



MONTEREY NEWS

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The Eastern Harlequin Duck

The eastern harlequin duck is one of the most brilliantly decorated creatures you will ever see as a birdwatcher, for their both graphic design and flaming colors. Like the wood duck, it is an exotic example of how nature paints the males of most bird species with brighter, more visible colors for the breeding phase. The male is an attention getter, not unlike the crowing barnyard rooster, or the drumming partridge, beating to announce the dawn of a new day. The females, as in my illustration, are cloaked in a monotone earthly brown, camouflaged to secretly and invisibly nest out of sight to predators.

At this time of year the harlequins may come into passing review along the coast as they migrate from the remote peninsular outcroppings of Newfoundland and Labrador southward along the Maine coast, with some even passing Buzzards Bay all the way to the southern tip of New Jersey where they will spend the winter along the rough-watered coastline. Their return migration is to their breeding areas in the north where they follow fastmoving rivers inland to nest in isolated destinations.

The male and female first breed at two years of age, pairing up as winter approaches, when several males may court one female, surrounding her on the water, with raised tails, stretched necks, and ritualized head bobbing movements. During spring migration the hens lead the drakes back to her natal river waters to breed.

In the spring the hens choose the nest sites, usually on the ground, well concealed under bushes, or in tree hollows, close to calmer woodland rivers.



Like the wood duck or the freshwater merganser, as soon as her chicks break their eggshells to hatch out, they are already preprogrammed to quickly depart the nest, flapping their small wings and striding rapidly to reach the watery safety. Once the chicks become proficient swimmers they move to ever rougher waters. Some of the adults may begin migration even before the chicks learn to fly.

They feed by diving for aquatic invertebrates, insects, small fish, and can use their beaks to pry food off the sides of submerged rocks. Their adult lives are spent in very active waters year round, which is rough on their bodies. Many harlequin ducks endure broken bones from this precarious lifetime being tossed around by pounding waves in the rough waters of their preferred habitats.

As a result of a number of factors,

the population of the eastern harlequin ducks, which is estimated in the 5,000 to 20,000 range, has been considered endangered by both the US and Canada for thirty years. Their range has been slowly shifting northward and may soon no longer be present in the further southern parts of their historic range.

— George B. Emmons