

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*

The Wood Duck is one of America's best-loved waterfowl. The primary expression of this affection is the providing of nest boxes for this species, which originally nested in tree cavities. Such boxes have allowed the Wood Duck's breeding range to spread into southern California. Once only a rare winter visitor to San Diego County, the Wood Duck is now also a local breeding resident, helped in part by releases of captive-reared birds.

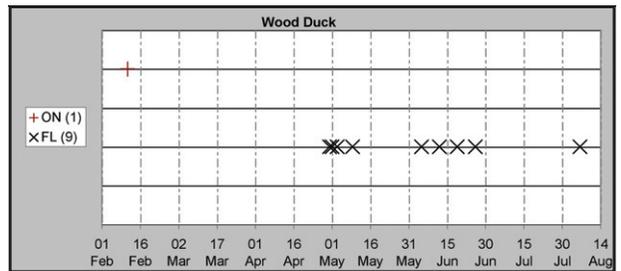
Breeding distribution: The primary center for the Wood Duck in San Diego County is Santee Lakes (O12/P12), where counts in summer range as high as 32 on 23 July 1999 (F. Shaw). From there the ducks have spread to borrow pits in the San Diego River between Santee and Lakeside (P13; up to 12, including chicks, on 30 April 1998, W. E. Haas) and Lindo Lake, Lakeside (P14; female with four chicks 9 May 2001, N. Osborn). The Santee Lakes population is presumably the source of Wood Ducks dispersing west to Lake Murray (Q11; up to two on 26 April 2000, M. Billings) and east as far as the upper end of Loveland Reservoir (Q16; three on 13 June 2001, J. K. Wilson). From Santee Lakes Wood Ducks have been seen repeatedly flying northwest, far up West Sycamore Canyon, in the direction of no nearby water (P. Unitt).

The Wood Duck's other San Diego County nesting sites are Cuyamaca Lake (M20; up to 14, including young, on 6 August 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan) and Wynola (J19; up to five, including a pair, on 8 May 1999; chick on 19 June 1999, S. E. Smith). At Cuyamaca the birds have raised about 80 chicks since they were introduced in 1994, but by 2003 the population was only about 12 individuals, their nesting success and survival being low through successive years of drought (H. Marx pers. comm.).

Wood Ducks near human habitation elsewhere in late spring and summer may have been domesticated: three in



Photo by Anthony Mercieca



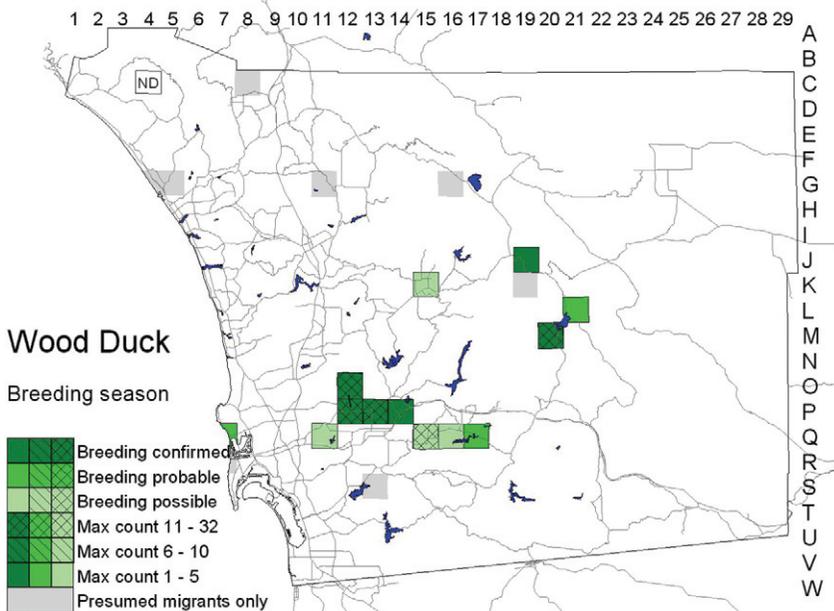
Valley Center (G11) 15 May 1997, one at Ramona (K15) 25 May 1998 (M. and B. McIntosh), and two at Pacific Beach (Q7) 7 May 2000 (L. Polinsky). But individuals at or near the Santa Margarita River mouth (G4/G5) 12 July 1998, 16 July 1999, and 13 May 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg) and along the San Luis River near the Forest Service picnic area (G16) 31 May 1999 (W. E. Haas) and 21 May 2001 seem more likely to have been natural pioneers.

