

FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE_____

HARLEQUIN DUCK COURTSHIP

Harlequin Ducks (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) appear in winter, locally but quite regularly, on the shores of Cape Ann on the northern Massachusetts coast. During the last few winters, a flock of a dozen or two has generally been visible from either Andrews or Halibut point, in Rockport. However, beyond watching the members of a distant flock submerge, one after another, and then pop up like corks a few seconds later, I have never had much luck observing their behavior. But on March 8, 1997, I found myself within 50 yards of a small flock as they bobbed in a weak surf at Halibut Point.

I arrived on the granite slabs of the Point around midday, with the temperature about 40° F and a wet snow falling, to find a group of five female and four male Harlequins, plus another pair a short distance away. The group of nine was segregated by sex, the males and females usually somewhat apart, sometimes close, and only occasionally intermixed. Courtship display was already taking place when I arrived, and I assume it was this, plus perhaps the obscuring effect of the snow, that allowed my close approach. The male Harlequins pumped their heads up, then down, largely in unison and while all facing toward the females. Then one of the males would break out of the group and charge the females in a scuttling, hunch-shouldered, wing-assisted dash across the surface. The females would scatter, the groups would re-form, and the process would repeat. Feeding took place only sporadically during the half-hour or so during which I observed this behavior. The courtship gradually wound down, the feeding picked up, and by the time I left the flock was feeding as a loose, mixed flock.

During their excited head-pumping, males gave an odd whistling quack, not very loud; it was suggestive of a wigeon's whistle with a bugle-like quality added to it. Females seemed to be silent.

The isolated pair did not interact with the larger group but copulated twice, a few minutes apart. I saw only the end of the first instance (it was called to my attention by another birder), but in the second case, copulation was preceded by head-pumping by the male. The male held the female's nape in his bill during copulation, and his weight pushed her entirely under water. After copulating, the birds resumed feeding as if nothing had happened, loosely associating but apparently not interacting with each other at all.

Dorothy Arvidson (pers. comm.) reports having seen similar behavior at Halibut Point in the past.

Matthew L. Pelikan

SUCCESSFUL OSPREY NEST AT PARKER RIVER NWR

In 1997 Osprey nested successfully at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge for the first time in the history of the refuge, according to a recent press release. Following World War II, Osprey populations plummeted, primarily due to pesticide poisoning. The banning of the use of DDT in the United States in 1972, and wildlife management efforts by conservation agencies and private citizens and organizations, have significantly contributed to the recovery of this raptor.

In the early 1990s, refuge managers at Parker River enlisted the assistance of Massachusetts Electric for the construction of two nesting platforms. Mass Electric generously donated the materials, equipment, labor, and expertise necessary to erect the towers. One platform is located on Nelson Island on the mainland in Rowley, and the other is at the base of Cross Farm Hill on Plum Island (this tower is best viewed from the Stage Island Pool Overlook access trail, across the road from parking lot 6).

In 1996 a pair of Osprey nested at the Nelson Island platform but were unsuccessful in fledging young. In 1997, however, a pair nested at the Cross Farm Hill platform and fledged one young.

Due to a printer's error, the following photograph of a Clay-colored Sparrow was omitted from the August issue. Our apologies to the author.



Clay-colored Sparrow

Photograph by Lysle Brinker

DUCKBUSTERS

My mother-in-law in Braintree called me at work on March 31, 1997, with a strange request: "How do you get a duck out of your fireplace?" She explained that Dad had heard some rustling in the chimney. He went to investigate, and when he opened the flue, a duck dropped down onto the fireplace grating! And it just sat there, looking back at them!

I asked her to describe it, and she said it was pretty much covered with soot, but that it had a green head. She wanted to know whom she should call to remove it. I eagerly volunteered, took an early lunch, and drove over.

My suspicions were confirmed — sitting in her fireplace, still as a stone, was a male Wood Duck. I got an old sheet and gently dropped it over the bird. At that point it showed some signs of life as it struggled to free itself from my grasp. I carried it to the front door, and once outside, examined it. No broken bones, no bands, and aside from the soot, no signs of wear! I released my hold and the duck flew from my hands, headed for the swamps and woods near their home. Cool

Who ya gonna call?

Eddie Giles

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