

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa* breeding in the Nazas River, Durango, Mexico

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Se describen los primeros registros del Pato del Bosque *Aix sponsa* reproduciéndose en México. Las observaciones fueron realizadas en la cuenca baja del Río Nazas en el Estado de Durango, México.

Howell & Webb² map the range of Mexican birds, enabling observers, at a glance, to recognise occurrences of species outside their known range. Wood Duck *Aix sponsa* is considered a winter visitor (U to R) to the north and west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, with some occurrences in southern Veracruz, Yucatan and Baja California², whilst Peterson & Chalif⁵ also describe it as a winter visitor with records in Sinaloa, Valle de México, San Luis Potosí and Tamaulipas. Edwards¹ states that the species is a very rare winter visitor to the northern half of Mexico. del Hoyo *et al.*³ maintain that *Aix sponsa* is a winter visitor to central Mexico but map the species as a visitor to the northern coasts of Mexico. These references form a coherent body of literature describing Wood Duck as a non-breeding winter visitor to Mexico.

During April–November 1998, I recorded a number of Wood Ducks on the lower Nazas River, including both sexes and young ducklings, indicating that *Aix sponsa* breeds in this riparian corner of the Chihuahuan Desert. The lower Nazas River has been dammed and channelled for agricultural uses in La Laguna Region (straddling Coahuila and Durango states). However, the sites where I recorded the ducks (downriver from the Las Tórtolas dam, also known as Zarco dam) are controlled by a series of small locks that allow water to accumulate throughout the year. Water levels vary with the opening and closing of the Tortolas gates. This availability of water permits the growth of mature Montezuma Bald Cypress *Taxodium mucronatum*, known locally as Sabinos or Ahuehuetes, and Cottonwood *Populus* sp., known locally as Alamos, which provide suitable nesting sites for Wood Ducks. Approximate coordinates, given below, were obtained from maps and a Global Positioning System (GPS) system.

I started visiting this area of the Nazas River in April 1998. On 19 April I saw four large ducks in flight from a tall Montezuma Bald Cypress, the dominant tree along the banks, in Cañón de Fernández, Durango (25°21'N 103°44'W). Subsequently, I identified the calls of these birds as being *Aix sponsa*⁴. On 17 May I saw a pair of Wood Duck at La Posta, Durango (25°27'N 103°43'W) near dense reedbeds. A lone male was sighted late in the afternoon of 6 June, in the company of Martí Boada, near the town of Sapioriz, Durango (25°27'N 103°43'W).

On 2 August a female and two young ducklings were near the reeds at La Posta. Early in the morning of 27 September, I saw 21 birds between La Posta and the northern mouth of Cañón de Fernández (25°23'N 103°44'W). These were in groups of seven, six and eight birds and included males, females and ducklings. As I was moving at a relatively brisk pace on a mountain bicycle other groups of Wood Duck may have been missed, and on my return, I saw three groups in a 500 m stretch of river near La Posta, comprising six, 15 and 10 males, females and young ducklings.

On 11 October, three males and three females were at La Posta reeds. A single male was in the same area on 25 October and on 2 November eight birds (five male, three females) were between La Posta and the northern mouth of Cañón de Fernández (25°25'N 103°44'W), preening discreetly in a secluded pond rich in algae. On 22 November, two males and two females were quietly resting at the northern mouth of Cañón de Fernández. At noon, on 1 January 1999, I observed three males and a female for over 40 mins, with José Valdés and Uriel Valdés, in the same place as on 22 November. This group appeared shy.

These observations indicate that *Aix sponsa* breeds on the Nazas River, although no nesting cavities have been identified. This part of the Nazas River has a rich and complex fauna and flora, including a diverse avifauna. Study of the birds of the Chihuahuan Desert has suffered, in part, due to a lack of local birdwatchers. The area is subject to heavy use for tourism, agriculture, cattle and fishing purposes. Additional fieldwork is required in this area to arrive at a true understanding of its biological riches.

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References

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