

Wonderful Wood Ducks

by *Aviva Rossi*

2009

The wood duck is a lovely example of how stunningly beautiful our own native wildlife can be. The breeding male is an unmistakable combination of an iridescent green and purple crown, with glistening black cheeks, separated by bold white borders. His chest is a flecked deep auburn, with a pale gold body, separated from the reddish violet near the tail by black and white plumage. And this is just a partial description. In winter, the male resembles the female. The female, although of a much subtler color palette, still has striking beauty in the patterns of pale gold lines and flecks decorating her tan and bronze feathers, including a distinctive trailing eye ring.

However, what really make these birds interesting are where they nest and how easily they can be encouraged to nest near your own section of creek. The wood duck is a year-round resident of the Bay Area, so it can be seen during the winter as well as the breeding season. The handsome couple shown in the photo here was taken in March 2009, in San Anselmo Creek.



A nesting pair of exotically-colored wood ducks was photographed on San Anselmo Creek in Fairfax by Friends board member Gary Leo.

Wood ducks nest in cavities in trees along waterways such as rivers, creeks, and ponds, unlike other duck species which make a concealed nest on the ground. However, these tree cavities can be a rare commodity, especially in areas without mature riparian vegetation. In California, approximately 90 percent of riparian forest habitats have been lost. This is another reason, among many, why preserving riparian forests, especially mature trees, is critical to maintaining a diversity of native wildlife. In Corte Madera Creek, vegetation is commonly removed to increase the visibility of and access to streams and to allow the installation of landscaping and structures near the tops of stream banks. This removes vital habitat from the wood ducks and other species. In a survey of San Anselmo's three-and-half miles of creeks conducted in 1996, a total of only 1,280 native trees was recorded; of these one would expect very few to have suitable nesting cavities. In spite of human impacts, what remains of our creek corridors constitutes a refuge for native trees that still provides suitable natural habitat for this species year-round.

Wood ducks pair up in January, and most birds arriving at the breeding grounds in the spring are already paired. They choose a suitable nest cavity, then the female lines the nest with down plucked from her breast. She lays and incubates the eggs for approximately 30 days. The male does not assist with brooding or caring for the young. The ducklings are covered in their own down when they hatch, and are soon able to leave the nest. They jump down from the nest tree and make their way to water. The mother calls them to her, but does not otherwise help them. The ducklings may jump from heights of up to 290 feet without injury, thanks to their lightness and the wind resistance of their feathers. Although generally close to water,

nests may be directly over water, or as much as a mile away and after 56-70 days the young can fly. The wood duck is the only North American duck that regularly produces two broods each year, so there are many opportunities to see ducklings with a breeding pair. Breeding season usually ends by mid-July.

The duckling's diet consists largely of insects, aquatic invertebrates, and small fish. At six weeks, it switches to plant foods until its diet consists of approximately 90 percent vegetative material, primarily aquatic plants. Adult wood ducks feed on a variety of fruits and nuts (including acorns), aquatic plants seeds, and aquatic insects and other invertebrates. Invertebrates are particularly important food items for adult females during egg-laying in spring. You can enhance habitat for wood ducks by planting native California species that contribute good nutrition for the ducks.

The population of the wood duck was in serious decline at the beginning of the 20th century as a result of severe habitat loss and market hunting both for meat and for plumage for the ladies' hat market in Europe. The population of the wood duck has increased a great deal in recent years due to regulations decreasing the impact of hunting, implementation of habitat conservation/ restoration programs, and the work of many people constructing and placing wood duck boxes.

The most important limiting factor for wood ducks is the availability of suitable cavities for nesting. Luckily for the wood duck, and for people who like to encourage nesting, this species will readily use nest boxes of a suitable design. The California Waterfowl Association (the wood duck is a popular game bird) coordinates the most extensive volunteer nest box program in the nation, hatching more than 30,000 ducklings each year.

The wood ducks are a fantastic example of how successful species recovery can be the result of individual actions. Corte Madera Creek watershed already has breeding wood ducks, so there is a good chance of hosting a nesting pair if you install a suitable nest box. By placing and maintaining a nest box, you could help the recovery of the species and encourage the success of another wildlife family of The Corte Madera Creek watershed in your own backyard.

Additional Information can be found at these websites:
www.ducks.org/Conservation/WaterfowlBiology/2716/WoodDuckBoxes.html and www.woodducksociety.com

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