

THE HARLEQUIN

York County Audubon

www.yorkcountyaudubon.org

Winter 2016

The Harlequin – *Monica Grabin*

On a bitterly cold and windy day recently, I accompanied a group of young birders, (the “Hard Core Birders”) from the Middle School of the Kennebunks to Parsons Beach, along with their teacher/advisor, Nathan Hall. We were looking for sea ducks, and although conditions were pretty miserable, we did see a few. As we were observing some Eiders and Black Ducks, I asked the kids: “How do those ducks manage on a day like this?” It seemed like a good question. We didn’t get a chance to fully answer it, but I thought it might be a good topic for this newsletter. As I was doing some research on the matter, however, I discovered some interesting things about a duck whose image is on the masthead above this article.

The first time I saw a Harlequin duck, I was hooked. They are definitely my favorite sea duck, and, to me at least, the most charming in every respect. They’re gorgeous while being cute, they’re fearless, and they pop up like little corks, on the rough water they prefer, which also happens to be close to shore and makes them easily visible. But how much do you know about them? I found that the answer for me is: almost nothing! Yet they have one of the most interesting life cycles in the duck world. So I thought we might spend a little quality time with York County Audubon’s mascot, the Harlequin Duck.

Harlequins are in the order Anseriformes: Swans, Geese and Ducks, in the family Anatidae, and the genus *Histrionicus*, “histro” being the Latin root meaning actor. It is the only member of this genus. The name “Harlequin” refers to a vividly dressed stock character in medieval *Commedia dell’arte*. They have many other names, including



Two proud male Harlequins – Doug Hitchcox photo

“Sea Mouse,” because of the squeaky noise they make.

Their life cycle is unique among our winter sea ducks. Most sea ducks breed in wetlands near the shore in the far north. But the Harlequin moves inland, and builds its nest among rocks and vegetation next to a swift-running mountain stream in the boreal forest. There the female lays her eggs very close to the water, her mate having already left for the coast, where he will molt. Shortly after hatching, the young are swimming in the eddies among the rapids, and by the time they have learned to fly are diving in swift currents and whitewater. They have been observed in terrific rapids, lost to view in the swirl of water among the rocks, only to surface downstream none the worse for wear. After fledging, the young are led by their mother to the coasts from the headwaters where they were

born. Unlike most sea ducks, Harlequins stay close to shore and are always found in areas of rocky, surf-battered coast.



*Female (top) and male Harlequin Ducks
~ Marie Jordan photo*

Their start in the rapids explains the Harlequin’s total indifference to the rough conditions we see them in on our coast. What makes them particularly suited to this is the density of their feathers, which trap a great deal of air. This is also what makes them “pop” to the surface, one of their more endearing traits. Their feathers are wonderfully colorful too, although it is the male who steals the show.

The Harlequins that we see here on the coast of Maine are now not as numerous as they once were. Their other stronghold is in the west, where there is a much larger population, perhaps as many as 200,000 birds. Hunting them is still allowed there, although they are now a “species of special concern.” The eastern population has been protected from hunting since 1989 and is “threatened” in Maine.

More than half of the eastern North American population of Harlequin ducks winter off the coast of Maine, and we are fortunate to have reliable viewing areas here in York County. If you’d like to see Harlequins, your chances are good around Perkins Cove in Ogunquit, as well as along Marginal Way. The Nubble light in Cape Neddick is also a good spot, as are the rocky areas just below Walker’s Point in Kennebunkport. Good luck, and enjoy our delightful and surprising mascot, the Harlequin.

YCA welcomes its New Members!

Brenda Anastasoff	Saco
Scott and Tallie Boisvert	Buxton
Anthony Carcirieri	Kittery Point
Nicole Colby and Jake Lyscars	Biddeford
Monica and Jason Crigler	South Berwick
Janet Drew	York
Philip and Linda Drew	Cape Neddick
Mark Ettinger	Kennebunk
Joline Ezzell	Parsonsfield
Brian and Karen Fraser	Kennebunk
Linda Greenfell	Wells
Bill Hoxie	Waterboro
Diane and Steve Losier	York Beach
Raymond Marston	Kittery Point
Sharon and Stephen Mosley	Lyman
Thomas Neufeld and Ann Patman	Kennebunkport
Patty and Bill Nutting	Saco
Jeff Petit and Heather Ripley	Kennebunk
Myrene G. Pfaff	York
Nancy Lee Rosolko	Eliot
Yurika Seko and Jeff Faulkner	Buxton
Kelly and Keith Shangraw	Wells
Beth Stepancik	Saco
Jennifer Taylor	Eliot
Mary F. Thomas	Eliot
Jolene and Jeremy Twombly-Wiser	Denmark
James Ward and Michelle Glen	Limington
Mrs. Peter M. Webster	York

