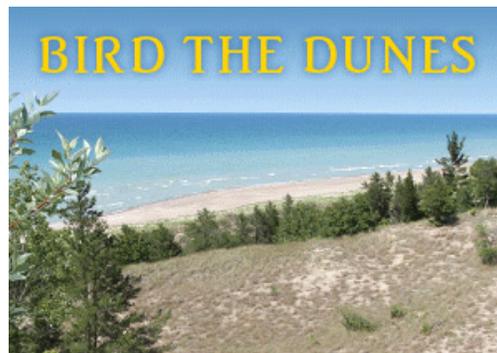
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The Wood Duck is one of the most stunningly pretty of all waterfowl. Males are iridescent chestnut and green, with ornate patterns on nearly every feather; the elegant females have a distinctive profile and delicate white pattern around the eye. These birds live in wooded swamps, where they nest in holes in trees or in nest boxes put up around lake margins. They are one of the few duck species equipped with strong claws that can grip bark and perch on branches.



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### At a Glance

Habitat



Lake/Pond

Food



Insects

Nesting



Cavity

Behavior



Dabbler

Conservation



Least Concern

### Range Map

### Cool Facts

- Natural cavities for nesting are scarce, and the Wood Duck readily uses nest boxes provided for it. If nest boxes are placed too close together, many females lay eggs in the nests of other females.
- The Wood Duck nests in trees near water,

### Measurements

Both Sexes

**Length**  
18.5–21.3 in  
47–54 cm

**Wingspan**  
26–28.7 in  
66–73 cm

sometimes directly over water, but other times up to 2 km (1.2 mi) away. After hatching, the ducklings jump down from the nest tree and make their way to water. The mother calls them to her, but does not help them in any way. The ducklings may jump from heights of up to 89 m (290 ft) without injury.

- The Wood Duck is a popular game bird, and is second only to the Mallard in numbers shot each year in the United States.
- Wood Ducks pair up in January, and most birds arriving at the breeding grounds in the spring are already paired. The Wood Duck is the only North American duck that regularly produces two broods in one year.

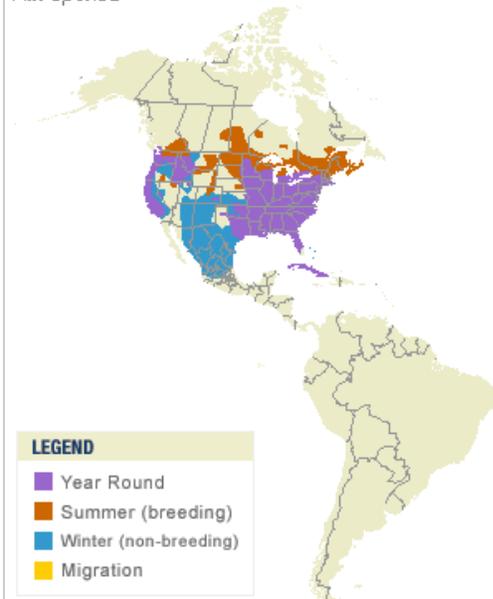
**Weight**  
16–30.4 oz  
454–862 g

#### Other Names

- Canard branchu (French)
- Pato de charreteras (Spanish)

## Wood Duck

*Aix sponsa*



#### LEGEND

- Year Round
- Summer (breeding)
- Winter (non-breeding)
- Migration

Map by Cornell Lab of Ornithology  
Range data by NatureServe

View dynamic map of [eBird sightings](#)

## Habitat



Wood Ducks thrive in bottomland forests, swamps, freshwater marshes, and beaver ponds. They are also common along streams of all sizes, from creeks to rivers, and the sheer extent of these make them an important habitat. Wood Ducks seem to fare best when open water alternates with 50–75% vegetative cover that the ducks can hide and forage in. This cover can consist of downed trees, shrubs such as alder, willow, and buttonbush, as well as emergent herbaceous plants such as arrowhead and smartweeds.

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## Food



Wood Ducks eat seeds, fruits, insects and other arthropods. When aquatic foods are unavailable they may take to dry land to eat acorns and other nuts from forests and grain from fields. Diet studies indicate a lot of variability, but plant materials make up 80% or more of what the species eats. Examples of food eaten include acorns, soybeans, smartweed, water primrose, panic grass, duckweed, millet, waterlily, blackberries and wild cherries, as well as flies, beetles, caterpillars, isopods, and snails.

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## Nesting

### Nest Description

Nest cavities can have openings as small as 4 inches across, and these may be preferred because they are harder for predators to enter. Wood Ducks sometimes use much larger openings, up to a couple of feet across. Cavity depths are variable; they average about 2 feet deep but in rotten trees can be 15 feet deep (the young use their clawed feet to climb out). Nest boxes of many designs have proved very popular and successful with Wood Ducks, though plastic nest boxes can overheat in strong sun. The female lines the nest with down feathers she takes from her breast.

### Nest Placement



Breeding pairs search for nest cavities during early morning. The male stands outside as the female enters and examines the site. They typically choose a tree more than 1 foot and often 2 feet

in diameter, with a cavity anywhere from 2–60 feet high (higher sites seem to be preferred). These cavities are typically places where a branch has broken off and the tree's heartwood has subsequently rotted. Woodpecker cavities are used less frequently. Wood Ducks cannot make their own cavities. The nest tree is normally situated near to or over water, though Wood Ducks will use cavities up to 1.2 miles from water.

### Nesting Facts

**Clutch Size**

6–16 eggs

**Number of Broods**

1-2 broods

**Egg Length**

1.8–2.4 in  
4.6–6.1 cm

**Egg Width**

1.4–1.7 in  
3.5–4.2 cm

**Incubation Period**

28–37 days

**Nestling Period**

56–70 days

**Egg Description**

Glossy creamy white to tan.

**Condition at Hatching**

Chicks hatch alert and with a full coat of down. A day after hatching they leave the nest by jumping out of the entrance.

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## Behavior



Wood Ducks feed by dabbling or short, shallow dives. They are strong fliers and can reach speeds of 30 mph. Wood Ducks are not territorial, with the exception that a male may fight off other males that approach his mate too closely. Courting males swim before a female with wings and tail elevated, sometimes tilting the head backwards for a few seconds. Males may also perform ritualized drinking, preening, and shaking movements. Both members of a pair may preen each other. Egg-dumping, or "intraspecific brood parasitism" is common in Wood Ducks—females visit other Wood Duck cavities, lay eggs in them, and leave them to be raised by the other female. This may have been made more common by the abundance and conspicuousness of artificial nest boxes; in some areas it happens in more than half of all nests. Individual females typically lay 10-11 eggs per clutch, but some very full nests have been found containing 29 eggs, the result of egg-dumping.

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## Conservation

status via [IUCN](#) Wood Duck populations increased between 1966 and 2010,



according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. This is good news considering their dramatic declines in the late 19th century. Wood Ducks can be found throughout the year in the U.S., with some individuals breeding in Canada, and some wintering in Mexico.

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## Credits

- Hepp, G. R., and F. C. Bellrose. 1995. [Wood Duck \(\*Aix sponsa\*\)](#). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 169 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America Online, Ithaca, New York.
- USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. 2012. [North American Breeding Bird Survey 1966–2010 analysis](#).

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