

A Bird's Eye View

BY RAM NAMBIAR

The most exotic of our ducks

(*Aix sponsa*)

The much showy Wood duck from south shows up in our wooded streams, flooded swamps, quiet ponds, backwater sloughs and marshes in late April. Halton region is one of its northern summer breeding range.

Coming already paired, we often see a male and female, or, at the most another pair, at any of these secluded waterways, initially seeking aquatic plants, plant seeds, insects from surface or going ashore into adjacent woodland floor for acorns, their favourite food item.



Like most other ducks, the Wood duck is dimorphic where drake is strikingly more colorful than the female. Woody is at his best looking in late April. He is endowed, literally, with a conglomeration of gorgeous colours and bold markings.

Male's bill is orange and white, and round eyes are red. 2 white lines start from the base of his bill ending at the back of drooping head crest. There are white lines on throat also. The head itself is glossy green and purple. The chestnut breast is with dots stopping just short of vertical breast band. Flanks are buff and the plumage on the back is bottle green.

All these colours and patterns, lavishly construed into his body, by nature, make the Wood duck drake the most spectacular and dignified of all North American Anatids.

Woody's intended wife, though less colourful, with her white broad eye markings and extended streaks on breast, appears quite appealing. In flight, where she always leads her male, she shows a greenish-blue speculum on her iridescent wings. Male also has the same.

The late Dr. Murray Spiers, author of 'Birds of Ontario' once remarked that the Wood Duck is a species to 'gladden the eye' of the on-looker.

Wood ducks have a few unduck-like traits. Although a dabbler, this intriguing Cairanini, has sharp hooked claws in its

feet and often perches in trees that is hanging into the water. They are cavity nesters unlike most other ducks. Female Wood duck differs from the majority of ducks in that she reaches maturity to breed during the first year itself. Further more, the Wood duck doesn't 'quack' like a Mallard. Instead, the female, when alarmed or in flight utters a squealing 'woo-eek' or 'creek-creek'. The drake, on the other hand, has a thin whistle, - 'jeeb'.

Breeding starts in early May. After courtship and mating, the female searches for a natural hollow in the trunk of a tree or an unoccupied hole of Pileated woodpecker, some 20m or so from ground, overlooking a quiet oxbow pond or flooded swamp. If no natural hole, she would readily accept a man-made box placed in a tree or above water.

In either case, the nest bed is made of soft down not plucked from breast like other ducks, but accumulated by her own preening in the nest, during incubation period.

Once abundant, these beautiful Wood ducks were brought to the point of extinction from extreme gun pressure and destruction of their habitats. Thanks to great work of concerned citizens, strict protection laws and the duck's adaptability, the species is proliferating once again. Wood ducks are successfully breeding in GTA, Peel and Halton region now.

Female Wood duck lays 10 to 15 eggs, which she herself hatches in 25 to 31 days. The male sticks around her until few days before hatching. Within about 30 hrs after, the hatchlings are fluffy, covered with down but no flight feathers. Now, a bizarre event takes place. Mother flies down the nest and calls them to her. The ducklings climb to the entrance hole, by using their sharp claws, and one by one jump down from such great heights either to the water or to the ground, miraculously escaping even the slightest of injuries.

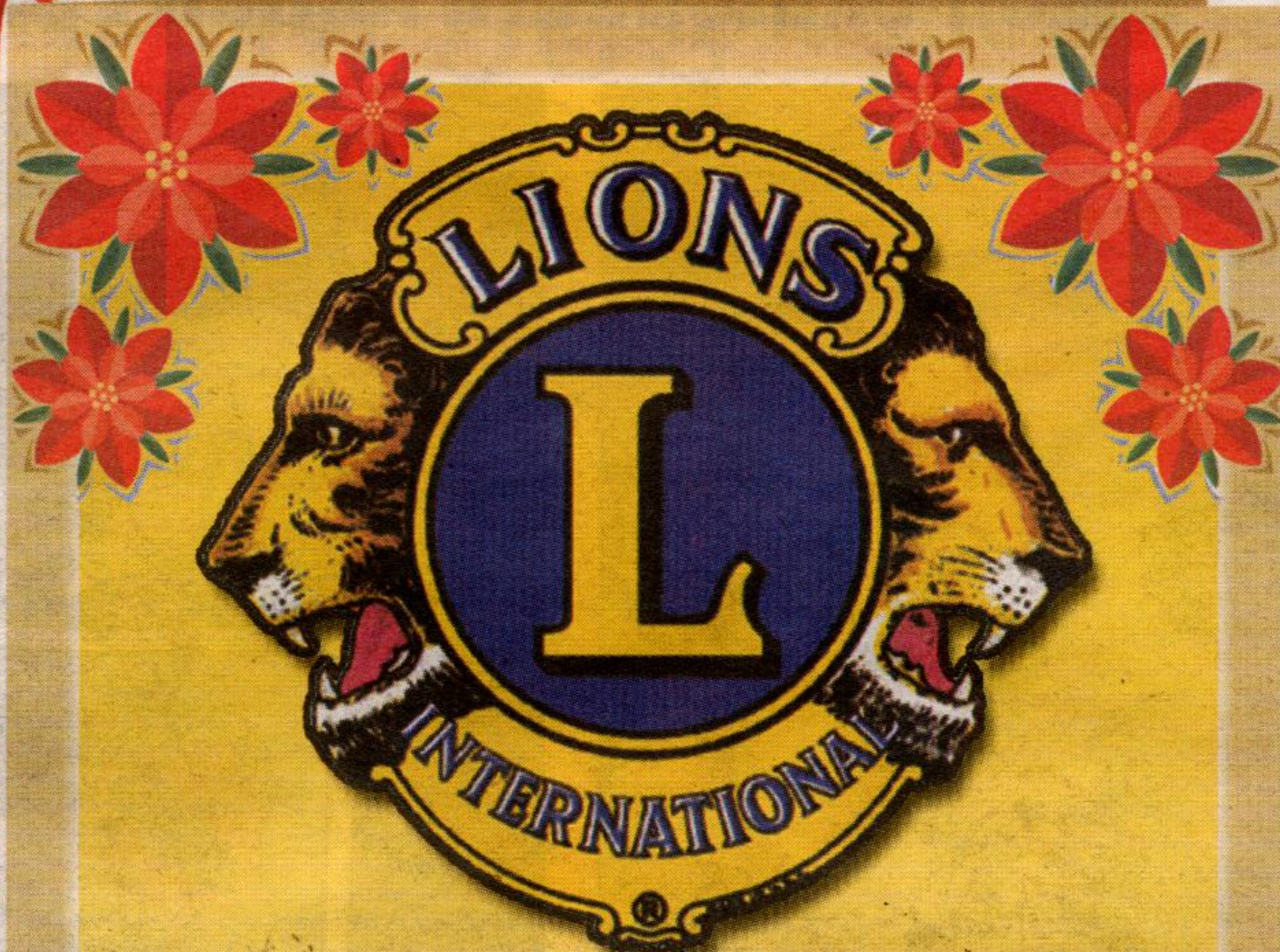


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