



## Wood Duck

*Aix sponsa*

True to its name, the wood duck thrives in forested wetlands from Canada to California. Its crested head and feathers of iridescent blue, green and purple make the male wood duck easy to identify. This “jewel on the water” has been sought for centuries by hunters, hat makers, bird watchers and fishermen tying flies. A threatened species once, the wood duck flourishes as North Carolina’s most popular waterfowl and as an example of effective wildlife management.

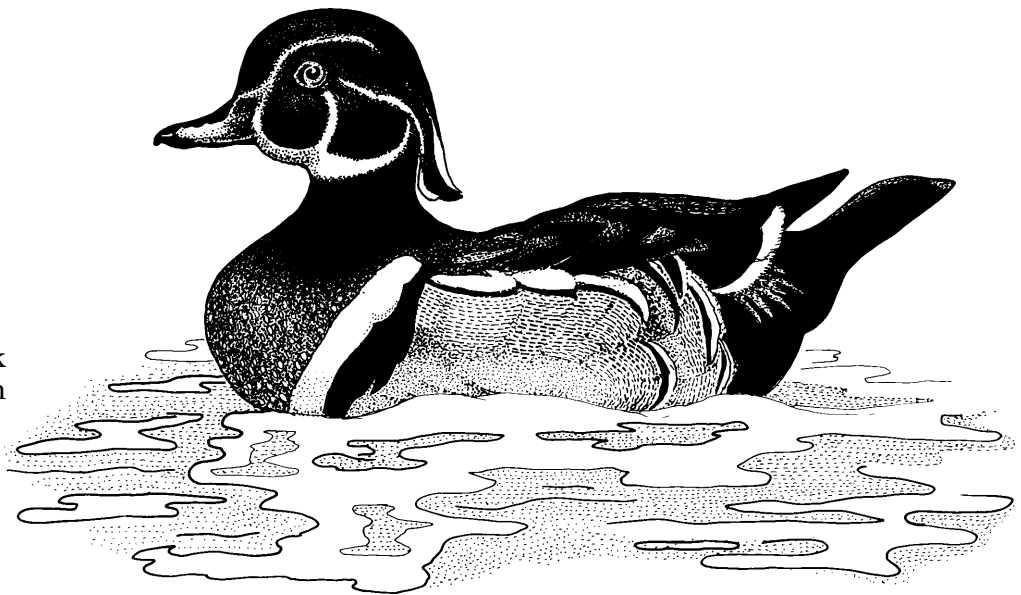
### History and Status

Throughout the 1800s, woodies filled swamps, ponds, wetlands and forests throughout the region. But by the early 20th century, American hat makers were seeking the wood duck’s plumage for ladies’ hats; trout fishermen were craving the glistening feathers for flies; and hunters were stalking the woods for them. This pressure, plus destruction of the wood duck’s habitat, caused its populations to plummet by the early 1900s.

But protection and good wildlife management have brought the wood duck back. Despite continued losses of forests and wetlands, wood duck populations in North Carolina and the South remain stable.

### Description

Colorings easily distinguish the male wood duck from the female. The male, or drake, has a large crown, or crest, that glitters in greens, blues and purples. White markings extend from his chin



and throat toward his eyes and the back of his neck. Dark bronzy green and black feathers cover its upper body, while its breast is white. Its red eyes and bill of white, red and black add to the drake’s brilliance. The female, or hen, has drab plumage in comparison. Its crest is gray and brown and its back is olive-brown with a shimmer of green. White patches accent her eyes and throat, and white colors her belly.

