

The changing status of the Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*) in Mexico



Photo/Geoff LeBaron (VIREO/L05/8/011).

THE OCCURRENCE OF THE WOOD Duck (*Aix sponsa*) in Mexico is unevenly documented and poorly understood. The species is listed as casual in northern Mexico, with records only from Durango, Sinaloa, and the Distrito Federal, the latter two reports well over 100 years old (A.O.U. 1983). In the past 35 years, however, Wood Ducks have been noted with increasing frequency and in increasing numbers at various Mexican localities, including the northeastern lowlands, the central plateau, and the west coast (Table 1). The purpose of this paper is to draw together scattered published and unpublished information on the occurrence of Wood Ducks in Mexico on a state-by-state basis in order to clarify the distribution and current status of the species in that country.

Tamaulipas—This century's first report of a Wood Duck in Mexico was

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Christmas Bird Count data help clarify the current status of the Wood Duck in Mexico



Photo/S.J. Lans (VIREO/L11/1/001).

of a lone female noted by Evenden (1952) on a pond 117 kilometers southwest of Matamoros, along the road to Victoria, February 23, 1951. Since the establishment of Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) in Mexico in the early 1970s, Wood Ducks have been noted on two Tamaulipan counts. Since 1977, the Gómez Farías CBC has recorded Wood Ducks on two of five counts: two birds on January 1, 1977 (*Am. Birds* 31:896, 1977) and two on January 2, 1982 (*Am. Birds* 36:769, 1982). The Río Corona CBC, first conducted in the winter of 1978–79, has recorded Wood Ducks on seven of its nine counts: two on December 29, 1979 (*Am. Birds* 34:673, 1980); two on December 27, 1980 (*Am. Birds* 35:740, 1981); two on January 1, 1983 (*Am. Birds* 37:784, 1983); a remarkable 17 individuals on December 31, 1983 (*Am. Birds* 38:819, 1984); four on December 29, 1984 (*Am. Birds* 39:814, 1985); four on December 28, 1985 (*Am. Birds* 40:1022, 1986); and ten on January 3, 1987 (*Am. Birds* 41 in press). Both the Gómez Farías and Río Corona areas have been explored ornithologically since the late 1930s, yet Wood Ducks remained unknown there until these recent sightings.

San Luis Potosí—Davis (1952) reported that a female Wood Duck was seen on three consecutive days during the period December 27–31, 1951, along the Río Axtla near Xilitla, in southeastern San Luis Potosí. A CBC was established at the northeastern town of El Naranjo in 1972, where Wood Ducks have since been noted on six occasions: two on December 20, 1972 (*Am. Birds* 27:536, 1973); seven on December 23, 1975 (*Am. Birds* 30:621, 1976); one on December 28, 1976 (*Am. Birds* 31:895, 1977); three on December 30, 1980 (*Am. Birds* 35:739, 1981); one on December 30, 1982 (*Am. Birds* 37:783, 1983); and nine on December 29, 1985 (*Am. Birds* 40:1021, 1986). Although not located in a coastal state, both the Xilitla and the El Naranjo areas contain lowlands at the base of the Sierra Madre Oriental.

Veracruz—David N. Pashley (a doctoral student in the School of Forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries at Louisiana State University conducting avian

research in the Sierra de los Tuxtlas region of southeastern Veracruz) observed a female Wood Duck on December 4, 5, and 10, 1984, on a pond 20 kilometers north of Catemaco. This bird, also seen by Rosamond Coates-Estrada and Steve Howell, appeared with the passage of a strong cold front, as did several other waterbird species seldom noted so far south (Pashley 1987). The Tuxtlas region has been worked intensively by ornithologists and birders for many years, but lacks prior reports of Wood Ducks.

Coahuila—Taylor (1966) saw two Wood Ducks on December 28, 1964, at Posos de la Becerra, 16 kilometers southwest of Cuatro Ciénegas in the Chihuahuan Desert region of central Coahuila. de Leon (1987) took a female Wood Duck on November 31, 1986, one kilometer southeast of Hipolito.

