



## Wood ducks

### What are they?

Wood ducks are one of the most colorful birds in the Chesapeake Bay region. They are dabbling ducks. Dabbling ducks tip themselves up when they look for food, with their heads and necks in the water. They seldom dive completely underwater.

### What do they look like?

All wood ducks have a crested head and a long, square tail. Like many birds, however, the colors are different for males and females. Female wood ducks have a gray crest on their heads. Males, or drakes, have a brightly-colored green and purple crest. The females are mostly gray and brown. On the other hand, males are more colorful. They have a red bill and a reddish chest. Their backs look iridescent, flashing many different colors like a soap bubble.



Photo Source: Gerald and Buff Corsi, Cal Images

Young wood ducklings look very much like adult females. They are mostly gray and brown.

They are medium-sized ducks, averaging between 17 and 21 inches long. Their wing span is less than three feet from tip to tip.

Their webbed feet have sharp claws, which make it easy for them to perch on tree branches.

### Where can you find them?

Wood ducks generally live in forested wetlands, wooded swamps, ponds, lakes, and marshes throughout the Chesapeake Bay region. While some wood ducks spend the entire year in the Chesapeake Bay region, others migrate to other southern locations in the winter.

### How do they behave?

Wood ducks are the only Chesapeake region ducks that make their nests in tree hollows. These nests are usually with a half-mile of the water and between 20 and 30 feet above the ground or water. The females build a nest, using rotting parts of the tree and their own down feathers. They usually lay between 6 and 15 eggs. The eggs hatch in about a month's time. The hatchlings use the claws on their feet to climb out of the nest and then fall to the ground. Their mother will then lead them to water. These ducklings cannot fly for about two months. During that time, their mother looks after them and protects them from predators. However, up to 90% of the ducklings die within two weeks of hatching. Most of them are killed by predators such as raccoons.

### What do they eat?

As ducklings, wood ducks generally eat animals such as insects. As they grow older, their diet changes. They feed on nuts (especially acorns), seeds, algae and other water plants, butterflies and moths, beetles and insects, ants, dragonflies, slugs, and snails. Because they eat both plants and animals, adult wood ducks are called omnivores.

### What eats them?

Raccoons, gray foxes, red foxes, great horned owls, and black rat snakes are wood ducks' chief predators. Snapping turtle also eat ducklings.

### Creature Feature

Wood ducks were once in danger of disappearing from North America. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, their favorite habitat (forested wetlands) was disappearing. In addition, they were a favorite target for hunters. In 1918, the government adopted a special act to protect the wood duck and other endangered birds. They stopped the hunting season for 23 years. Other conservation efforts—such as building nesting boxes—helped. Today, researchers estimate there are well over one million wood ducks in North America.

