



Wood Duck Boxes

Installation & Maintenance

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Wood ducks are commonly seen on Alabama's marshes, swamps, and other wetland areas. This duck is perceived by many to be one of the most beautiful species in North America and is a favorite of waterfowl hunters. Fortunately for residents of Alabama, the wood duck can also do something that most duck species do not – that is, call Alabama home year-round. The wood duck is one of few waterfowl species found throughout the year in Alabama. Because of this, Alabama landowners can have a greater impact on wood ducks than on other waterfowl species that may only spend the winter months in the area, or just simply pass through on their way South.

There are many factors to consider when managing a property for wood ducks. The ducks need an environment that provides the right amounts of food, cover, and water to survive. However, the amount of quality nesting cavities is sometimes overlooked. In some locations, there are not adequate numbers of mature trees to provide natural nest cavities due to logging or other activities. In such areas, the construction of wood duck boxes may be a needed management strategy.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service first used wood duck boxes in 1937. Since that time, they have been used on numerous properties to increase local populations of wood ducks. Boxes should be placed in any habitat that has enough food and cover, but does not provide enough natural nesting cavities. Once an area has been identified, the number of boxes needed and the location of each must be determined.

Start small when initially placing wood duck boxes in an area. Place only the number of boxes that can be maintained annually. The recommended number is one per acre of suitable habitat, with the boxes spaced at least 55 to 110 yards apart. Once 50-80 percent of these boxes are being used, more may be added if they can be maintained.

Opinions differ on how much to conceal the boxes. Research shows that boxes placed in areas that are more concealed with dense vegetation are less susceptible to becoming a dump nest (i.e., nests where multiple ducks lay eggs and cause the nest to be abandoned). However, nests located in open areas tend to be more productive, even though they may have a higher chance of becoming a dump nest. Therefore, it is recommended that boxes be placed in open areas. Nest boxes should be observed to determine nest success.

Ideally, nest boxes should be placed over or very close to water. However, they do not have to be over water if this makes them hard to maintain. Remember, the farther the boxes are

Photo courtesy of USFWS



located from the water, the chances increase for predation as ducklings leave the nest.

Once a location is identified, the height of the box must also be considered. A height of at least 6 feet is recommended, but other factors such as water level fluctuations should be considered. Water levels can vary greatly throughout the year in some locations. Nest boxes should be placed higher than the average annual high-water events to avoid problems caused by fluctuating water levels. In many situations, such as along larger creeks and rivers, wood duck boxes may need to be placed up to 20 feet above normal water level to avoid problems.

One important tool to help enhance nesting success is the use of a predator guard. This predator guard should be installed below the box and, if mounted on a tree, all limbs or other debris allowing a predator access to the nest should be removed. The box and predator guard should be checked and maintained at least once a year. During the inspection, repair any damage to the box or predator guard. The inside of the boxes should be cleaned, and three to four inches of new sawdust or wood shavings should be added. Also, document the nest success of each box during inspection. This can be particularly important information when deciding if more boxes are needed, and it also provides general information on reproductive success in the area.

Erecting and maintaining wood duck boxes is an effective wildlife management practice for areas where natural nest cavities are limited. Utilizing the proper number of boxes that can be adequately maintained and monitored should provide years of enjoyment, as well as add numerous broods of wood ducks to the population. ♪