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Scout Loves Wood Ducks, Installs 10 Nesting Boxes at Lafayette Reservoir

Submitted by Tyler Higgins



Justin Higgins (right) with his nesting boxes and some Troop 219 Scouts at the Lafayette Reservoir.
Photo Greg Francek

Last April, Justin Higgins led 26 of his fellow Scouts from Lafayette's Troop 219 to install 10 nesting boxes for Wood Ducks at the Lafayette Reservoir. The service project not only satisfied Higgins' service hour requirements for his Eagle rank, but also offered him a chance to earn the coveted Hornaday Award - Scouting's highest conservation award - by selecting a project category focused on fish and wildlife management that would help return Wood Ducks to the Lafayette Reservoir.

The Wood Duck is considered by many bird watchers to be one of the most colorful and beautiful ducks, but the species has had many challenges regarding breeding and available habitat. The absence of adequate nesting areas for Wood Ducks at the Lafayette Reservoir is the primary reason for the significant decline in the local population over the last few decades.

"I worked with park rangers, Rod Tripp and Greg Francek, from EBMUD, and Sandy Ferreira, District Manager of the California Waterfowl Association (CWA)," said Higgins. He chose to collaborate with CWA as it sponsors many habitat projects benefitting waterfowl throughout the state, and specifically, monitors Wood Duck populations and funds programs to help encourage this species of duck.

According to one wildlife biologist at the CWA, 10 Wood Duck nesting boxes have the potential to add 50-60 ducklings each year. Unfortunately, as a result of the installation date occurring later than expected, none of these boxes have attracted mating Wood Ducks yet. However, a representative of CWA has offered to donate mature Wood Ducks for introduction to the area in time for the next mating season.

Visitors looking to locate the Wood Duck nesting boxes can view them most easily by boat as they are generally within 20 to 30 feet from the shore. A wildlife biologist helped to establish each location as Wood Ducks tend to be somewhat territorial and prefer privacy - hence the reason for their distance from the walking paths. Onlookers should be sure to keep their distance from the nesting boxes and not disturb the areas.

Higgins collected more than \$1,500 of individual donations to fund the materials cost of his service project, and gives additional thanks to Dolan's Lumber Company for its "Eagle Scout" discount and Jeff Cronk, owner of Lloyd's Custom Woodwork, for providing access to his wood shop in Concord.

"[Higgins] has done an excellent job of learning about the issue of Wood Duck population decline, working to reverse that decline through provision of optimal nesting sites, dealing constructively with disappointing results, arranging for on-going box maintenance, and sharing what he has learned with his community," said Lillian Remer, the conservation director of the Mt. Diablo Silverado Council of the Boy Scouts of America. "In addition, because most of the members of his unit, Troop 219, provided assistance in building and installing the nesting boxes his Troop will receive the Hornaday Unit Award."

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