



MONTEREY NEWS



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The Wood Duck

“A perfect floating gem.” — H.D.Thoreau

The Assabet River joins the Sudbury River flowing north to form the Concord River, about twenty miles west of Boston. Early in November, 1855, Henry Thoreau went up the Assabet with his friend Harrison Blake. As they paddled, they came upon a male Wood Duck, known to many in those times as a “Summer Duck.”

Thoreau describes the duck with “a large, rich, flowing green burnished crest—a most ample head-dress,—two crescents of dazzling white on the side of the head and the black neck, a pinkish-red bill (with black tip)... but, above all, its breast, when it turns to the right light, all aglow with splendid purple and ruby reflections, like the throat of the hummingbird... As if the hummingbird should recline its ruby throat and breast on the water. Like dipping a glowing coal in water! It so affected me.”

There were once so many of these small ducks in North America that early writers felt them to be as common and familiar as robins or blackbirds. They nested in tree cavities, sometimes near farm buildings, mostly close to water. When they came in the spring they rolled in by the hundreds: “and when they come, like the rains of the tropics, they pour in until every pool in the woodlands is deluged with them.” This description comes from Dr. Hatch, writing in 1887, and is quoted by Edward Howe Forbush in 1925 (*Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States*).

Before long, “spring shooting” brought them nearly to extinction. By this time pigeon and poultry raisers in Belgium had noticed the Wood Ducks’ remarkable beauty and had imported them and raised them. It wasn’t long before Americans, wanting Wood Ducks once again, “were forced to buy them from the Belgians at exorbitant prices.” Soon state and federal protections were put in place, and by the time of Forbush’s writing they were on the increase again here.

These ducks are also called Wood Widgeons, Acorn Ducks, and Tree Ducks. They are seventeen to twenty inches long with

a wingspan of twenty-eight inches. They nest in a hollow trunk as much as fifty feet from the ground or water, and many people put out wooden boxes for them over water.

Wood Ducks come to Massachusetts in early March and can be seen here until early November. A few even stay all winter. Forbush writes that the young ones hatch with sharp hooked claws on their feet, also a hooked “nail” at the end of the beak. They can climb up a perpendicular side of a wooden box “like flies walking on a wall,” he writes.

When they first hatch, the babies stay quiet for a day or two, until their mother leaves the hollow tree or box and lights down below on land or water. Then she calls them and they climb right up and flutter out and down. From here, if on land, the mother usually leads them to water and they are ready to swim. Some observers reported to Forbush that the mother may carry the hatchlings on her back, from the nest box or tree, right down to the water. Other folks saw the mother carry the youngsters in her bill, one at a time, as much as two miles to water. The ducklings are inclined to climb, and some that were hatched out under a bantam hen often climbed up to ride on her back.

Wood Ducks start migrating in September, traveling in small flocks or family groups, and by late September and early October they are often in much larger groups on the swamps, ponds, and rivers in New England, and then gone for the winter. When the ice is out, in early March, they come back just as the Spring Peepers and Wood Frogs begin their chorusing.

Wood Ducks eat all sorts of plants and seeds, like duckweed, grass and grass seeds, pondweeds and their seeds, acorns, smartweed seeds and many other varieties found in



the wetlands. They also eat a few dragonflies and their nymphs, and some crickets and spiders. When the ducklings first hatch and hit the water, they love to eat up mosquito wigglers.

Edward Howe Forbush, Massachusetts State Ornithologist, lay “concealed beneath foliage” and watched a flock of Wood Ducks on a woodland pool. He wrote, “Such a picture no pen can adequately describe,” but he did his best for us. “Loveliest of all water-fowl, the Wood Duck stands supreme . . . she clothed in modest hues, he glowing and resplendent.” And these ducks inspired Thoreau to make a plea for the preservation of beauty for its own sake, as a public property for all “to enjoy freely.” — Bonner McAllister