

West Indian Tree Duck Management at White Oak Plantation

by Pat Rider
Yulee, Florida

The tree ducks or whistling ducks (genus *Dendrocygna*) form a unique group of waterfowl. Superficially they resemble ducks, but with longer necks and longer legs. Behaviorally, however, they are most closely related to geese and swans. They are noisy, nocturnal birds. There is little sexual dimorphism and pairs bond for life, with males helping with incubation.

The West Indian tree ducks, *Dendrocygna arborea*, are the largest of the eight species of tree ducks. They inhabit the brackish water mangrove and fresh water swamps of the Greater Antilles. The majority are found on Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico; although small groups may be found in the Bahamas and Lesser Antilles. They are threatened with extinction due to a combination of hunting pressure, the taking of eggs, pesticide use, habitat destruc-



West Indian tree duck nestbox.

tion and predation from the introduced mongoose.

At White Oak Plantation we have been fortunate to have a large colony of West Indian tree ducks for several years. We maintain a group of between 20 and 30 birds, with five or six pairs nesting annually. The flock is

kept in a one acre enclosure with a large, free-flowing fresh water lagoon. Numerous cypress and tupelo trees lend a swamp-like appearance to the enclosure.

Sixteen nestboxes are scattered throughout the facility. The boxes are constructed of 1/2" plywood. They

Photo by Pat Rider

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See feature article in "Bird Talk," June 1989



White Oak Plantation treeduck pen.



Author's son, Jonathan Rider, feeding flock of hand raised West Indian treeducks.



West Indian treeducks, Dendrocygna arborea.

are 24" long, 16" wide, 16" high with 4" diameter entrance holes. The boxes are divided into two compartments and supplied with hay or straw. The birds seem to prefer nest-boxes that are at least two feet above the ground and partially hidden by vegetation.

Nesting takes place from February to October with usually ten eggs per clutch. Incubation is by both parents and lasts approximately 30 days. The hatchlings are vent sexed and pinioned on day two. If pulled for hand rearing, they are placed in a brooder and fed a medicated pullet grower with 15% protein. Chopped greens or lettuce are added to the diet. After fledging, the birds are fed the same diet as the adults, a commercial pigeon pellet with 18% to 20% protein.

In January 1988, 13 of our surplus West Indian treeducks were sent to the Parque Zoológico Nacional, Dominican Republic, as part of a cooperative reintroduction program. The birds arrived in good condition and were released into the Rio Isabela Wildlife Reserve in Santa Domingo. Other birds were sent to Puerto Rico where they are being studied by the Department of Natural Resources to determine if it is feasible to reintroduce these endangered birds into Puerto Rico. Great care is being taken to ensure that they do not adversely compete with native birds or pollute the local gene pool. All birds that are sent for reintroduction are kept full winged and are parent raised in covered enclosures.

Captive West Indian treeducks are extremely pugnacious and have been known to kill other waterfowl, some much larger than themselves. Hand reared birds must be gradually introduced to the flock to prevent aggression. These birds are not suited for small collections. Our flock is kept with black swans, Andean geese and ruddy shelducks. Smaller waterfowl would surely be injured.

Although threatened with extinction in the wild, West Indian treeducks readily breed in captivity and are well represented in collections throughout the world. Their melodious whistling call and curious nature make them an interesting part of our waterfowl collection. As White Oak Plantation's primary concern is wildlife conservation, we hope to be able to continue to place our surplus West Indian treeducks in programs for reintroduction into their natural habitat. ●

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