

## Water Birds: Wood Duck

Of the twenty or so dabbling ducks that call New Jersey home, perhaps the most stunning is the wood duck (*Aix sponsa*). The male's plumage is so graphic it looks as if it could have been painted by a creative genius. Overall they are iridescent bronze and green with elaborate feather patterns and bold white outlines on the head and throat. Like most ducks, the female is more subdued with mottled feather patterns, but she still has bold splashes of white on her eyes and blue and white on her wings. By late summer, the males mostly lose their bold patterns except for their bright red eye and bill.



*Male wood duck; note the bold white markings, extended crest and bright red eye.*



*Female wood duck; note the royal blue wing patch, bold stripe on the wings and the white eye ring.*

Dabblers are ducks that feed by sticking their head underwater and leaving their tails pointing up as they graze on the aquatic plants and invertebrates in the shallows. However as summer ends and the seasons are in transition they will also eat acorns, seeds, and the leftover grain found in farm fields. Once the waters warm again in spring they dabble on smartweed, milfoil, duckweed, sedges and waterlily, as well as flies, beetles, caterpillars, water insects, and snails. Wood ducks can be residents year-round where water doesn't freeze over but most do migrate and move south from northern breeding areas in early fall. In the eastern U.S. about one-third of wood ducks are permanent residents, the others migratory. At Duke Farms in mild winters we sometimes have them on the property year round.

Wood ducks have an interesting physique. They have a distinct oblong shaped head, a long thin neck, broad tail, and short wings. The shape of the male's head crest is reminiscent of a warrior's helmet, but they are not aggressive waterfowl by any means. Wood ducks often bob their heads in flight and jerk their heads back and forth when swimming. These beautiful ducks often gather in small groups of less than 20 birds and stay mostly to themselves, not mixing among other waterfowl.

Wood ducks get their name from the habitats in which they reside. They prefer wooded swamps, but they also live along streams, lakes, rivers, and in marshes or flooded beaver ponds that are bordered by forests. Since they make their homes in the company of trees, their broad tails and short, broad wings help them perform flexible flight maneuvers in their habitats. They are strong fliers, can reach speeds of 30 mph, and



their wings whistle on the wind. They are also one of the only duck species equipped with strong claws that can grip bark and perch on branches.

Courting males perform for females by swimming around them with wings and tail elevated and may also drink and preen to get their attention. Courting happens in winter, but mating occurs in spring. They make their nests in cavities in trees and cannot excavate their own. Breeding pairs search for nest cavities together but the male waits outside as the female does the inspection. They typically settle on a tree at least 2 feet in diameter, with a cavity high over the water. These cavities are usually hollows where a branch has broken off and the tree has rotted. Nest openings can be very small (just 4 inches across) as this makes it harder for predators to attack.

With so many acres of wetlands disappearing it is fortunate that the ducks will also use human made nest boxes installed along undisturbed waterbodies. Whether natural or human made, the female lines the nest cavity with down feathers she takes from her breast. She usually lays between 6 and 12 eggs and incubates them for 28 to 37 days. What is unique is that wood ducks often commit [egg dumping](#), aka *intraspecific brood parasitism*. This may be a natural insurance policy against the loss of a female's own eggs through some unforeseen disaster. Females visit other wood duck cavities, lay eggs in them, and leave them to be raised by the other female. It seems to happen more often with artificial nest boxes and in some areas, it happens in more than half of all nests. Some nests that have been parasitized have been found to contain up to 30 eggs!

Ducklings start vocalizing with sounds called click calls 2 to 3 days before hatching. This may serve to synchronize hatching as all ducklings hatch somewhere between 6 and 18 hours after first egg is pipped. The chicks hatch with their eyes open and with a full coat of down to protect them. They certainly need it as just *one day* after hatching they must jump out of the nest. Before ducklings leave the nest, the female scans the area for predators or trouble. When all is clear the female flies from cavity to the ground or water below and begins softly calling a kuk, kuk, kuk sound. The ducklings immediately climb to the cavity entrance to look for her. She calls to encourage them but it's up to the ducklings to make the leap out of the nest alone. The ducklings survive jumps from heights of 50 feet or more! It's a harrowing [experience](#) for all the baby ducks and momma too.