Durango—Hubbard and Crossin (1974) reported taking a female on April 3, 1972, at Río Mesquital (elevation 1350 meters), 72 kilometers south-southeast of Durango; the specimen showed no signs of having been in captivity. On June 12–13, 1986, Melissa J. Renfro and I observed and photographed two Wood Ducks at Presa San Bartolo (elevation 1940 meters), a shallow reservoir with standing timber located in central Durango, just east of Canatlán and about 60 kilometers north of Durango. These birds, both males, were wary and capable of flight. I had visited this reservoir, as well as nearby Laguna de Santiaguillo, on numerous occasions from 1973 to 1978 and again in 1981 without recording Wood Ducks.

Jalisco—On the morning of June 8, 1974, I observed and photographed a male Wood Duck on a small pond 1.5 kilometers east of Laguna de Cajititlán (elevation 1500 meters), about 30 kilometers south-southeast of Guadalajara. This bird, which was feeding in the shallows when first observed, seemed quite wary and, when eventually disturbed, took wing with three Mexican Ducks (*Anas platyrhynchos diazi*) and flew to the safety of an extensive waterhyacinth mat that covered much of the nearby lake. Color slides of the Wood Duck, in company with Mexican Ducks and Northern Jacanas (*Jacana spinosa*), show it to be in apparently typical spring plumage. On the mornings of July 15–16 of the same year, a male Wood Duck, presumably the same individual,

was present at the same locality. This site was one of my principal waterfowl study areas each May through September from 1973 to 1975 (Williams 1980); Wood Ducks were unobserved on visits except those mentioned.

Distrito Federal—One of the two very oldest reports for Mexico pertains to the Valley of Mexico, a closed basin (elevation 2200 meters) containing Mexico City and Lago de Texcoco, and including parts of the state of México and the Distrito Federal. Sánchez (1878) appears to have been the first to ascribe the Wood Duck to the area, listing it without comment for the Valley of Mexico. Next, Herrera (1887) included the Wood Duck along with 15 other species of waterfowl generally said to arrive in the valley in the fall and to leave in the spring. Villada (1890–91), who apparently never saw the species, credits Herrera with considering it “accidental” on Texcoco in August while arriving in October and leaving in

March with all the other wintering waterfowl. Interestingly, Villada (1890–91·260) closes his account by expressing his personal doubts that the species is ever present in the valley.

With the information at hand, it is difficult to judge accurately the status of the Wood Duck in the Valley of Mexico during those days. If specimens were obtained, their whereabouts today are unknown to me. I suspect that Herrera did indeed find a Wood Duck on Texcoco in August of one year and correctly recognized it as something unusual, at least at that season. However, he probably listed the species with the more common North American migrants with no actual evidence of regular winter occurrence. It is noteworthy that Sánchez, Herrera, and Villada all provided Náhuatl (Aztec) names for the common or conspicuous waterfowl species, but none gave such a name for the Wood Duck. This suggests that the species was not well known to the in-

Table 1. Wood Duck reports from Mexico, 1951–1987.

