

Hurrying Spring

Time on the ice interrupted by warm weather chores

By Dick Ellis



Dick Ellis walks the ice of marsh pond after a two mile walk through woods from a county road February 21 to clean one of the woodduck box houses he placed in 2007 to bolster the local duck populations in southern and northern Wisconsin. Woodduck houses must be cleaned of old egg shells and re-matted with proper nesting material before the spring migration of ducks from the south to invite hens to nest again.

It might not be possible to hurry spring, but there are ways to extend the invitation. Mentally, the task can be difficult when the hardwater Saturday on Big Silver Lake in Waushara County where our group ice-fished was still more than 20 inches thick, a story next on the schedule. Immense Trout Lake in Vilas County will be our base camp for the day March 1 and whitefish the target. Barron County and the great northwest serves as host for more ice fishing March 2, and March 3, this column originates from Lake Superior bobbing for Lake trout. No, it doesn't feel like suntan lotion time yet and... really... I am in no hurry to push out the winter fun just yet anyway.

But spring is looming and now is not too early to prepare for the woodduck migration and Woody's nesting needs. That's where I was Friday, cleaning one of my own nesting boxes of egg shells and old nesting material that I originally placed in southern and northern Wisconsin marshes in 2007. Mature wood duck pairs return first to Wisconsin from wintering grounds primarily in Arkansas and Louisiana as early as mid-February (in extreme southern Wisconsin) with hens claiming the same box used the year before often before April 1st. Imperative to achieving high re-nest-

ing statistics, each dwelling must be cleaned of the hatched and unhatched eggs from the previous season, and replaced with a new bedding of sawdust or fine wood chips.

Hens in early spring will be seen near an artificial box for five or ten minutes "evaluating" factors such as safety from predators and proximity to water in determining whether the location is right. The drake will never enter a box, but remains nearby to encourage the hen. The hen will then sit on the roof, and eventually crawls in for a first look around. These are the Wood duck facts I learned many years ago as a guest of the Koshkonong Wetlands Association.

Young of year hens hatched the previous year will imprint on the box and also often return in later spring to the same house. Ultimately several hens may use the same dwelling. Each hen lays one egg each day with an average collective clutch being 14 eggs. Only one hen, though, will incubate the entire clutch, with the average incubation period being 30 days.

Having multiple hens use the same house is a common occurrence and is referred to as a "dump nest." The proper size house enables the eggs to be laid in layers to promote a successful hatch; the single hen that ultimately stays during the incubation period can



Lucy joins Dick Ellis to clean a woodduck house first erected in 2007 to attract nesting hens. Boxes must be cleaned and readied again with new nesting material annually to attract the tenants again in spring.

turn the eggs as necessary and otherwise efficiently nurture the entire clutch.

Each egg is laid in early morning, with the hen staying until approximately 9:00 a.m.

With the arrival of the third or fourth egg, the hen begins to pull warming “down” from her chest to nurture the clutch. With about eight to 10 eggs laid the hen instinctively leaves the nest only twice daily during the incubation period for approximately 20 minutes to an hour with each departure.

The hen instinctively knows when the incubation period is concluding, and begins to “call” to her young still in the eggs. The chicks begin to peck their way into the real world. The new young of year hatch in the afternoon and spend only one night in the box.

Anxious to fledge her young, the next morning Mother Hen scans the surrounding terrain for predators, drops to the ground, and calls or “chirps” the chicks out. Chicks can’t fly for about 60 days but Mother Hen leads them right to water. Chicks also need insects and invertebrates immediately that they find on the ground.

Due largely to predation, a five percent nesting success rate is average and 15 percent the break even mark for maintaining the population of North American waterfowl. With the proper boxes and instruction, the success rate can increase to as high as 90 percent. Proper construction and annual springtime preparation has provided man the potential to supplement the wood duck population literally with hundreds of thousands of birds... just in Wisconsin.

Man’s successful intervention was one of those “necessity is the Mother of Invention” stories. With overharvest, extensive logging

and loss of wood duck habitat decades ago throughout Wisconsin, the bird’s population went into severe decline to the point of being placed on the federally protected list. Since, because of hunting restrictions, responsible logging practices and in part because so many people are placing nesting boxes, the wood duck has made a tremendous comeback. Currently, in fact, the wood duck is among the top two harvested ducks in Wisconsin.

For this hunter who enjoys taking binoculars back again when spring actually does arrive to see if the houses have been adopted, the welcome mat has been placed. When the birds arrive too, across Wisconsin the blending of natural forest and artificial housing structures reflect man’s response to one species of wildlife in need. In the north last spring in Vilas County, we watched one nesting pair of woodies use an old hollowed out tree just 30 yards from our cabin to raise one clutch of chicks while 200 yards down “our” hill another pair used our second artificial nesting box strategically placed in a marsh.

Call it a Spring Thing. It may be early in your mind. But I strongly recommend extending the invitation.

To order a wood duck house kit or for more information, connect with www.koshwetlands.org. It’s the place where this reporter initially learned about woody, and purchased two boxes. ^owo

More outdoors? Connect with us at www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com.

1st Annual Hunting Heritage Held Wisconsin Hunter’s Network launched

The Wisconsin DNR hosted the first annual Hunting Heritage Conference in Wausau February 19-20. The conference, according to Ben Mott, Deputy Conservation Warden and Learn to Hunt Coordinator with the DNR brought members of Conservation Organizations from across Wisconsin together to share ideas on the learn to hunt program. The Hunting Heritage Conference was funded by a grant through the National Shooting Sports Foundation and Hunting Heritage Partnership.

Over the last decade, the number of hunters has declined across the country as well as in Wisconsin. The Learn to Hunt Program has great potential as a recruitment tool to help change hunter loss, according to Mott.

“Wisconsin has a rich hunting tradition and the Learn to Hunt Program is a way for experienced mentors to pass on their knowledge to the next generation of hunters in Wisconsin,” he said. “During the planning stages we worked with local and statewide organizations in order to reach capacity for this event. Because of their dedication to the future of conservation, we had nearly 50 local and statewide conservation groups as well as three different government agencies represented.”

DNR Secretary Matt Frank offered the welcome with Bruce Matthews, Executive Director of the North Country trail Association acting as keynote speaker. Attendees also discussed state university research pertaining to

the Learn to Hunt Program and social networking and hunting. “The main goal of the conference was to facilitate networking between these organizations and to come out with a list of best practice points for hosting successful Learn to Hunt Programs,” Mott said.

In an interview Sunday, February 21, the day after the conference, Wisconsin Head Conservation Warden, Randy Stark, said that the main goals of the Wisconsin Hunters Network would be “to build community around the issue of hunter recruitment and retention”, facilitate networking and sharing of ideas between individuals and organizations, and to share best practices for mentoring and hosting suc-

cessful Learn to Hunt Programs.

“As the world around us is changing, our generation is writing the next chapter in conservation history,” Stark said. “Undoubtedly one of the storylines will be the impact this generation of hunters had on passing on our hunting heritage and the conservation ethic to the next generation. Based on the palpable energy, sense and purpose, innovation, gender and cultural diversity experienced at the Hunting Heritage conference, this responsibility is in dedicated and capable hands who believe failure is not an option.”

For more information, connect with huntersnetwork.org or see them on Facebook. ^owo