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Harlequin Duck

Histrionicus histrionicus

By Ellen Horowitz

The rapid wingbeats of two small ducks caught my attention. The birds flew upstream only a few feet above the churning, swollen river and landed in an eddy about 50 yards away. The drab brown female blended into the background of river rocks. But her mate's bold colors and patterns gave the pair away as harlequin ducks. One of Montana's most unusual waterfowl species, the harlequin is the only duck in North America that requires clear, fast-moving mountain streams for part of its life. I felt lucky to see the handsome pair. Within minutes, they paddled toward the main river channel and let the rushing water sweep them farther downstream.

Since that day nearly 20 years ago, my spring traditions have included a search for this elusive whitewater wonder. The lords and ladies (as harlequin drakes and hens are known) seek the seclusion of wild, remote mountain streams. Only about 200 pairs nest in Montana. Glacier National Park

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boasts one of the densest populations of harlequins in the state, and the best opportunities for viewing them.

NAMES The harlequin duck is named for the classical European theatrical clown who wore a multicolored costume and painted face. Its scientific name comes from the Latin word for actor. Known by early naturalists as circus duck and painted duck, the harlequin drake has a slate blue body, chestnut sides and cap, and white crescents and streaks on his face, shoulders, and back. The female wears muted brown plumage and has three white patches on her face. Due to the species' amazing affinity for whitewater, the harlequin is also known as surfer duck, mountain duck, and glacier duck. Its high-pitched call has also spawned the nicknames squeaker, squealer, and sea mouse.

LIFE HISTORY Scientists classify harlequins as sea ducks, yet the birds migrate inland to breed. The small population that nests in Montana each spring spends most of the year along the wave-battered Pacific Coast from Oregon to British Columbia.

Bachelor harlequins arrive in Montana in mid- to late April. Paired ducks show up about two weeks later. "The female brings her mate home to her natal stream," says John Ashley, a harlequin expert who teaches

courses on the duck at the Glacier Institute.

At the stream breeding grounds, the lord guards his lady from would-be suitors and watches alertly as she feeds. If they sense danger, the ducks let the swift current whisk them to safety downstream. Harlequins typically remain mates for life, but the male takes no part in incubating or rearing the young. His bright colors would advertise the nest location and make the brood more vulnerable to minks, hawks, and other predators.

The female builds her well-concealed nest near the water's edge. She lays three to eight eggs that hatch in 28 days. Hatchlings practice paddling techniques in quiet backwaters. Their 600-mile aerial migration to the coast begins in September. Some females depart earlier, leaving the young to fend for themselves. Ashley estimates that only about ten percent survive to reach the average breeding age of three. Long-lived for a duck, the harlequin can reach 15 years of age.

FOOD Harlequins are visual feeders. They dive underwater probing among river cobbles for stonefly, mayfly, and caddis fly larvae. Along the Pacific, they also eat snails, crabs, and fish roe. The ducks use their powerful feet to swim against the current, wings held slightly outstretched as rudders.

WHEN AND WHERE TO VIEW The best place to spot harlequins is during May and June at Upper McDonald Creek in Glacier National Park near the Going-to-the-Sun Road. You can also spot them on streams along the Rocky Mountain Front, tributaries of the Lower Clark Fork River, and tributaries of the North, South, and Middle forks of the Flathead River. Because these shy ducks may abandon an area if disturbed, Ashley recommends watching them quietly from behind trees or shrubs.

STATUS IN MONTANA Ashley says harlequin populations along the Strait of Georgia off the coast of British Columbia (where most of Glacier's ducks winter) are showing a slow, steady decline. The greatest threats are oil pollution, degradation to breeding streams, and human disturbance to nesting birds. In Montana, the harlequin is listed as a species of special concern. 🐼