Date	# of Birds	Location (Map Reference No.)
<i>1950s and 1960s</i>		
Feb. 23, 1951	1	117 km SW Matamoros, TAMS (1)
Dec. 27–31, 1951	1	Xilitla, SLP (5)
Feb. 1961	1	Agua Prieta, SON (12)
Dec. 28, 1964	2	16 km SW Cuatro Ciénegas, COAH (7)
<i>1970s</i>		
Apr. 3, 1972	1	Río Mesquital, DGO (9)
Dec. 20, 1972	2	El Naranjo, SLP (4)
June 8 & July 15–16, 1974	1	1.5 km E. Lag Cajititlán, JAL (10)
Dec. 23, 1975	7	El Naranjo, SLP (4)
Dec. 28, 1976	1	El Naranjo, SLP (4)
Jan. 1, 1977	2	Gómez Farías, TAMS (3)
Dec. 29, 1979	2	Río Corona, TAMS (2)
<i>1980s</i>		
Dec. 27, 1980	2	Río Corona, TAMS (2)
Dec. 30, 1980	3	El Naranjo, SLP (4)
Jan. 2, 1982	2	Gómez Farías, TAMS (2)
Dec. 30, 1982	1	El Naranjo, SLP (4)
Jan. 1, 1983	2	Río Corona, TAMS (2)
Feb. 6, 1983	4	Villa Hidalgo, SON (13)
Dec. 30, 1983	2	San Blas, NAY (21)
Dec. 31, 1983	17	Río Corona, TAMS (2)
Dec. 4–5 & 10, 1984	1	20 km N Catemaco, VC (6)
Dec. 29, 1984	4	Río Corona, TAMS (2)
Nov. 26–Dec. 4, 1985	1	Cuemanco, DF (11)
Dec. 28, 1985	4	Río Corona, TAMS (2)
Dec. 29, 1985	9	El Naranjo, SLP (4)
Jan. 6, 1986	1	Tonichi, SON (18)
Feb. 7, 1986	2	San Antonio de Huerte, SON (17)
Feb. 11, 1986	3	13 km S Onabas, SON (19)
June 12–13, 1986	2	Presa San Bartolo, DGO (8)
Nov. 31, 1986 [Nov. 30 or Dec. 1?]	1	Hipolito, COAH (7a)
Dec. 14, 1986	1	Natora, SON (16)
Dec. 18, 1986	1	Lagode Chalco, DF (11)
Dec. 21, 1986	3	Aros/Yaqui confluence, SON (15)
Jan. 3, 1987	10	Río Corona, TAMS (2)
Mar. 25, 1987	2	13 km S Granados, SON (14)

digenous population and hence may never have occurred regularly in the valley. Furthermore, Villada (1890–91: 256) stated that the noted naturalist A. Dugès believed that the Náhuatl name “Ixtactzonyayauhqui” (which practically all recent compendia ascribe to the Wood Duck) most probably applied to the Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*), a species which is now, as it probably was then, much more common than the Wood Duck in Mexico in the winter.

Wilson (1986) recorded an adult male Wood Duck in a small pond east of Cuernavaca, present from November 26 through December 4, 1985. He once again recorded a single individual on the Mexico City CBC, December 18, 1986 (*Am. Birds* 41 in press), at Lago de Chalco in the Tlahuac District (Wilson, pers. comm.).

Sonora—A Wood Duck was shot by a hunter at a tank south of Agua Prieta in February 1961; the bird was mounted by Seymour Levy of Tucson, but its present location is unknown. On February 6, 1983, two pairs were found on the Río Bavispe near Villa Hidalgo by Stephen M. Russell. In 1986 and 1987, while conducting river trips in search of nesting Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), Bryan Brown recorded Wood Ducks on six occasions in eastern Sonora: one bird on the Río Yaqui just north of Tonichi on January 6, 1986; a male and a female on the Río Yaqui about five kilometers north of San Antonio de Huerte on February 7, 1986; three on the Río Yaqui about 13 kilometers below Onabas on February 11, 1986; one on the Río Aros near Natorra (east of Sahuaripa and near the Chihuahuan border) on December 14, 1986; three on the Río Aros near its confluence with the Río Bavispe on December 21, 1986; and two on the Río Bavispe about 13 kilometers below Granados on March 25, 1987. The ornithology of Sonora was reported upon in detail by van Rossem (1945), but with no mention of Wood Ducks.

Sinaloa—In his summary of specimens collected primarily by Grayson, Xántus, and Bischoff in western Mexico, Lawrence (1874) listed the Wood Duck followed only by “Mazatlan, Col. Abert.” There is no further information on this specimen (U.S. National Museum No. 12705), nor is any record available on the date of John J. Abert’s Mazatlán material, except that it was obtained prior to 1859. Colonel Abert must have been an extremely selective, or extremely fortunate, collector, as he

