

WOODWORKING FOR WILDLIFE

WOOD DUCK BOX

In the early 1900s, wood ducks (*Aix sponsa*) nearly became extinct due to unregulated market hunting for their meat and feathers, and also due to destruction of nesting and brood habitat. But thanks to the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, and the discovery of the wood duck nest box, the wood duck is now one of our most abundant duck species. In fact, Mississippi has one of the densest populations of breeding wood ducks in North America.

“One of the greatest success stories in wildlife management has been the restoration of wood duck populations through the use of artificial nest boxes,” said Rob Ballinger, field biologist with Wildlife Mississippi. “Fortunately, the woody was rescued by regulations limiting harvest and the discovery in the 1950s by Dr. Frank Bellrose of the Illinois Natural History Survey that wood ducks would nest in artificial cavities.”

Nest boxes have been constructed in many different forms and the type Wildlife Mississippi finds easiest to maintain, and most aesthetically pleasing, are vertical wooden boxes.

“The first consideration when placing a nest box is whether the habitat is suitable to support ducklings once they hatch. Two to four boxes per acre of wetland is plenty,” stated Ballinger.

Here are some important tips and observations that Wildlife Mississippi has gathered over several years of checking and maintaining wood duck boxes:

- 1) Boxes should be erected two per pole, on a 10' 4"x 4" post, with a minimum 28" diameter conical metal predator guard nailed to the post about 1' to 2' below the boxes (2' to 3' of the post should be driven into the ground).
- 2) Boxes should be placed in shallow water (3' or less) in a site that can be reached easily by wading or by a small boat. Placing boxes in water greatly reduces predation by raccoons. It is important to place the boxes in an area that can be easily accessed to facilitate annual maintenance. Be sure to keep any overhanging limbs and emergent vegetation trimmed back at least 5' from the boxes and post to prevent snakes and raccoons from entering the boxes.
- 3) Nest boxes must be maintained on an annual basis. This is best done during the winter months when water levels are highest (easier to float a boat), vegetation is knocked down (won't clog the outboard or snag the paddle) and the wasps and snakes are hibernating.
- 4) Boxes need a 4" to 5" layer of **fresh** wood shavings, sawdust or wood chips placed in them each year **prior** to the nesting season. **WOOD DUCKS WILL NOT NEST IN A BOX WITHOUT NESTING MATERIAL!**
- 5) This is also a good time to make sure that the predator guard is securely fastened to the post. Winter storms have a habit of shaking things loose.
- 6) Also, check the condition of the lid, the bottom and the door. Sometimes a couple of nails will hold a box together to get another 2 to 3 years nesting. Replace lids and bottoms that are rotted or split.

