

Notes From the Woods

... and some tidbits from the bird world! March is the month when the spring bird migration starts to ramp up, particularly for waterbirds. Waterfowl, gulls, and some shorebirds are already on the way to their northern breeding grounds. They will follow open water northwards, many headed to breeding grounds above the Arctic Circle, hoping that the ice has melted on their part of the tundra. If not, they may have to wait until next year.

Geese are on the move through our area this month. Migratory Canada geese (yes, there are still some of those!) and snow geese can sometimes be seen feeding in our farm fields, often in a mixed flock of the two species. Snow geese can be distinguished from domestic geese by their black wingtips, which are very visible in flight, and their pinkish bills and legs.

While only three species of duck regularly breed in our area— mallards, common mergansers, and wood ducks - many others pass through in late winter, stopping to rest and feed in areas where they can find open water. In late winter and early spring, it can be worthwhile to check out any ducks on almost any pond or stream, to find something different. I often spot ring-necked ducks and buffleheads on farm ponds in East Amwell at this time of year.

Wood ducks, which naturally nest in tree cavities, will be house-hunting this month. The pair will usually choose a secluded wooded area near water, a wooded swamp being ideal, and the female will fly from tree to tree, peering into likely holes until she finds one that looks like it will be a good place to raise a family. I have had the privilege of observing this in the woods behind our house. I was very disappointed when she did not find anything to her liking in my yard. I would have loved to have had a first row seat for “jump day”, which is when the newly hatched chicks, still unable to fly, jump out of their tree home (a distance of up to 60' above the ground!) and plummet to the forest floor to land on a soft bed of leaves. Maybe I'll put up a wood duck box this year, although it would be a tough walk for the tiny chicks through our boulder-strewn woods to get to the nearest stream!

- Juanita Hummel