



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STELLA SANKO

**Stella Sanko with one of the wood duck boxes.**

## Wood ducks at Zofnass get a lift from student

By NEAL RENTZ

Not long ago, Stella Sanko got to thinking about birdboxes.

A Mamaroneck resident and rising senior at Greenwich Academy in Connecticut, she was already familiar with Otter Creek Preserve, a nature preserve near her home that is managed by Westchester Land Trust.

She was inspired by a teacher at her school to pursue her interests in environmental studies around the same time she was looking for a project in Westchester that could earn her a Girl Scout Gold Award.

Her interests led her to develop a unique project that involves fabricating and installing wood

duck nest boxes at the Westchester Wilderness Walk/Zofnass Family Preserve, which is one of WLT's larger preserves, with about 7 miles of trails on 120 rugged acres in Pound Ridge, Ms. Sanko said.

"As I was trying to come up with ideas for my Girl Scout Gold Award project, the two things I knew going into it were that I wanted it to involve the environment and Westchester," Ms. Sanko said.

Based on her experience at Otter Creek Preserve, Ms. Sanko was drawn to work with WLT. "There are over 100 species of birds there and an osprey nesting platform," she noted. "It got

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# Wood ducks

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me thinking about birdhouses.” She reached out to John Zeiger, the preserve manager at WLT, “about possible projects and what their needs are. One of the things he said they needed were some wood duck boxes at the Westchester Wilderness Walk/Zofnass Family Preserve.”

Recently, beavers have returned to the Zofnass Preserve, flooding a wetland next to Upper Shad Road, Ms. Sanko said. “While beavers create challenges for preserve management, flooding trails and forests, they also present an opportunity. This beaver pond will create habitat for wildlife and otter, muskrat, mink and wood ducks have now been observed in the preserve,” she explained. “Wood ducks, however, need specialized habitats — large cavities in dead trees. By installing nest boxes, we can create a place for these gorgeous waterfowl to thrive very quickly,” she continued.

Under the supervision of Mike Surdej, a WLT Advisory Board member, and Mr. Zeiger, Ms. Sanko built five wood duck boxes that will be installed at the Westchester Wilderness Walk/Zofnass Family Preserve in August. Mr. Surdej, a carpenter, “has taught me so much about woodworking,” Ms. Sanko said. Ms. Sanko said she hopes the birds will use the wood duck boxes for nesting. “I had originally hoped to install a nesting cam in one of the boxes for people to view them, but there is no Wi-Fi in the area,” she said, adding, “I am not giving up hope that there could be a way to do the nesting camera next spring.” Ms. Sanko said her plan is to place the boxes in locations where not only the ducks can thrive, but also where the public can view them.

“The issue my project aims to address involves reviving the wood duck population in a preserve where the habitat has changed from a forested wetland to a shallow pond due to the reestablishment of beaver,” she said. “I want to use the knowledge I have acquired from research to assist in the growth of the wood duck species at the preserve,” she added.

From WLT’s perspective, she added, one of the project goals “is to find a balance with the

beavers as they see the new habitat changes as an opportunity rather than just a challenge,” Ms. Sanko said. “The new beaver pond is flooding a wooded wetland and several acres of forest will be lost. However, by working to improve the wildlife habitat, new animals will be able to use this area. WLT would love to have families of wood ducks thriving in this new beaver pond,” she added.

Ms. Sanko said Girl Scout Gold Award projects require a minimum of 80 hours of work and she has nearly reached the minimum level. Her project will be considered complete around mid-August when the boxes will be installed, Ms. Sanko said. The high school student has led several birdhouse building workshops for Girl Scout troops and also given mini-lectures on habitats in an effort to help Scouts earn their habitat badges. Ms. Sanko has been a Girl Scout since the first grade in the Heart of the Hudson Troop 2940. After her expected graduation from Greenwich Academy next year, she hopes to further explore environmental studies in college, she said.

Westchester Land Trust, which is based in Bedford Hills, works with public and private partners to preserve land in perpetuity and to enhance the natural resources in Westchester and eastern Putnam counties. Since it was founded in 1988, WLT has preserved 9,000 acres of open space. Today more than 1,000 acres of land are owned by the organization. In addition to receiving assistance from WLT, Ms. Sanko has also been working with Ben Dickson of Wild Birds Unlimited in Bedford Hills. Mr. Dickson is a bird specialist who has helped the student with several aspects of her project.

“It’s important to all of us involved that the boxes are installed in the correct location on the property for the birds to find them,” she said, “and that means they have to be near water and far enough apart that the birds don’t get territorial.”

Working on the project, she said, has benefited her in many ways. “I have learned so much through my research and discovered Cornell University has an incredible website called [nestwatch.org](http://nestwatch.org) where bird lovers can tune in,” Ms. Sanko noted.