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Pat Moynahan, Birding Challenge	284-5487
Bob Watson, Publicity	251-1135
Eileen Willard, Director	967-5118
Marian Zimmerman, Birding Trail	710-3015

For all upcoming events and general information, please visit our website:

www.yorkcountyaudubon.org

And for the latest news, photos and updates, please visit us on Facebook at:

www.facebook.com/yorkcountyaudubon

Working Towards Saving Our Piping Plovers - Pat Moynahan

Over the last few years, the York County Audubon Board has been asking the question, “How can we as an organization contribute to the saving of the Piping Plover in York County?” Education of the public that uses the problem Plover beaches has been the Board’s answer. And so, in collaboration with Noah Perlut, PHD, Associate Professor of Environmental Sciences at the University of New England (UNE), and Laura Zitske, Wildlife Ecologist, Maine Audubon Piping Plover Project, we hired a UNE student to walk Hills and Fortunes Rocks Beaches educating the public on the plight of the plover.



Our 2015 student, Haley LaMonica, spent 86 hours on both of these beaches. She began on May 16th and ended on July 25th. She educated 613 individuals, encouraged 156 dog owners to keep their dogs on a leash, and identified a new nest at Fortune’s Rocks. She certainly experienced the complexity of trying to save the plovers, and contributed to the safe fledging of 5 plover chicks from Fortunes Rocks, the most that have ever fledged from this particular beach, I believe. Unfortunately, the Hills Beach pair of nesting



Plovers abandoned their nest, a situation that suggests additional work is necessary.

Haley summarized her experience on her last day: “I met with Tracie and gave back my equipment that I had borrowed, and also talked about my experience working with the plovers. I have learned so much about these little guys and have gained an even greater appreciation for the species. It’s a tough life for a plover. These little guys are tough, I mean, they have to be to call a beach a home. I have seen nests abandoned, chicks washed away in the tide, chicks die and birds being taunted by people. But I have also seen how smart and adaptable they really are and how they continue to endure as a species. Being born a plover certainly isn’t easy.”

Thank you Haley for a job well done. Thank you YCA Board for working towards saving our plovers.

York County Audubon announces Hog Island Scholarship for July, 2016 Program

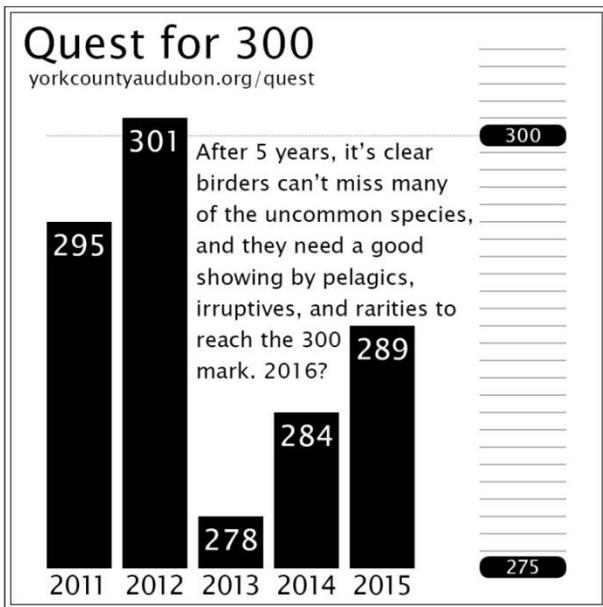


York County Audubon is seeking an educator or community leader to participate in a one-week program on famed Hog Island off mid-coast Maine in July 2016. YCAS will sponsor one participant who can benefit from the Hog Island experience and use it to teach others. **Complete info is available at www.yorkcountyaudubon.org and applications are due by March 15, 2016.**

The program is entitled “Sharing Nature: An Educator’s Week” and will run from July 17th through July 22nd. The YCAS scholarship will pay 70% (up to \$700) of the recipient's cost for program tuition, room and board.

YCAS’s 2015 Hog Island scholarship winners were teachers Nathan Hall (Kennebunk Middle School) and Christine Caprio (York High School). They provided lively descriptions of their program experiences in an article for the Autumn 2015 issue of *The Harlequin*, the YCAS newsletter, which can be accessed through the YCAS website.

