



## Wood Duck Conservation



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One of the most striking of American ducks, the Wood Duck displays the rainbow in its plumage and a touch of poetry in its scientific name, *Aix sponsa*. A hybrid of Greek and Latin, the phrase signifies “waterfowl in wedding raiment.” From the crest on his head to the tip of his tail, the male wood duck glows with iridescent hues set off by brilliant white stripes. Both males and females are crested with white throats and bellies. The male has a white-striped face of iridescent green and bronze, a purple head and back, a white bar in front of the wing, and spotted chestnut breast. The female has a grayish-brown back, buff-colored flanks, and a white patch around each eye.

### Wood Duck Natural History

#### Habitat

Centuries ago, wood ducks inhabited dense woodlands, secluded pools, slow flowing creeks, and marshy ponds of North America’s primeval forests. With the loss of much of this ancient forest setting by the turn of the 20th century, the wood duck nearly became extinct. Drainage and logging eliminated many woodland swamps and with them went the big, hollow tree trunks used by wood ducks for nesting. Commercial gunners took huge numbers; stuffed wood ducks were handsome adornments in the home; and the birds feathers made dandy artificial trout flies.

#### Conservation Measures

Enacted just in time, a 1918 law placed the species under protection and the wood duck gradually recovered under wise conservation actions, including a 23-year ban on hunting wood ducks. By 1941, the wood duck had once more become a commonly seen bird. Today, they are generally found throughout the United States and Southern Canada. Their winter range is from the southern U.S. to central Mexico.

Able to survive close to human settlements, wood ducks have been greatly helped by a widespread program of nest box building and placement. Members of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Programs are encouraged to make or purchase nesting boxes for wood ducks and place them in suitable habitat. Although wood ducks spend much of their time in or near water, they have been known to nest as far as a mile away from the nearest water body. Wooded swamps, flooded forests, ponds, marshes and bottomland sloughs are all appropriate places to put up nesting boxes.

Wood Ducks prefer to nest in the woods near water, hence their name.

### **Nesting Habits**

Wood Ducks pair up on their wintering grounds. Then the female leads the drake back to the region where she was hatched or to the area where she nested the year before. She lays 10 to 15 creamy white eggs in a tree hollow or a large woodpecker hole as high as 50 feet from the ground (normally 5 to 50 feet, but they prefer 30 feet or more). The breeding period is April through June. Incubation by the female lasts 27-33 days. About half hatch in 30 days and the remainder within the next 3-4 days. At hatching, the young have sharp claws and climb to the nest opening. Regardless of the height, they will drop to the ground in response to calls from the female on the ground. She then leads the young to the nearest body of water. Young wood ducks learn to fly 63 days after hatching. An adult wood duck can reach speeds between 39 and 55 mph.

### **Feeding Habits**

On the water, wood ducks primarily feed on aquatic plants, such as duckweed, but insects are also included in their diet, providing a good source of protein. Wood ducks explore the forest floor for acorns as well, often squealing and chattering when eating. When alarmed, they call *whoo-eeek*.

## **Wood Duck Nest Box**

### **1. Construction**

When building your nesting boxes, use non-planed lumber or exterior grade plywood. Glue and nail all joints except the roof. Let the back extend above and below the box, as shown, to make it easier to mount the box on a tree or post. The roof should be removable so that the box can be cleaned once a year, and it should slant forward slightly. To aid young ducks in their exit, use rough lumber inside the box, or install a cloth "ladder." This plan shows an optional water barrier to keep rain from leaking into the box.

The size of the entrance hole is important. It should be just big enough to allow hen wood ducks to enter, but not raccoons. Use the pattern shown, which is the actual hole size. A round hole (four-inch diameter), cut with a hole saw, will also work.

### **2. Predator Prevention**

Many animals, including raccoons, snakes, mink, house cats, opossums and rats, will prey on young wood ducks. A conical metal shield, mounted below the box, will help keep predators out.

