

**Deering Conservation Commission
2016 Hatch Season - Wood Duck Box Report**

The Deering Conservation Commission (DCC) maintains dozens of Wood Duck nesting boxes throughout the town, primarily on its many conserved lands. The boxes were installed with the intention of providing suitable nesting opportunities for Wood Ducks. Annually, DCC members fan out across town to locate the boxes, see if they've been used, record the results, and refresh them for use during the coming nesting season.

PROGRAM UPDATES:

Since installing three new boxes at Central Rangeway Pond in 2014, and replacing some downed boxes during the Feb-Mar 2016 clean out season, the Conservation Commission has not installed, removed, or replaced any nesting boxes. There are a few boxes in need of TLC, but none are falling apart or are in desperate need of replacement. Conditions are ripe, however, to distill the information we have and shuffle some boxes around in an attempt to increase usage.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

Best Usage Year On Record

Let's start by acknowledging how difficult it is to get to each box every year. This is primarily due to the remote locations of the boxes, and most require frozen water to get to with ease. In the past two winters, the safety of frozen ice, particularly over moving water, where many of our boxes are, was not certain. This provided volunteers with very little opportunity to get to the boxes, given everyone has other things on their plate. This year, we had one weekend where safety was as close to certain as possible. That dissipated the following weekend when temperatures consistently hit 60 degrees, and snow/ice melted away. Those that could make it out that weekend did, but several key locations have thus far gone unchecked.

Thus far during the 2016 cleanout season, the DCC has checked 24 of 36 active boxes with an astonishing 50.0% use rate. The use rate is well above the 33.3% 23 year average, and well ahead of the 26.5% rate the prior year. Notably, no prior year has recorded a usage rate this high. This may be due to the lower number of boxes used, however several locations reported usage that hadn't in some time.

There were a few dump/failed nests, which happens frequently. We have been actively moving boxes over the years so you cannot see one from another in an attempt to stop hens from the practice of dump nesting. No flying squirrel boxes were found this year, and nobody fell in. Both of these facts are welcomed.

We lost the long-standing lone box at Fulton Pond, though it hadn't been used in over a decade. We are doubtful about placing a new box. The location sees a 'lot' of traffic, relative to others in town, and doesn't provide much cover for hens or chicks.

Four of the six boxes on Hunter's Pond were used; a high bar for the location. One particular box is used EVERY YEAR, however it is located on a dead tree in the water that we fully expect to fall at any moment. You can see this box easily from the road, on the left while looking north. A few years back, we replaced and moved several boxes at this location, recognizing the superior breeding ground for our ducks. One of these boxes was used for the first time during 2016!

At the Lead Mine locations, both upper and lower ponds had usage. This is remarkable given our tenacity in trying to keep good, usable boxes in place. Every year since 2011, we've lost boxes on these ponds, but not last year! This year's usage rate was 50%!

Lily Pond had its first used box since 2011!

At Poling's Marsh, a once well-used box was replaced in 2012, with a new box installed near an old small dam at the same time. That box by the dam was used for the first time in 2016! This is a beautiful location, if you get the urge to go for a walk in the woods sometime this summer.

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Reservoir Marsh had a 67% hit rate last season, which is unheard of. Several of these boxes have gone unused for nearly a decade. Persistence has paid off. We should replace these boxes however, as they are long in the tooth.

Both Audubon locations and Johnson's Pond have not yet been checked. Both require frozen water to get to, but perhaps we can use a boat in the coming weeks.

LOOKING AHEAD:

I'd like to pass along the Duck Box program to another Conservation Commission member this year. Over my six years, I've enjoyed changing up the reporting, replacing and moving a lot of boxes, and getting solid GPS markers at all locations. However a fresh set of eyes and a newfound enthusiasm for this project is needed.

CONCLUSION:

Best hatch year yet!

Best,
Aaron Gill
March 2017