*Ducklings getting ready to leap out of the nest just one day after hatching!*

Ducklings make a high-pitched *peep* call with a distinct to signal alarm. They use a shriek call to alert the mother and brood mates to danger. Sometimes they make a hiss call to threaten or intimidate predators. Most young can make [adult vocalizations](#) by 3 months of age. They do not begin to fly until after their mother has left them to fend for themselves which is usually in 8 or 9 weeks.

So where should you look for wood ducks at Duke Farms? Yes, Wood Duck Lake is actually a great place to scan for ducks. This water body is a little further away from most of the busy roads and trails which is just how wood ducks like it. But in the early morning before it gets busy you may catch a glimpse of wood ducks on any of the waterbodies on the property. Duke Farms is perfect habitat for this shy breed of waterfowl and there are nest boxes for them at various locations. Bring your binoculars and come duck watching! But if you are lucky enough to spot them, remember - do not disturb!



Wood duck female with her ducklings. With so many in the brood, it's most likely she is raising ducklings that were egg-dumped in her nest. Photo courtesy of PBS [Bird Note](#)

**More Dabbling Ducks of Duke Farms**



**Male**



**Female**

*Mallard*



**Male**



**Female**

*American widgeon*



**Male**



**Female**

*Gadwall*



**Male**

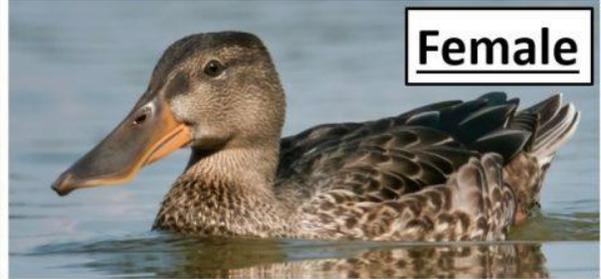


**Female**

*Green winged teal*



**Male**



**Female**

*Northern shoveler*



**Male**

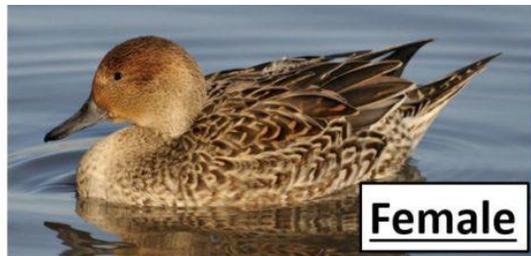


**Female**

*Blue winged teal*



**Male**



**Female**

*Northern pintail*



**Male**



**Female**

*Black Duck*



### **Activity: Go Duck Watching**

Print out the above pages of More Dabbling Ducks\*. Compare and contrast the pairs of ducks. Look for distinguishable characteristics that make them unique. Many have beak shapes or tails that set them apart. Look for distinguishable markings on the wings. Note how the male and female are the same or different.

Download the free Cornell University Bird Identification tool called [Merlin](#) for your mobile device. This is a fantastic tool to help you identify any of the birds you see including the ducks. You can observe photos of the ducks and listen to their calls as well.

Then head to Duke Farms, a nature preserve, or a park with freshwater lakes, ponds or streams. See if you can observe any ducks on the water. Spring and fall is a good time to look for them as some of the ducks don't all breed in New Jersey, so sometimes we only see them on migration. Many stop over on their way to breeding areas to the north in early spring and when they are on their way to winter grounds in the south in fall. But non-breeding birds and juveniles often hang out in our New Jersey fresh waters all year round.

Come to Wood Duck Lake at Duke Farms early or late in the day and you may get to see a real wood duck. It's worth the trip no matter what.

### **Additional Resources**

[All About Birds, Cornell University](#)

[Birds of the World](#)

[Audubon](#)

\*Photos for this activity are attributed to and The Cornell University Lab of Ornithology. Macaulay Library, Ithaca NY