Since 1936, some of the world’s most well-known and highly respected naturalists have come to Hog Island and inspired thousands to learn about and protect birds and the environment. Roger Tory Peterson was among the first teachers on the 335-acre island. Rachel Carson described her visit to Hog Island in her landmark book, *Silent Spring*. Kenn Kaufman, only nine years old when he read Peterson’s account of Hog Island, is now an international authority on birds and nature.



How many bird species can be seen in York County in a single year? We do our best to answer that question each year with our tracking of the “Quest for 300.” We reached 300 once, with 301 in 2012. For 2015, the total was “only” 289, but that included many unusual sightings. There were 11 species that had not been seen in 3 or more years: Acadian Flycatcher, Cave Swallow, Common Gallinule, Eastern Screech Owl, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Red Crossbill, Redhead, Worm-eating Warbler and Yellow-throated Warbler. And there were 3 that had never been seen in the six years we’ve been tracking our York County sightings: Gyrfalcon, Mississippi Kite and Surfbird!



Gyrfalcon on Parsons Field, Kennebunk
– photo by Shiloh Schulte

To see what’s been seen (and not seen) each year, you can scan the species checklist on the Birds & Birding drop down menu on our website. And certainly let us know if you’ve seen anything that we haven’t!

Two more successful Christmas Bird

Counts – by Pat Moynahan, Marie Jordan and Bill Grabin

Each year, York County Audubon sponsors two Christmas Bird Counts (“CBC’s”) as part of National Audubon Society’s worldwide CBC. Our two counts are centered in York/Cape Neddick and Biddeford/Kennebunkport. Each count covers a geographic circle, carved out into six or more territories. Each territory has a team that scours it during “count day” looking for all bird species, and recording the numbers seen of each. It can, at times, be a bit more art than science, as we attempt to count - but not double count - the birds we find. We also have supporters who monitor their home feeders during the day and contribute their totals. We ask them to report the greatest number of each species that they see at any one time during the day.

At the end of the day, we meet to compile the counts and share highlights. Once compiled, the counts are forwarded to National Audubon for their master compilation. Both locally and nationally, the totals are reviewed to assess trends in the populations of all species. While the totals can vary fairly dramatically year to year due to the weather that happens to grace us on count day, the bigger picture over time can be very informative.

This year, the Southern York County CBC was held on December 14th. The count circle extends from Moody Beach in Wells to Gerrish Island in Kittery Point, and inland to Mt. Agamenticus. Forty-five field participants, a count high, and two feeder watchers identified 81 species. This was a relatively low total, but not for lack of trying! This count has been held for 43 years, and despite the low overall numbers, we did have record high counts for five species: Greater Scaup: 32, Lesser Scaup: 21, Wild Turkey: 129, Rock Pigeon: 388, Barred Owl: 2. Clay-colored Sparrow made only its second count appearance.

The Biddeford/Kennebunkport CBC was held on January 2nd. A good crew of (forty!) birders covered the circle with enthusiasm and skill. Many reported



Red-tailed Hawk

that in total numbers, it was a slow day, but we still did a great job of finding individual species.

We had three record high counts for species this, the 56th year for this CBC: Red-tailed Hawks: 35, Northern Harriers: 5, and the NEW BIRD to the count - the one Little Blue Heron that forgot to go south when it should have!! We did not find, on count day, some of the birds that had been hanging out earlier in the week before the snow storm. Others that we would have expected to find escaped detection on count day - that’s birding!

And a note from Marie Jordan who has overseen this CBC for many years: “A family tradition - 4 generations gathering together over the New Year’s weekend - has made it too difficult for me to continue, so this will be my last year compiling this count. Please let me know if you might consider stepping into this role. I will help with the planning next year to ease the transition. We have a wonderful core of great birders that traditionally cover areas of this count so organizing it is fairly easy.”

Most of all, thanks to all who participated, including many who joined us for the first time. If you’d like to join us next year, keep an eye on our website in November for contact information. We’d be delighted to have you.

Saco's "Magic Hillside," Microclimates and intro to Cross-billed Deformities

~ Pat Moynahan

On November 18, 2015 David Doubleday led York County Audubon Wednesday birders to the Saco River Walk with the intention of finding late Fall migrants. We found them and renamed these local birding hotspots "The Magic Hillside." The Saco Riverwalk is located at the terminus of Front Street in Saco. There is parking across the street from the Saco Yacht Club. The hillside at this parking area has been dubbed "Magic Hillside #1." The River Walk proceeds via sidewalk along the Saco River and around the Saco Wastewater Treatment Station, which is isolated by chain link fencing. At the Northeast end of the Wastewater Treatment Facility fencing, after the sidewalk has become a dirt path, the Riverwalk curves around a small cattail marsh and to your left, under the powerlines, is "Magic Hillside #2."