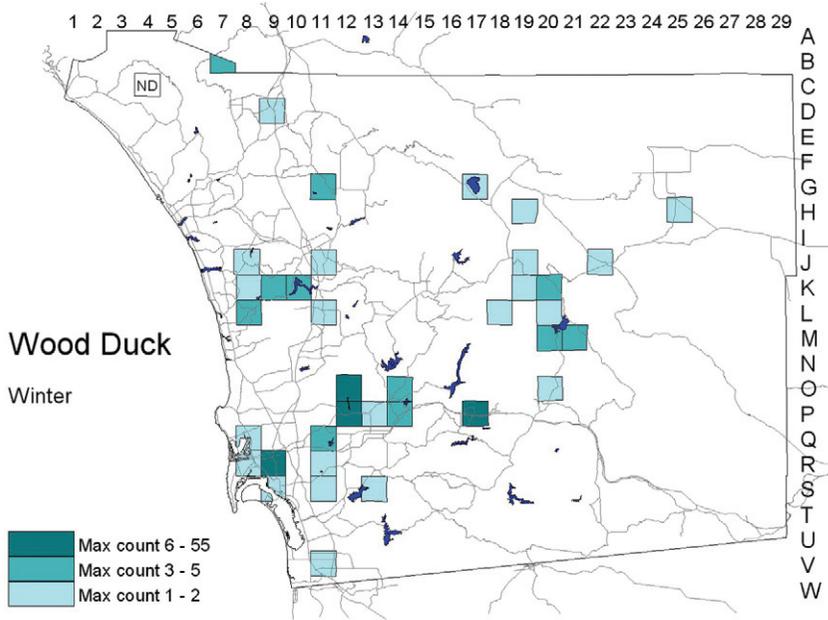
Nesting: Primitively, Wood Ducks nested in cavities in trees over or near water. Nest boxes have been used widely in the effort to increase the species' population, and the

species' establishment in San Diego County was dependent on them. Our sightings of chicks suggest the Wood Duck lays from about 1 April to about 1 June, though the birds have been seen around nest boxes at Santee Lakes as early as 11 February.

Migration: With the Wood Duck's establishment as a breeding bird in San Diego County, its migration schedule here is no longer well defined. But all, or almost all, migrants occur from October through March. The 13 records for the Anza-Borrego Desert range from 16 October (1994, one at Lower Willows, D23, L. Clark et al.) to 21 January (1998, one at Scissors Crossing, J22, E. C. Hall).

Winter: The Wood Ducks at Santee Lakes remain year round, in numbers up to 55 on 28 December 1998





(E. Post). Some, at least, remain at Cuyamaca Lake and Wynola through the winter as well. Our high winter counts at those sites were four on 14 December 1999 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan) and two on 27 December 1999 (A. Young), respectively. Most of the Wood Ducks at Cuyamaca, however, move to other sites for the non-breeding season (H. Marx pers. comm.).

Wood Ducks originating farther north are widely but sparsely scattered over San Diego County. The largest flocks noted during the atlas period were five at Ross Lake (B7) 18 February 2002 (K. L. Weaver), five in Escondido Creek near Elfin Forest Lake (K9) 9 January 1999 (L. E. Taylor), 12 in a pond along Viejas Creek, Alpine (P17), 8 February 2000 (M. B. Stowe), and 10 in Mission Valley

(R9) 11 January 1999 (J. K. Wilson). The only reports of greater concentrations are from Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts 23 December 1985 (13) and 19 December 1988 (30).

Except for the two cited under Migration, all records from the Anza-Borrego Desert are from artificial ponds from the Borrego Valley and are of no more than two birds.

Conservation: After being nearly extirpated from California in the early 20th century (Grinnell et al. 1918), the Wood Duck has enjoyed a renaissance throughout its range. A federal ban on hunting Wood Ducks from 1918 to 1941 allowed the recovery to begin, and the provision of nest boxes has contributed since. In San Diego County the species was introduced at Cuyamaca Lake. Six birds raised at Sea World were released in 1994, another six in 1995, and another five in 2002 (H. Marx pers. comm.). At Santee Lakes, on the other hand, there may have been no deliberate introduction. Wood Duck enthusiasts noticed the birds, put up boxes, and the birds colonized, as they have also in the Prado Basin and at Lake Elsinore, Riverside County (J. Brown pers. comm.). At ponds with domestic ducks Wood Ducks often become tame and remain year round, planting a nucleus for a breeding population if nest boxes are provided. If lacking such boxes the birds may prospect for nest sites in unsuitable man-made structures: near Viejas Creek a female Wood Duck came down a chimney (H. Marx pers. comm.).