

# ALONG•THE•TRAIL

by Ken Cudmore, Site Manager

*The Winnipeg Wood Duck Project (WWDP) is probably most energetic conservation program ever undertaken in the city. It is also the most successful. Now entering its 24th year, the project consists of providing and maintaining nesting boxes for the cavity nesting wood ducks along the three main river systems within city limits. Today these colourful ducks number in the hundreds, if not thousands. But this was not always the case.*

Never a common bird, the Winnipeg wood duck population was suffering a serious lack of potential nesting sites in the 70's. Females require a cavity, 10 to 50 feet up in a dead or dying tree, and unfortunately, there came a drastic reduction of suitable trees. Oblivious to the problem they were creating for the little ducks, riverbank residents removed many such dead trees to make way for new backyard landscaping designs.

The WWDP got its start in 1970 when a concerned group of individuals recognized the problem. In cooperation with the Wildlife Foundation of Manitoba, a few wood duck ducklings were imported from Ontario. The little woodies were raised and then released along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers just before they could fly. Because females faithfully return to where they learned to fly, hopes were high that some "pioneer" ducklings would be back in spring with husbands in tow. In anticipation of their arrival, nest boxes were constructed for placement in trees along the riverbanks.

Then a man by the name of Elliot Rodger took charge. This retired Major-General took over the actual physical operation of the infant project, referring to himself as the "Chief Box Inspector". Elliot and his right hand man, Des Whellams, went right to work installing the boxes. A handful of the original ducklings did return as breeding adults and the Winnipeg Wood Duck Project was well underway.

Interest grew steadily as word spread amongst the riverbank residents of the "beautiful little ducks walking around back lawns and in the tree tops." From just a few boxes in 1970, to over 100 by 1980, the wood duck was firmly established as a resident Winnipeg waterfowl species.

After 12 years of diligent ladder climbing, Elliot Rodger "retired" and moved to Ottawa in 1982. He is to be commended for his years of service to Winnipeggers — particularly the riverbank residents. To this day, many of them hold fond memories of the man as they enjoy the fruits of his labour.

With the Chief Box Inspector's retirement, the WWDP entered a new era.

In 1983, the newly established Fort Whyte Centre assumed responsibility along with the help of Mr. Ross Holder and other supporters who generously met the demand for building new boxes. And with a dedicated crew of volunteers to cover the city, both the

## The Winnipeg Wood Duck Project



number of boxes maintained and the population of ducks have doubled!

Wood ducks are now our most common urban waterfowl. Fifteen years ago, a pair of wood ducks nesting in a riverbank resident's yard was newsworthy information. Woodies were scarce and you were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a pair quietly hugging the cool shoreline shade.

Last year, I received reports of up to 30 ducks foraging for acorns in just one backyard. I even get calls about colourful males strutting around garage rooftops two blocks from the river (*the females are likely on nests nearby*). Two pair have nested faithfully for the past five years in an East Kildonan yard, a block and a half from the Red River.

During fall migration, the Centre now hosts dozens and dozens of staging wood ducks. Conservation Officers from Beaudry Park near Headingly tell me they



Photo: Jim Penner



see flocks of wood ducks numbering in the hundreds on the Assiniboine River each fall. And the list goes on. Suffice to say the WWDP is enjoying continuous success.

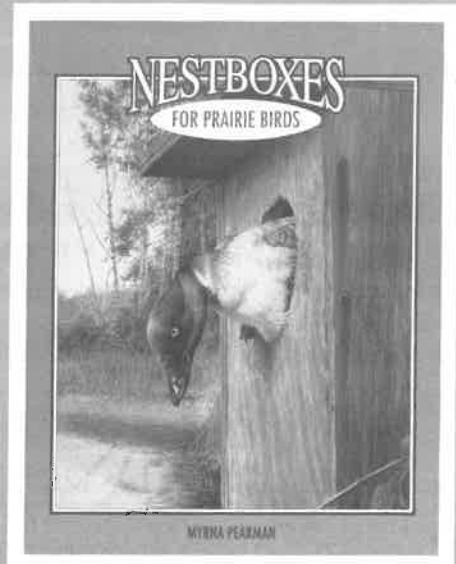
This spring the WWDP enters yet another era. Fort Whyte Centre will begin an energetic nest box campaign designed to double or even triple the number of boxes maintained.

In the battle to control Dutch Elm disease, hundreds of ideal wood duck nesting sites are being removed every year. This purge of riverbank elms and subsequent loss of potential nesting cavities is the only real threat facing Winnipeg's wood duck population. But by erecting more nest boxes, we can compensate for the loss of suitable nesting sites.

Past history speaks for itself...  
*"If you build it, they will come."* 🦆

## So You Want to Build a Nesting Box...

Fort Whyte Centre is pleased to introduce this beautiful new book for spring! It's a comprehensive guide to cavity-nesting bird conservation on the Canadian prairies. Eighty pages feature 54 full colour photographs and 80 illustrations. *Nestboxes for Prairie Birds* was researched and written by Myrna Pearman, the author of the best-selling *Winter Bird Feeding -- An Alberta Guide*.



This book shares with you:

- Functional, easy to follow and extensively field tested nestbox plans
- All the information you need to design, build and place nestboxes for the more than 40 species of cavity-nesting birds native to the Canadian prairies.
- Guidance on how to monitor and maintain an effective nestbox trail and how to keep records of its success.
- Solutions to potential problems on the nestbox trail, including ways to deal with pests.
- The history of cavity-nesting bird conservation in Canada and a map of both historic and current bluebird nestbox trails on the prairies.
- The findings and field experiences of nestbox trail operators all across N. America.

PLUS...

- The natural histories of all cavity-nesting birds on the prairies — from owls to bluebirds, from creepers to kestrels and from ducks to nuthatches!

### "Nestboxes for Prairie Birds"

Available now  
 in the Fort Whyte Gift Shop! **\$18<sup>50</sup>**  
 .....Just

*Royalties will be used for the conservation work of Ellis Bird Farm Ltd.*

## WINNIPEG WOOD DUCKS



A unique volunteer experience is just a phone call away!  
 Fort Whyte Centre is actively seeking interested individuals to assist with the Winnipeg Wood Duck Box Project.  
 Join our volunteer team of wood duck box installers & inspectors and learn a great deal more about the beautiful birds that will benefit from your time commitment.

If you are interested in helping with the Winnipeg Wood Duck Project, please call Barry Jansen at 989-8353.

Photo: Irwin Bauer



*"I have a nagging feeling we're doing something wrong."*