

For the Hawkeye

Signs of early spring are all around us. Mother always said that the river ice always breaks up before Saint Patrick's Day on March 17th. The first open water will bring the pairs of mated wood ducks to our region. Then when we have a series of three or four warm bright days the ducks will be prospecting for nesting sites. If the hen that used one of your boxes last year is still living and escaped the hunting season last autumn you can bank on her returning to nest in your box again.

So you want everything to be ready for her! Check your boxes now before she arrives! Be sure the fastening hardware that supports your box is in safe condition to hold the heavy box. Look for decayed bottoms and replace if necessary. See that all nails are fully driven and add new nails if needed to seal all joints. Any open cracks can allow the litter which the hen needs to seep out. There should be four inches of litter available for the hen to bury her first six or eight eggs. In case the litter is compacted use a sharp pointed metal tool to break up any crust. You need not remove the old litter but add more if needed to bring up to four inches.

I strongly suggest that this year you inspect each box at least once a week. Do not be worried about disturbing the hen. If you get a nest started it takes two weeks approximately to lay the average thirteen eggs at the rate of one per day. Most eggs are laid in the morning so if you do your inspecting later in the day the hen will not be in her nest. Later after incubation starts the hen usually will allow you to look in on her quietly without flushing. But if she should flush do not be worried, she'll soon return to her nest.

If you really want to get the most pleasure out of this experience then start a loose leaf notebook in which you record the evidence you uncover by your next inspection. Keep the data on each nest on a separate page. When

a nesting attempt starts you will soon be able to determine the date the last egg was laid. Remember the eggs are laid at the rate of one per day. Incubation takes approximately thirty days. When the probable hatching date is only a day or two away you should watch for a chance to inspect while the hen is away on her twice daily rest flight. The evening flight is apt to occur around sunset time. Inspect the eggs to detect the first sign of pipping. The hatch occurs two days after the pipping begins and the exodus of the ducklings follows the next morning. You will want to see this exciting event! This chapter closes with the hope that the ducklings survive and that the hen will return next year.

Each year at this time there is always the anxiety as to how much breeding stock will be available for the coming season. Remember that even though our local hunting season extends for fifty days the ducks are subject to a much longer period of hunting. The earliest Canadian seasons open before October. Next the northern states and so on region by region all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Where the season I believe finally closes in January. So the migratory water fowl are followed by open shooting seasons as they move southward through a period of about four months each year.

Also remember that so called refuge areas are usually surrounded by open hunting areas. Often by commercial blinds because of the good hunting. The commercial blinds usually put out literally hundreds of block decoys and employ expert "callers" to lure the birds into shooting range. Then from four to six guns open up on the birds often with deadly effect if the birds are close enough. Often with many crippled ducks when shot at too long range, flying away to die in hiding.

Perhaps you would like to join the ranks of sportsmen who favor cutting down the length of the open water fowl hunting season so that hunters may enjoy a limited season without killing so many birds. We need to send more live

ducks back north in spring to utilize the already available nesting grounds, now not used because there aren't enough ducks to use them to anywhere their capacity in most years.

Frederic Leopold