The magic in both Hillside is the nature of the microclimates created by the southern facing hillside in the fall. They're also located by water, and mostly covered in dense vegetation. In a column contributed to ebird.org news entitled *November Birding: Urban and Suburban Microclimates*, Luke Seitz wrote "With temperatures dropping as we head into winter, any slightly warmer area has a higher likelihood of holding surviving insects. For insectivorous warblers or flycatchers, finding bugs is their only hope for survival, which is why lingering fall migrants or vagrants are often concentrated in these small patches."

The southern facing Magic Hillside #2 illuminated this fact on November 18th. Within minutes of the group's arrival, an Orange-Crowned Warbler arrived as well. Great color contrast was seen as the south sun shone on the bird's gray head and distinctive eye line. The Orange-crowned Warbler was followed very closely by at least one Yellow Warbler, and then a bird that required lots of photos and discussion leading to eventually agreement on the ID: a first-year Tennessee Warbler. The Common Yellowthroat was not overlooked and several Ruby-crowned Kinglets rounded out

this mid-fall day - that's right, November 18th. The phenomenon persisted: within a week, a Blackburnian Warbler and then a Western Tanager were identified on the hillside. Microclimates in fall mean birds, and, of course, adjusting those eBird filters which are based on historic arrival and departure dates. The latest eBird report for the Tennessee Warbler was December 20, 2015 and the Western Tanager was counted in the CBC in Biddeford/Kennebunkport on January 2nd, 2016.



Tennessee Warbler with crossed bill ~ Kevin Couture photo

Thanks to the photographers in the Wednesday birding group, great photos of all the birds were captured. Identification of species, estimated age, and of course plumage were reviewed by many state experts. Photos revealed an extended crossed bill on the Tennessee Warbler. This fact evoked a lengthy email conversation with several members of the Maine list serve. We found that the Alaska Science Center is studying beak deformities in all species. Findings of this research include that deformities were identified in 28 bird species in Alaska and "every migratory bird observed with a bill deformity has been a juvenile bird." Plumage indicated that our Tennessee Warbler was a Hatch Year Bird. In addition to the scientific and photo reports of deformed bills, anecdotal stories abound. No causation of the phenomenon was identified. Microclimates hold the potential for bonanza Fall birding. Identify one close to you and see if you can experience your own "Magic Hillside."

***** Upcoming YCA Events at the Wells Reserve at Laudholm Farm *****



Thursday, February 18th, 10 am – 2 pm at the Wells Reserve:
Winter Wildlife Day & Snow Day. For the sixth year, the Wells Reserve, the Center for Wildlife, and York County Audubon team up to celebrate the wildlife of southern Maine. Join us for lots of family fun with live animal presentations, guided walks, and crafts. If the ground is white, bring skis, sleds, and snowshoes (we have some snowshoes to share — mostly kid size — if you don't have your own). Center for Wildlife presentations: 10-11am, Tracking walks & crafts: 11-12, Family friendly snow sports and plenty of hot cocoa 12-2pm



Tuesday, March 15th, 7:00 pm

Life Lessons from the Life of John James Audubon

Share an evening with Mark Jones, Sr. V.P. and Director Retail Lending at Saco & Biddeford Savings and lifelong outdoorsman/photographer as he shares his photography of our stunning natural surroundings and offers thoughts on four often overlooked steps to making a bigger impact on what is most important to you.



Tuesday, April 26th at 7:00 pm (Note: this is the 4th Tuesday!)

Why do We Need Carnivores Anyway?

Geri Vestin is a conservation biologist whose work focuses on Maine carnivores and our relationship with them. She is a terrific speaker whose informative program will better educate us on the role carnivores play in our ecosystem and help us become more knowledgeable about their ecology. You will discover connections that will leave you in awe. We should take away with a better understanding of the value of carnivores in the Maine landscape and gain in our ability to practice coexistence skills.



Visit us on
Facebook

Our Facebook page has experienced a steady increase in activity, rewarding visitors with “hot off the digital camera” photos of local unusual birds and other treats. Please visit the page, “like” us if you wish, and post a photo, sighting or comment of your own.

And visit our website - YorkCountyAudubon.org - to see the photos in this newsletter magically transformed from Black & White into Color!

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