2014 Bird of The Year

The Wood Duck

Aix sponsa

The wood duck is considered by many to be among the most beautiful birds in North America. The last part of its scientific name, *sponsa*, means "the betrothed", comparing the drake's stunning plumage to wedding attire. The hen, while possessing far less colorful plumage than that of the drake, exhibits a more subtle beauty, with her white teardrop-shaped eye patch and blue speculum. Both sexes posses a crest, with the hen's being somewhat smaller. A surprising trait of the wood duck is that a bird that appears so striking in photographs, prints and in the form of decoys can so easily blend into the background when viewed in its natural environment. The combination of lines and colors break up the bird's outline and help it disappear into the shaded forested wetlands that are its preferred habitat. After the breeding season the drakes molt, losing not only their colorful plumage but their primary wing feathers as well. Summer must be a humiliating time for these regal birds, losing both their beauty and their ability to fly at the same time!

Wood ducks naturally nest in tree cavities but will readily use man-made nest boxes. In fact, since tree cavity availability is usually the limiting factor for local wood duck populations, nest box construction is one of the best ways to increase numbers. Boxes are often erected over water but wood ducks have been known to nest as far as a mile away from nearest water. The ducklings do not have to land on water when first leaving the nest. Seemingly being made up of more fluff than bird, they have no problem bouncing from a cavity as much as 50 feet high to the ground, after which they will parade behind their mother to the water. Whether built over water or on land, predator guards placed on the poles or tree trunks below nest boxes will increase chances of nesting success.

While the ducklings focus on invertebrates and the occasional small fish, the diet of adult wood ducks consists primarily of vegetable matter. Their powerful gizzards allow them to digest acorns, beechnuts and other hard seeds, but they will also feed on a variety of aquatic vegetation. As with other game, diet influences quality of table fare, and the wood duck is one of our consistently tasty species of waterfowl.

The wood duck is one of North America's conservation success stories. By the turn of the 19th century, market hunting and freshwater wetland destruction had brought them to the brink of extinction. Along with eliminating market hunting, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 prohibited sport hunting of wood ducks nationwide. By 1941 their population had recovered to sufficient levels to allow resumed hunting seasons. Today, their population is considered to be stable or increasing throughout their range, and they are second only to the mallard in total harvest in the Atlantic Flyway.