

On Ebert's Golden Pond

By Leif Marking

Wood Ducks are cavity nesting waterfowl that search out natural or artificial nesting places along aquatic habitats that are more often forested and offer streams, ponds, and small lakes. They are truly ducks of the woods so artificial nesting structures will be more useful and successful if they are placed in the proper habitat locations. Ebert's Golden Pond, spring fed, and about two acres in size, is located just off the La Crosse River near West Salem WI. It has been attracting nesting wood ducks for more than a decade with canister type boxes originally constructed by the Brice Prairie Conservation Association. They were originally mounted on pipes in the ground near the pond, but I placed them on trees with pipe mounts so the boxes would be higher and overlook the pond.

Last year (2007) the box placed on a large, old oak tree with horizontal lower branches seemed to be desired by several female woodies because two or three eggs would appear in a single day while none were laid in the other four boxes. Therefore two or three females were competing for the same nest box and apparently deposited their eggs at different times. When the dominant hen decided to incubate and prevented any further egg deposits she found 25 eggs beneath her. Then the less dominant females chose other boxes and produced much smaller clutches of eggs for their incubation. The 25 eggs were too many for a single layer so many of the eggs were double layered and I wondered how this hen could manipulate those layered eggs to maintain the heat of incubation uniformly to all those eggs. Well, as suspected, only 19 ducklings hatched to escape, but that is a big family! One fertile egg did not hatch, and five hatched only partially and those ducklings perished under the anxious activity of those that thrived and escaped.

This year the female woodies chose a different site for their nest competition and they deposited 31 eggs before one dominant female began incubation and forced the competitors to choose other boxes. Prior to and somewhat simultaneously other female woodies deposited 23 eggs in the box directly across the pond. They also deposited 12 and seven eggs in two other boxes. Once again I wondered



Thirty one wood duck eggs in a single nest results in several layers of eggs to incubate by a single female.



Thirty egg membranes verify the number of ducklings hatched, 29 escaped; and a single egg remained unhatched.

how that hen could possibly offer enough heat of incubation to those 31 double layered eggs. The average time of incubation for duck eggs to hatch is 28 days under normal conditions. This spring was unusually cold, and the large number of eggs suggested a longer incubation period. So I checked the progress at 30 days to find a single duckling hatched, and piping was evident for a number of eggs. Suspecting that hatching of so many may take longer than 24 hours, I returned two days later to discover a remarkable hatching success. Thirty of the eggs had hatched and 29 ducklings had escaped. One egg remained and one duckling was dead. The photo illustrates the 30 egg membranes from this very successful hatch. The 29 escaped ducklings from a single box establish a new record for club members; previously the record was 22 escaped ducklings from a single nest box. Golden Pond is truly a Wood Duck haven!

Note—Jack and Joyce Ebert are life members of BRAW and monitor 17 bluebird boxes for cavity nesting song birds on their property near their Golden Pond.



Joyce and Jack Ebert enjoy living with the wildlife and feeding the birds on their farm.