



PHOTO BY LUKE KATHOL

Wood Ducks

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Fall is the time Nebraskans begin to see the annual migration of wood ducks as they fly south from northern breeding areas, with numbers usually peaking in mid- to late-October. Their ideal nesting spots include streams, wetlands, shallow farm ponds and lakes with mature woodlands nearby. Wood ducks most often move as singles or pairs and can be found in large numbers along the Platte River and wetlands along the Missouri River. Breeding populations can be found across Nebraska, though numbers are higher in the eastern part of the state, where tree cavities for nesting are more readily available. Some wood ducks have been found to nest in hollow tree cavities as high as 40 feet off the ground.

The male wood duck can be identified by its brilliant coloring, often considered the most stunning of all waterfowl. Its Latin name, *Aix sponsa*, translates to “water bird in bridal dress.” The iridescent green and purplish head is bordered by a thin white line from its striking red eyes to the end of the crest, with another narrow white stripe from the red and black bill to the tip of the crest. The wood duck’s burgundy chest offers a sharp contrast to its golden sides and white throat.

In the last half of the nineteenth

century and beginning of the twentieth century, wood duck populations decreased so significantly that they were in danger of extinction. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and hunting restrictions on wood ducks imposed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in the 1940s and 50s prevented further losses. Eradication of bottomland hardwood forests – their favored habitat – kept their numbers down, but the introduction of nesting boxes in the last two decades seems to have helped the population.

In 2004, Bluebirds Across Nebraska (BAN) received a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund to finance a wood duck restoration project, which included introducing nesting boxes across the state. Steve Eno, former executive director of BAN, says the population numbers show a marked improvement since the inception of the program: “We have seen notable increases in the wood duck population across Nebraska since the introduction of over 250 nesting boxes across the state, most notably in Otoe County.”

Significant improvements in wetlands conditions across the Plains states in 2009 continue to improve nesting conditions for wood ducks, according to the USFWS. Current populations remain stable or are increasing – an encouraging sign for this popular game bird.