

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

HARLEQUIN DUCKS, AND MORE ON OWLS

By Clive E. Goodwin

Late last November a Harlequin Duck appeared for a couple of days in Cobourg harbour. A high-plumaged male, it was a spectacular bird. It played hide and seek for the first day of its visit, but thoughtfully timed its second coming for a Sunday, and spent much of the morning displaying its finery to everyone who happened by. The drakes of many of our waterfowl are striking birds, but the Harlequin's pattern of white bars and spots against a dark background is most intriguing – until one sees the birds on their breeding grounds, with turbulent white water flickering against the dark rocks and boulders in the upland rivers and streams. In this setting they can be surprisingly difficult to see.

Your editor gave an excellent account of this species' habits in her article for *Northumberland Today* on December 4, which most regular readers of this article will have seen, so I'll simply cover the history of the bird both here, and in Ontario as a whole.

Harlequin Ducks have a long history in the Province, dating back to the mid-1800's, but records over the next 100 years were few. This would be less significant if the bird was not a duck, and it presumably would have been hunted in those days throughout that period; clearly it was always a rare bird in Ontario. Most of these earlier records were from Toronto, where 13 birds were recorded up to 1950, plus some from the Niagara River, and a scattering of sightings from other localities. Records continued to be few until the '70s, but there were enough to show the birds turning up in all seasons. There was a consistent pattern of birds wintering in Toronto, but late fall emerges as the time to see birds more generally, while there are several April and May records, and one of a bird that spent the summer at Oakville.

From 1970 on things become much clearer, as Harlequins were seen in most years, and because birds were so often seen repeatedly in the same area, they generated numerous observations. Indeed, a bird in the west entrance to Toronto harbour became something of a tourist attraction, keeping company with a tame flock of Mallards at the foot of Bathurst Street and competing for hand-outs! But essentially the patterns noted in the previous paragraph were reinforced.

Fairly clearly, then, the birds were wintering in the Great Lakes area, particularly on Lake Ontario and the Niagara River, the latter probably the best candidate for suitable habitat in the south of the Province. The late fall birds would be migrants arriving from their breeding grounds in Newfoundland, Labrador and northern Quebec. Incidentally, this relatively late movement is consistent with the eastern population as the source of the birds wintering here: apparently the birds in the mountains of the west move earlier in the season. Our spring observations, late though they are for waterfowl migration generally,

are apparently about on time for this species. And it's not unusual for young birds to sometimes spend their first full summer on the wintering grounds.

What, then, of Northumberland? Our first record was not until February 24, 1950, when Ted McDonald found a bird in Port Hope, as reported by Jim Baillie in *Audubon Field Notes*, then [and still, now as *North American Birds*] the journal reporting noteworthy bird sightings for the Province. Cobourg had its first five years later, on January 22, 1955, and set the now familiar pattern of hanging around until the 24th. One of its finders was Ken Niles, who is once again in Cobourg, and a keen watcher of the harbour scene! In all, we have now amassed 127 records of Harlequins, but this represents only some 46 birds at the most, as there were many repeat sightings on subsequent days.

I say 'at most' because several of our records are of birds appearing in, say, Cobourg, and then disappearing from there, only to appear a few days later at Presqu'ile. Or one appears in Cobourg, vanishes, and then a month later another pops up. I was tempted to think all these cases were the same bird moving around, and maybe they are, but we have a couple of years that seem to tell a different story. Consider 2007, when there was one in Cobourg on November 12, a second in Port Hope on November 21, and then 3 at Presqu'ile on December 30. Were there three, four or five birds? Certainly there was more than one around that winter, which is what I was tempted to conclude from the November sightings. So I have included all of these kinds of records, which means my answer to the question above is five, at least as far as this analysis is concerned. In fact, we have had as many as five birds at once recorded.

When we look at these 46 records by year we find that, up to 1994, we had single birds appearing roughly every second year, with a 'peak' of 3 in 1983 [in Cobourg], and two [including our only June record] in 1986. Then 1994 was a bonanza year, with 9 birds seen, a total not equaled since. But subsequent numbers were consistently higher than formerly: in the 15 years since we only failed to record Harlequins once, in 2003, and single birds were only reported in four years. In fact, we have averaged three birds annually from 1995 on. So, at least on our part of Lake Ontario, it appears that Harlequin Ducks have become more regular over the past 16 years, an encouraging trend for a bird that has been in trouble.

In closing, some follow up to the November article on owls. Readers may recall that I mentioned that in four recent winters, 2000-1, 2004-5, 2005-6 and 2007-8, Barred Owls had appeared in places where they were not normally seen. What I did not say [but perhaps one might assume] is that in those years birds were also being seen more often than usual in places like Presqu'ile Park where they do occur. The past autumn showed an unprecedented increase in sightings of these birds at Presqu'ile: observers were reporting seeing up to 6 birds on a visit, and one assessment suggested at least 8 different birds. I suspect this would be conservative, as at least some owls must have been hidden in cavities in the woods. Was this a purely localized event? It would seem not. First, two birds were found dead on the beach at Presqu'ile, suggesting they were moving – somewhere! Then the Summer Bird Count had recorded a record number, and now we

have at least one report of a bird turning up in an unusual location. For the first time in years, John Geale had a bird in his woodlot in November. All of which raises the question: what is happening with Barred Owls?