

No Joking: Harlequin Ducks Make Ft. Abercrombie Home

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Harlequin ducks are known for their dramatic feather patterns. Glen Smart, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service photo

Periodically

this summer the volunteer naturalist at Fort Abercrombie State Historic Park, Deb Mignogno, teaches us a little bit more about the natural world around the park This week we learn a lot about the Harlequin Duck, and that's no joke.

Hi - this

is Deb Mignogno, naturalist at Fort Abercrombie State Historic Park. If you haven't been to Abercrombie yet this summer, come on out for a visit. We still have lots of activities planned for the rest of the summer. For more information, check out the Summer Naturalist program on the Park's website.

I've been

noticing a few more harlequin ducks around the Park's coastal waters recently.

Harlequin ducks can be seen year round in Kodiak's coastal waters, although, during the breeding season, the harlequins we see are probably non-breeders and immature birds.

Harlequins inhabit inshore marine waters, rocky shores and reefs; often

perching on rocks for preening and sleeping. The total population of harlequin ducks in the Kodiak area is estimated at 10,000 individuals.

Harlequins

establish pair bonds on their wintering grounds and they migrate together to their breeding areas in late May to early June.

Unique among North American waterfowl, harlequins generally seek rapidly flowing streams and rivers for nesting and rearing young. Most nests are built very close to the water on the ground in dense vegetation, among tree roots, or in rock crevices. Once the female has laid 5-7 eggs and begins incubation, the male returns to coastal waters. Incubation takes about a month, longer than any other sea duck. Within 24 hours of hatching, the chicks will be lead by the female to nearby water where they learn to find aquatic insects and larvae. The young are able to fly when they are about a month and a half old.

Generally,

males return to the coast mid- to late June and are molting by early July. Breeding females with their fledged young will not return until August or September.

Like all waterfowl, each year, harlequins lose all of their flight feathers and, until new ones grow out 3 to 4 weeks later, they cannot fly. Their molting sites are often close to their wintering sites. Males and females are separated while the female incubates, rears the young, returns to the coast, and molts. Pairs reunite on the wintering grounds and maintain long-term pair bonds.

There is

little information on the links between wintering areas and breeding areas for most of Alaska's harlequins. Based on information gained from banding harlequins in the Kodiak area, it is thought that Kodiak is pretty much a closed system, with harlequins both nesting and wintering in the Kodiak area.

There are breeding records for harlequin ducks throughout much of Alaska.

These birds sometimes make long distance trips to reach their breeding grounds. For example, one male harlequin banded by

Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Prince William Sound migrated over 2000 km to the Anadyr River drainage in Russia. Birds wintering in

the western Aleutian Islands may nest in Russia or in Alaska. In Idaho,

where I am from, an estimated 70 pairs breed in our clear, fast moving mountain streams. Harlequin ducks marked in Idaho have

been observed along the coasts of Washington and British Columbia

during the nonbreeding season.

Both

its common and its scientific names are related to the male's colorful appearance. The term "harlequin" recalls

the gaily colored dress of medieval court jesters or "harlequins." The "histrion" of its Latin scientific name *Histrionicus*

means "stage player."

There are a number of places on the Park where you may be able to observe harlequins, including Miller Point and from the cliffs along the wildflower meadow trail. Enjoy your summer at the Park and I hope to see you on the trail!

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