

Status: Common, Native Migrant and Summer Resident

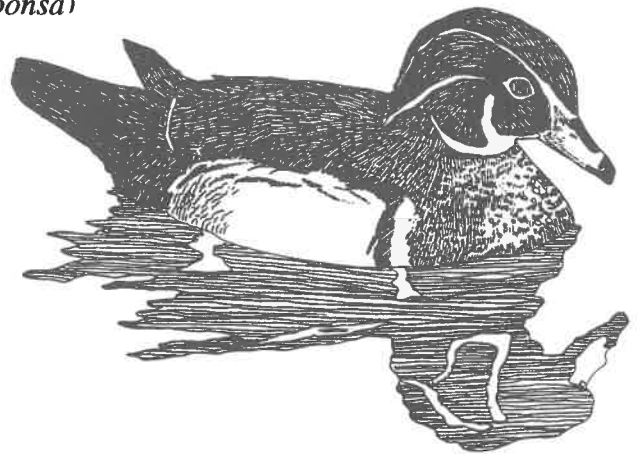
## WOOD DUCK

(*Aix sponsa*)

### Description

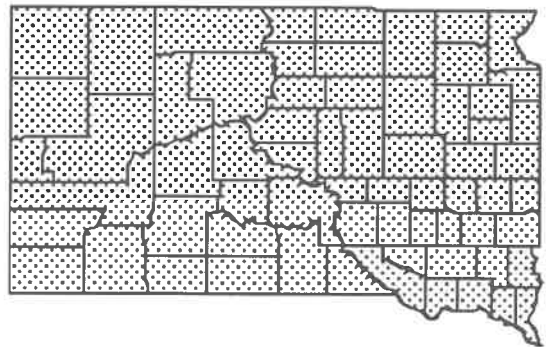
Wood ducks get their common name from their adaptation for living in the trees along streams and ponds. Their genus name, *Aix*, from the Greek for water bird, is also a reference to the species' habitat. The name, *sponsa*, is Latin for bride, or promised one, and refers to the spectacular plumage of this species.

Wood ducks are relatively small ducks, measuring from 15 to 21 inches (38-53 cm) in length, and weighing from 1 to 1.9 pounds (0.5-0.9 kg). The colorful male gives this species the title of the most beautiful duck in North America. His crest is *iridescent* green in front and purplish in the rear. The sides of his head are purple, blue-green, and bronze. The bird's eyes have a red iris and eyelids. The short bill has a black tip and ridge, white on the sides, and a red base bordered with a narrow yellow line. The sides of the male's body are bronze, finely barred with black. The upper feathers are broadly tipped black, and there is a white border along the green, purple, and bronze back and rump. The feet and legs are dull, straw-yellow. Females are much more subdued in color. The crest of the female is brown, glossed with green. Her bill is dark blue-gray and her eyes are brown. The female's back is olive-brown with a shimmer of *iridescent* green. The undertail feathers are white, like the belly.



The species has a number of calls; the most familiar is the "hoo-eek" call given by the female as she takes off.

### Distribution



Wood ducks are common migrants and summer residents in eastern South Dakota, especially along the James and the Big Sioux rivers. They are uncommon in western South Dakota, and sporadic in the Black Hills. Numbers have increased in all parts of the state since the 1930's.

## Natural History

Wood ducks winter in the southeastern United States, and begin returning to South Dakota during early April. When they arrive, pairs of wood ducks search for suitable nesting cavities in trees. They prefer to nest in trees close to water, but will use sites up to 1.3 miles (2 km) away. Where natural cavities are in short supply, artificial nesting boxes are commonly used. The birds nest from April through June. The average *clutch* size is 12 dull white to brown white eggs. More than one female may contribute to a clutch, resulting in a "dump nest." This behavior can create clutches of more than 60 eggs. These huge clutches are rarely *incubated*, but successful dump nests of fewer than 30 eggs are common in nest boxes. The hen must *incubate* the eggs for about 30 days until they hatch. At hatching, the ducklings have sharp claws that they use to climb to the entrance of the nest, where they bail out of the nest cavity and, along with the hen, head for the water. Ducklings have been known to jump 89 feet (27 m) to the ground without injury. The ducklings are ready to fly 6 to 8 weeks after hatching. Most wood ducks begin their southerly migration out of South Dakota during the first half of October.

About 90% of a wood duck's diet is aquatic plant material. They are especially fond of duckweed, small flowering plants that float on the water's surface. They also eat seeds and tree fruit such as acorns, nuts and berries. The remainder of their diet consists of aquatic insects, minnows, frogs and tadpoles, and small salamanders. Raccoons are the most important predator of wood duck eggs and incubating females.

## Conservation Measures

Once thought to be in danger of extinction, wood ducks are now common due to careful management. Locally, wood duck populations can be boosted through the use of nest boxes. But, care must be taken in box placement to prevent nesting interference (dump nesting) and use of the boxes by squirrels. Nest box maintenance can be expensive and time consuming, so management for natural cavities in trees should be encouraged. Preservation and proper management of trees along rivers, streams, and wetlands are important. Federal, state and private agencies are keeping a close watch on the health of these populations. Wood duck hunting is allowed by licensed hunters during a specified time of the year. The money derived from license fees and taxes paid by the hunters is used to care for and protect wildlife populations.

### Glossary

**Clutch** - the number of eggs laid in a nest at one time.

**Incubate** - to keep eggs in a favorable environment for hatching which is accomplished by the female sitting on the eggs in the nest.

**Iridescent** - displaying a changing combination of shiny, rainbow-like colors.

### References

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