### Habitat and Habits

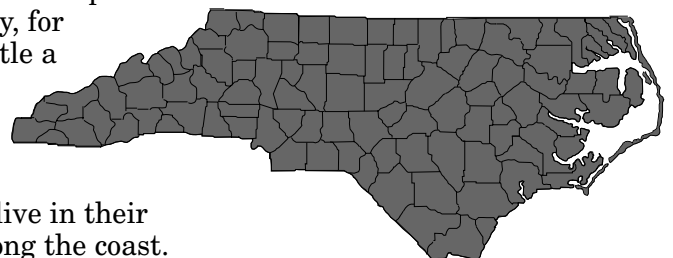
The wood duck’s reputation as a secretive bird partly derives from its ability to hide in its woody habitat. Old beaver ponds, freshwater marshes, old rice fields, cypress and gum swamps, and sloughs, creeks and rivers near forests make prime wood duck habitats. Woodies nest in tree cavities, perch on limbs and feed among the dense foliage. Keen hearing and eyesight protect them as well. A fisherman paddling 200 yards away, for example, would startle a wood duck.

These stunning birds can be sighted throughout North Carolina but live in their highest densities along the coast. Wood ducks seldom choose salt-water habitats, however, prefer-

ring freshwater ponds and streams.

Wood ducks do not dive in the water for food, but dip their heads under water and pick food from the bottom.

By December, southward migrations are usually complete. Once a male and female are paired, they usually remain together throughout the breeding season. In North Carolina, breeding ducks may begin searching for nesting sites in January or soon after they return from the wintering grounds. Female wood ducks frequently return to a nest on the same pond, swamp or woodlot where they hatched, sometimes to the same nest. Wood ducks typically build nests high above the ground in a tree cavity near water or they may select artificial nesting boxes. When the nest is ready, the hen lays 10 to 15 eggs, usually at the rate of one a day. After the hen has incubated, or warmed,



#### Range Map:

Found statewide 

**WILD  
Facts**

the eggs for about 30 days, the ducklings hatch. Nesting may begin as early as February, with the peak hatching period in North Carolina in April and early May.

Usually the morning after the ducklings hatch, the mother hen perches below the nest and uses a soft call to coax her young to the opening. One by one, the tiny balls of fluff flutter down to the water or soft ground, leaving the nest and following their mother to a water haven usually less than a mile away.

Ducklings grow quickly, protected by their mother for the first few weeks. Yet snapping turtles, owls, cottonmouth moccasins, largemouth bass and other predators prey on the ducklings. In eight to 10 weeks, young wood ducks can fly. By August the brood is strong and ready to flock with other families.

**Range and Distribution**

The wood duck's range covers parts of Canada, most of the United States and southern regions of North America. Wood ducks live throughout North Carolina. Dense populations may occur in western and central parts of the state, but woodies can be found in their highest numbers along the coast in swamps, wooded ponds and river bottomlands.

**People Interactions**

One of the biggest threats to the wood duck today is loss of its woody habitat. Years ago, lumbering operations, swamp drainage and land clearing for agriculture cleared much of the wood duck's nesting and breeding grounds. Today, more people, more technology and greater demands on natural resources pose similar threats. Wood duck populations can continue to thrive with protection of older, mature hardwood forests that provide trees with cavities for nesting.

Hunting wood ducks has been a



tradition in the South. With good habitat, properly regulated sport hunting does not adversely affect wood duck populations today. It is the most popular waterfowl hunted in North Carolina, with more wood ducks harvested than any other species each year.

**References**

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**Credits**

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**WOOD DUCK**

**Classification**

Class: Aves  
 Order: Anseriformes

**Average Size**

Length: 17 to 21 inches  
 Weight: 1.5 pounds

**Food**

Nuts, seeds and small fruit of trees, shrubs and grasses, aquatic plants and insects.

**Breeding**

Males are called drakes, females are called hens. Mate in late winter and early spring, and usually remain paired together throughout the breeding season.

**Young**

Average clutch size is 10 to 15 eggs. Incubation period is about 30 days. One brood per year if successful. Hen may renest if first nest is destroyed by predators. Sometimes may produce two successful clutches. Young are called ducklings.

**Life Expectancy**

Short-lived. About 40 to 50 percent of wood ducks born each per year will survive to the next year.