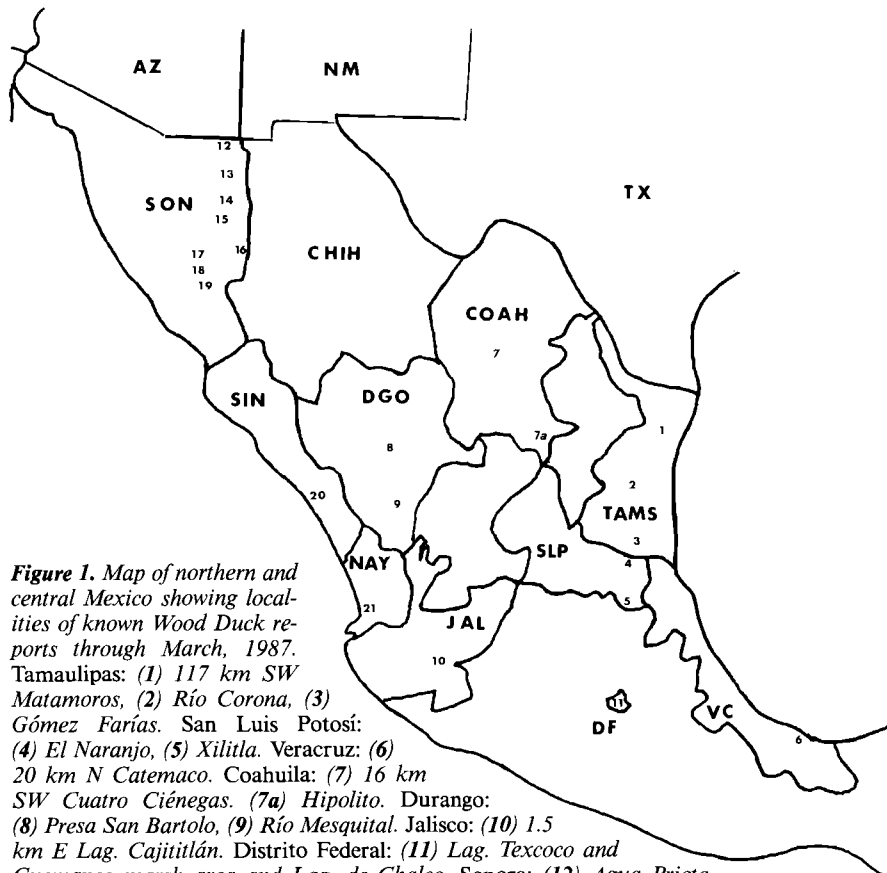


Figure 1. Map of northern and central Mexico showing localities of known Wood Duck reports through March, 1987. Tamaulipas: (1) 117 km SW Matamoros, (2) Río Corona, (3) Gómez Farías. San Luis Potosí: (4) El Naranjo, (5) Xilitla. Veracruz: (6) 20 km N Catemaco. Coahuila: (7) 16 km SW Cuatro Ciénegas. (7a) Hipólito. Durango: (8) Presa San Bartolo, (9) Río Mesquiteal. Jalisco: (10) 1.5 km E Lag. Cajititlán. Distrito Federal: (11) Lag. Texcoco and Cuernavaca marsh area and Lag. de Chalco. Sonora: (12) Agua Prieta, (13) Villa Hidalgo, (14) 13 km S Granados, (15) Río Aros/Río Yaqui confluence, (16) Natorra, (17) 5 km N San Antonio de Huerte, (18) Tonichi, (19) 13 km S Onabas. Sinaloa: (20) Mazatlán. Nayarit: (21) San Blas.

is credited with also taking at Mazatlán the only mainland example of the Hawaiian Duck (*Anas wyvilliana*), although the validity of this last has been questioned (American Ornithologists’ Union 1983:76). Other than Abert’s specimen, which was sent from the U.S. National Museum to the Chicago Academy of Sciences in 1870 (where it became a victim of the Chicago Fire of 1871), there are no other Wood Duck records from Sinaloa.

Nayarit—On December 30, 1983, two Wood Ducks were noted on the San Blas CBC (*Am. Birds* 38:819, 1984). Although the environs of San Blas have been intensively birded since the early 1960s, this is the first sighting for the area and the state.

