

NOTES ON BREEDING WATERFOWL OF THE TENNESSEE VALLEY IN NORTHERN ALABAMA

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When you mention nesting ducks in our State, there are two common reactions. Perhaps half of us Alabamians seem to think we have no nesting waterfowl; the other half seem surprised that all species of ducks and geese do not nest here. The truth lies somewhere in between. Certainly we are too far south for any significant waterfowl nesting, but we do have at least some breeding birds.

Our most common nester is the wood duck, breeding throughout the State wherever hollow tree cavities in reasonable proximity to water are found. We know of no way to really estimate the number of wood ducks breeding in our State or the number of young produced, but they must range into the hundreds, perhaps the thousands.

There are at least two other species, mallards and black ducks, that nest rather commonly in the northern third of the State. Hooded mergansers, tree nesters like the wood ducks, may breed throughout the State, most often in the northern part. There are scattered reports of occasional nesting by other species, including blue-wing teal, ringnecks, and gadwalls, but these are exceptional cases and certainly not the rule.

In the Tennessee Valley, where the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service maintains the 41,000 acre Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge and the Alabama Conservation Department has the Sauty Refuge along with four public hunting areas, some interesting data has been kept on nesting birds. Here, as in other parts of the State, wood ducks are the most common nesters. On Wheeler Refuge about 200 pairs are estimated as the breeding population. Nests with eggs have been seen as early as late February, and the first broods of ducklings have been noted as early as April 13. Ducks with broods of flightless young are usually seen in May and early June and occasionally in July. These broods have numbered up to 14 young, but averaged about nine.

Second most common of the Valley nesters are the mallards. Wheeler Refuge personnel estimated about 25 breeding pairs each spring. Nesting begins in early April and the first broods have been noted on April 24. Broods sighted usually consist of from 7 to 9 ducklings and these have been noted as late as early July.

Somewhat less common than the mallards, as nesters, are the black ducks. On Wheeler Refuge about a dozen pairs are estimated to breed each year. While nesting probably begins earlier in the season than the records indicate, the first nest noted has been on May 1, with the first broods seen on May 13. There are no records of flightless young after June 7. From these

records, broods seem to average about seven ducklings.

While hooded mergansers are definitely nesters, they are never common in summer. On April 19, 1947, Paul Bryan of the T.V.A. Fish and Game Branch, discovered a female incubating a clutch of eggs near Elk River. Wheeler Refuge personnel saw a female with a brood of seven young on April 27, 1940, and a female with a brood of three young May 15, 1952.

While pairs of blue-wing teal have been seen on Wheeler Refuge throughout summer, no young have ever been noted. J. L. Heflin, manager of the Alabama Waterfowl Development Project, reports a female blue-wing with a brood of three flightless young on the Swan Creek Public Hunting Area May 20, 1951. There have been scattered unverified reports of teal nesting in this part of the State and it seems probable that a few pairs breed in Alabama each year.

Although our State is too far south for any large-scale waterfowl nesting and most of our ducks breed far to the north and visit us only during cold weather, we do contribute many young wood ducks and a few mallards and blacks to the continent's waterfowl population. A close watch may reveal more nesting in other localities and by other species. This would be a worthwhile project for the bird student, since we do not know enough about duck nesting at the extreme southern limits of their ranges.

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge
Decatur, Alabama
Accepted for publication July 1, 1953.