

# WOOD DUCKS BREEDING NEAR NORTH BATTLEFORD

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An article in *Blue Jay* 78(3):34 (Fall 2020) by Dale Hjertaas details the occurrence of breeding Wood Ducks (*Aix sponsa*) significantly outside their reported breeding range for Saskatchewan, notably farther north and west. My article expands on the theme of his observations of June 2018 except predating them by two years, even farther northwest.

We live 6 km south of Denholm, just north of the North Saskatchewan River valley, not far southeast of North Battleford. I optimistically built two suitable nest boxes in earlier years and the Wood Ducks finally appeared in 2016. The boxes are located on either side of a small slough just east of our house. Box #1 is on the east side of the slough, while Box #2 is on the west side, just 20 m from our house. The slough is surrounded by aspen, willow and red osier dogwood but both boxes are visible from our kitchen window.

The first male was seen 23 April 2016; the first pair 13 May. The female was inside Box #1 for 10 minutes while the male swam nearby. The female also checked out Box #2 before the pair flew to a nearby field to feed. Presumably the same pair rechecked the boxes on both 14 and 15 May. Things looked promising! But we considered that both boxes were somewhat small for Wood Ducks, so I added a larger box (Box #3) 4 m up an aspen trunk, just 10 m from our house, on 17 May. Nevertheless, our story now focuses on Box #1.

At 05:30h 20 May, two males and one female competed for possession of the first box with a female Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*). Throughout the following days, the pair appeared



Wood Duck family near Denholm, Saskatchewan. Photo credit: Orval Beland.

irregularly at the box. Two female Hooded Mergansers (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) attempted, unsuccessfully, to flush the male Wood Duck from the roof of the box on 25 May. One female merganser entered the box after the male Wood Duck eventually departed. She subsequently took his place on the roof for some time, but he regained his perch by dusk.

The Wood Duck pair was recorded 17 more times in and around the box through 10 June. Then comes special day, 11 June: Female arrived and entered the box at 16:30h. Then... surprise... another female Wood Duck swam by with 10 ducklings in tow! These ducklings appeared to be about five days old. The family posed for photos taken later from our kitchen window through 10 x 60 binoculars at 35 m. These ducklings grew to flying age on the slough. Some were seen as late as 26 August when the slough had almost dried up.

Our original female was seen entering and exiting the box until at least 5 July. Did she also brood successfully? Probably, but we never saw her young. We suspect she

immediately escorted them east, across the road to a larger slough that is not practically accessible. One would require hip waders to fight through the flooded, dense willows and undergrowth from any direction to reach the relatively open water near the center. Any waterfowl would certainly flush or hide with such disturbance. One unhatched egg remained in the box. We also believe that the larger, willow and tree-bordered slough also sourced the surprise brood of 11 June since we had not seen any activity at the other boxes. Data interpolated from *Birds of Saskatchewan*<sup>1</sup> indicate an average clutch size of 11.6 eggs and 8.8 young. We haven't seen any Wood Duck activity since 2016 but a Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) nested in the largest box (#3) in 2019 and 2020.

Thanks to Dale Hjertaas for his encouragement to submit this article. To use his words: "When you share stories you also learn things."

1. Smith AR, Houston CS, and Roy, JF editors (2019) *Birds of Saskatchewan*. Nature Saskatchewan, Regina. 🦆