

The return of the harlequin ducks

Birds I View

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Female Harlequin Duck with a smudge of oil on cheek, Branch - 6
March 2009 (photo: Tony Power).

The elegantly plumaged and robust little seaducks, referred to as lords and ladies, are a birdwatcher's delight. Once an abundant duck in our coastal waters, a mounted harlequin duck was a hunter's living room trophy. On a boat trip from St. Brides to Cape St. Mary's in the 1950s, Les Tuck and Roger Tory Peterson observed hundreds of harlequin ducks near Lears Cove.

Subsequently, harlequin numbers plummeted to a low point of just a dozen birds in Golden Bay in 1990. Numbers were so low that the Eastern North American population was designated as Endangered by COSEWIC (Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada). Through research, educational outreach and conservation efforts like those carried out by Parks and Natural

Areas staff in the Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve, the numbers of these seaducks have increased.

Oiled harlequin and fulmar

On 6 March, Tony Power, Manager of the Cape St. Mary's Reserve, called to tell me that he had seen an oiled harlequin duck off Branch. Later he found an oiled northern fulmar in Point Lance.

These are two unusual species to find oiled – the harlequin owing to its rarity and the fulmar owing to its primarily offshore distribution. We always try to assess what oiled birds can tell us about marine pollution.

Harlequin duck survey

Each year in late winter, a systematic boat survey for harlequin ducks and other marine birds is run in and around the Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve. After having seen the oiled harlequin, Tony was concerned and anxious to check the reserve and adjacent waters.

With funding from the Friends of Cape St. Mary's, this year's survey and took place on the glorious sunny day of 11 March. Owing to family commitments, I was not able to join in.

At nearby Point Lance, there were 25 harlequin ducks. On the rocky outcropped Bull and Calf, there were 56 harlequins, 3,500 – 4,000 eiders, 142 purple sandpipers and a snowy owl were at the Wester Bull. An immature bald eagle was at the Easter Bull.

At Forthy Sunker, they counted 110 harlequins, including 95 in flight. Two small flocks of 10 and 12 flew towards Cats Cove in Golden Bay. Two bald eagles were perched on cliffs of Redland Point, below which there were another 57 harlequins – 40 hauled and 17 in the water. At Cats Cove Point, 117 harlequins were counted, including 51 in flight, 31 hauled out plus another 35 hauled out Lord and Lady Gulch. Nine harlequins were in Wester Cove.

To this point, the total harlequin count was 374. From this tally, Tony subtracted the flocks of 10 and 12 that flew in from the Bull and Calf and another 47 harlequins that flew while they were counting. This left a total of 305 birds, well above the previous high survey count of 267 in 2007. But they were not done yet.

From Golden Bay, Tony, Chris Mooney and crew headed out to the St. Mary's Cays. Here they found 6,000 eiders. Amazingly, they counted another flying flock of 158 harlequin ducks! Tallied in with the 305 previously counted, their day total was 463 harlequin ducks – the single highest systematic count of harlequin ducks ever made in Newfoundland and Labrador. At the day's end, it appeared that Tony Power and Chris Mooney had matched or bettered the half century old count of lords and ladies by Roger Tory Peterson and Les Tuck. Could there have ever been a finer day? Les and Roger are no doubt smiling about this one.

Birds in the area and around the province

In Carmanville, Ed Easton has been feeding some mallard ducks that are wintering on the ice in Noggin Cove. Good numbers of greater scaup and tufted ducks are at Quidi Vidi Lake and Burton's Pond.

During a Valentine's Day beach survey for seabirds with a class from Memorial, Tony Power observed 2 Ruddy Turnstones at Point LaHaye. We also found a number of freshly dead thick-billed murrelets that had no oil on them, which was less comforting than finding no dead birds but more comforting than finding dead oiled birds. The remains of a gull coated with heavy black crude oil looked to have been there for a while.

On the beach at Portugal South, we found the carcass of a white-sided dolphin. A 15 cm crescent cut through the spinal cord just above the tail suggested that a prop injury had caused the animal's death. These dolphins have been dying in a number of locations around the island recently.

More than 50 carcasses of great black-backed gulls were counted on the ice at Quidi Vidi Lake. A provincial vet is attempting to determine the cause of the die-off that provided meals for scavenging eagles and gulls.

On February 12, I noted 4 immature eagles scavenging on gull carcasses on the ice at Quidi Vidi Lake. Earlier in the week, others had counted up to 10 eagles on the lake. During our beach survey around the southern Avalon from St. Mary's Bay to St. John's we noted 7 bald eagles mostly adults. Might a higher proportion of immature gulls remain in the vicinity of St. John's and Robin Hood Bay where scavenging opportunities are greater?

Lots of dovekeys were seen onshore in the Twillingate area in early February (David Boyd).

Offshore tragedy

What a sad day began on the morning of 12 March, when the Cougar helicopter heading to the White Rose and Hibernia platforms ran into troubles and attempted unsuccessfully to return to St. John's. Making a living in North Atlantic is never a certainty. My deepest condolences and Godspeed to the families and friends of those offshore workers downed at sea.