

ABOUT THE COVER: HARLEQUIN DUCK

Many people consider the Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) our most spectacular and elegant waterfowl. Named after the famous, gaudily dressed comic character in the *commedia dell'arte* — the Latin *histrion* means stage player or actor — the male Harlequin duck has chestnut-colored flanks and glossy slate-blue plumage highlighted with black-edged patches of white. It is, indeed, an elegant bird. The female is a drab brown with white underparts and three patches of white on either side of her head. He is unmistakable, while she could be confused at a distance with immature scoters, or perhaps with a female Bufflehead. Harlequin ducks are small, chunky, diving ducks, which often swim and fly in small dense flocks. The folknames "blue-streak," "circus duck," and "rock duck" describe different aspects of the species — rapid flight low over the water, the clown-like plumage pattern, and winter habitat preference.

The Harlequin Duck is generally considered monotypic despite the existence of two disjunct breeding populations, one in eastern North America, Greenland, and Iceland, and a second in western North America and eastern Siberia. In the east harlequins nest from Baffin Island and Labrador south to the Gaspé Peninsula, while in the west they nest from the Aleutian Islands and mainland Alaska south in the mountains through the Pacific Northwest. Western populations are much larger than those in the east, with estimates of up to a million birds for the Aleutian Islands alone. The eastern birds winter from Newfoundland south in small numbers to Chesapeake Bay, western birds, along the Pacific Coast from Alaska to northern California. In Massachusetts Harlequin Ducks generally arrive in November and leave by late April. They are found along the rocky coast of Essex County and other rugged coastal areas of New England and its coastal islands. They tend to congregate in the same areas year after year, where they can be seen diving among the crashing surf and spray. Harlequins have been returning to the same area off Martha's Vineyard at least since 1896, and other favored spots include the rocks near Hammond Castle in Magnolia, North Scituate, and Sachuest Point in Rhode Island, where flocks of 30 or more are commonly reported. Griscom and Snyder considered Harlequin Ducks extremely rare before 1930 and only "rare winter visitors" in the 1950s.

Harlequin Ducks are seasonally monogamous and do not breed until two years of age. In spring they move inland from the oceans where they winter and nest along swiftly moving mountain streams and on rocky coastal islands. During courtship males are pugnacious, particularly when guarding their mate, swimming toward intruding males, bill open and hissing. If the intruder does not leave in a hurry, a fight ensues with feathers flying. As in a majority of duck species, most courtship displays are performed on the water. Courtship displays

include much mutual bobbing and bowing, swirling, head-shaking, and bill touching. The male has a "head-throw" display in which he bends his head over his back, open bill pointing to the sky, and then brings his head forward, wings drooping, and utters a shrill whistle reminiscent of the shrieks of fighting mice ("sea-mouse" is a folkname for the Harlequin Duck along the Maine coast).

Nest-sites, chosen by the female, are usually near water and often under shrubs. The nest is composed of dried grass lined with down. Occasionally, Harlequins will nest in rocky crevices or among boulders, and they have been reported using hollow stumps and even puffin burrows. The usual clutch is 6-8 cream or buff-colored eggs. The male deserts soon after the eggs are laid, and the female tends the eggs alone during the roughly one-month incubation period. The young are precocial and are led to water by the female soon after hatching. The young ducks stay with their mother for several months, learning the art of feeding in fast-moving streams.

Harlequins are the "torrent duck" of North America. During the summer they frequent the white waters of swiftly flowing mountain streams. They utilize a variety of foraging tactics, diving, tipping up and feeding off the bottom like Mallards, and have been reported to walk along under water in the manner of the American Dipper. In winter they dive for up to half a minute, "flying" through the water using both wings and feet, and in the rocky surf are in "white water" once again. In winter their diet is largely crustaceans, including crabs, isopods, and amphipods, and mollusks, including gastropods and chitons. In the freshwater streams they take crustaceans and aquatic insects such as caddis and stone fly larvae and midges; they may take a few fish.

Harlequin Ducks are very tame and unwary, and their tendency to fly and swim in tight clusters has made them easy targets for hunters. However, since most of the population resides in remote areas, they have not suffered much habitat alteration or exposure to pesticides. They are subject to predation by arctic foxes and Gyrfalcons, jaegers, and ravens, but harsh winter weather in their arctic homelands is probably the major factor limiting population, at least in Alaska.

It appears that their numbers are stable, and the number of wintering birds along our coast increasing — an encouraging sign for those of us for whom an encounter with Harlequin Ducks is the highlight of an otherwise drab New England winter.

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