### **3. Placement and Observation**

Wood Ducks prefer to nest in the woods near water, hence their name. Place the box 10 to 20 feet above ground or 6 feet above water. In order to prevent dump-nesting (too many females laying eggs in the same nest), place the box in an inconspicuous area. Once the box is in place, be sure to monitor it on a regular basis throughout the nesting season. This will help you to detect problems, while enjoying the process of watching the nesting wood ducks. When the young birds have left the box, remove the nest and clean the box for the next season when the female will return to the same nest site.

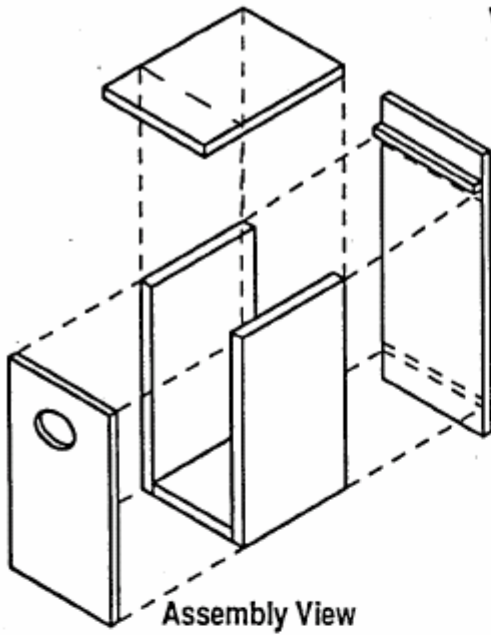
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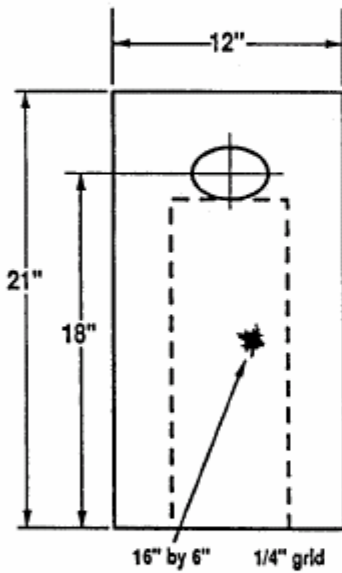
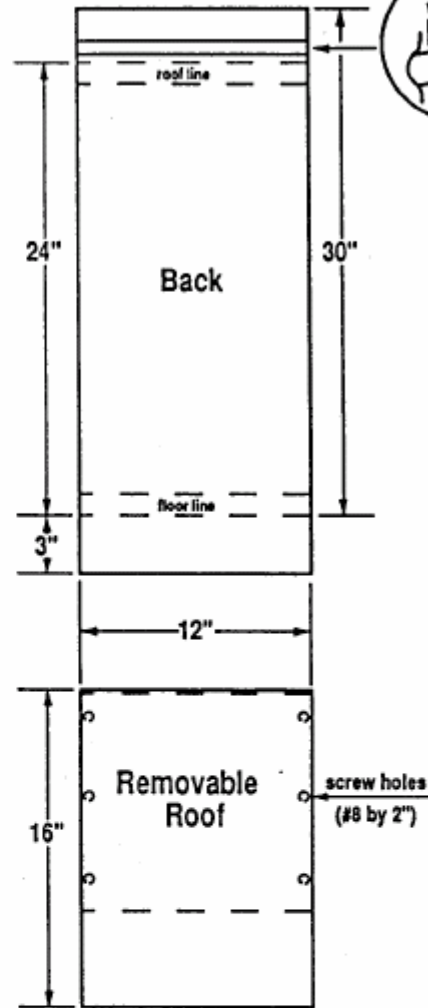
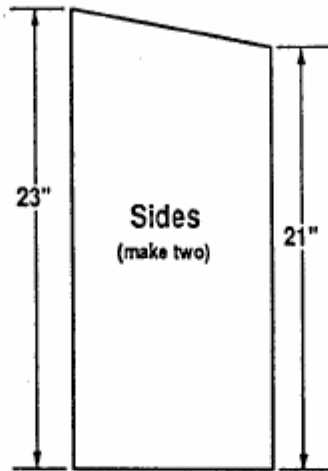
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# WOOD DUCK BOXES



3/4" by 3/4" Water Barrier



Hardware Cloth Ladder  
(inside)