Discussion

Birders began to show increased interest in Mexico during the 1950s, an interest that has continued to the present day, but this interest alone does not necessarily explain the increased incidence of Wood Duck observations over the past 35 years. From the late 1890s through the first half of the present cen-

tury, numerous collecting expeditions were undertaken throughout Mexico. It is noteworthy that E.W. Nelson, E.A. Goldman, W.W. Brown, C.C. Lamb, G.B. Saunders, A.S. Leopold, and others all failed to note the species despite years of work in Mexico. The same period was, correspondingly, a time of critically low Wood Duck numbers in the United States and Canada, when the species was feared by many to be on the road to extinction (Bellrose 1976). It was not until the 1940s that the North American Wood Duck population had recovered sufficiently to allow even limited hunting, and it has only been since the 1960s that the population has maintained consistently high numbers (Bellrose 1976). Occurrences in Mexico appear to have shadowed the overall increases in the North American population.

The regularity with which Wood Ducks have been noted recently in winter in northeastern Mexico has followed closely on increases observed in adjacent south Texas since the early 1960s. Brazda (Saunders and Saunders 1981) saw a flock of 25 on January 11, 1963, in the Río Grande delta on the Texas-

Tamaulipas line Bolen and Cottam (1967) reported that a flock of 200 wintered at Lake Corpus Christi during the winter of 1963–64 and that the first Wood Duck nest for south Texas was found July 15, 1964. Wood Ducks are now recorded with such regularity in south Texas that they are no longer considered unusual by compilers. A flock of 175 was seen below Falcon Dam on the Rio Grande on January 31, 1981 (*Am. Birds* 35:316, 1981), while during the 84th CBC the species was noted in the Rio Grande valley from Anzalduas-Bentsen upriver through Del Rio and Big Bend National Park to El Paso (*Am. Birds* 38, 1984).

Because of the popularity of Wood Ducks with aviculturists and waterfowl fanciers, extralimital occurrences are often viewed with suspicion. However, the predominance of winter occurrences in suitable habitat at relatively remote locations, together with the general correlation between increased sightings in Mexico and a rebounding North American population, argues strongly that these reports represent naturally occurring birds.

To date, nesting by Wood Ducks is unreported from Mexico, but should be expected in the northeast and perhaps elsewhere in the north. Of special interest as regards nesting is an ambitious nest box program for Muscovy Ducks (*Cairina moschata*) now underway in parts of Mexico; some 2500 nest boxes are now in place, including some in areas where Wood Ducks have been reported. Additionally, the numerous reservoirs on the northern plateau, which both flood timber and create small areas of riparian habitat, may eventually prove attractive to nesting Wood Ducks.

In light of the Wood Duck's historic scarcity in Mexico, the great number of alleged vernacular names provided by the literature is puzzling. One recent publication (USFWS Resour. Publ. 139: 14, 1981) gave no less than eight Mexican names—more names than there were then generally known records of occurrence! As noted above, the Náhuatl name may apply to another species, while most of the rest are, as noted by Saunders and Saunders (1981), purely “book names” and unknown to the Mexican people.

Summary

Wood Ducks have been reported from nine Mexican states and the Dis-

trito Federal (Fig 1) They are found in the lowlands of northeastern Mexico regularly in Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí south rarely to Veracruz, occasionally on the central plateau and rarely in southeastern Coahuila and Durango south to Jalisco and the Distrito Federal, and in the west coast states of Sonora (principally on upland rivers), Sinaloa and Nayarit. The great majority of records are from December–February, although there are individual reports for March, April, June, July, and August.

Following two very old reports from the 19th century, the Wood Duck went unreported from Mexico for about 75 years. The species was noted on four occasions during the 1950s and 1960s (five birds at four locations), on seven occasions in the 1970s (16 birds at five locations), and on 23 occasions so far during the 1980s (78 birds at 16 locations). The apparent absence of the species from Mexico early in this century and its appearance there in recent years seems to correlate with critically low numbers in the United States and Canada in the early 1900s and the subsequent recovery of the continental population by mid-century. Regular occurrence in northeastern Mexico has followed closely on observed increases in numbers in adjacent south Texas. Nesting is unreported but might be expected in the northeast and perhaps elsewhere in the north. The species is of regular enough occurrence in west Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and eastern Sonora to be expected to occur also in the state of Chihuahua.

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