

Boaters and Harlequin Ducks: guidelines for co-existence

Harlequin Ducks should be the envy of whitewater paddlers — they move with cork-like ease through rapids and waterfalls, eddy out with precision and always return to the surface right-side-up! You may have noticed them ... like a flying football going by at head height.

The Harlequin Duck is a small sea duck that spends most of its life at the ocean, migrating inland to fast mountain streams to breed. The east slopes of the Rockies is on the eastern edge of their range. Pairs generally arrive here in early May. After their long migration they spend a lot of time feeding. The hen usually makes her nest along a small tributary that has lots of vegetation. Once she begins incubating, her mate returns to the coast. The time of nesting is variable — generally between mid-May until mid-July — depending on elevation and depth of snowpack. Broods might not migrate until late September even.



Harlequin Ducks feed by diving to the bottom of the stream, where they move rocks and pebbles to find the larvae of caddisflies and mayflies, freshwater snails or fish eggs. They frequently feed below riffles and rapids, using eddies to rest between dives. After feeding they often “haul out” to rest on mid-stream rocks or logs, and at the downstream end of gravel bars.

For more information about Harlequin Ducks, visit www.bowvalleynaturalists.org.

But human presence can disturb them. Their first response is usually to let the current carry them downstream out of danger ... but a boat is naturally heading downstream, too, and may unintentionally “chase” them. This is particularly true for hens with a brood, as the young cannot fly until they’re 7-8 weeks old. Adults may go downstream for a distance and then fly back upstream past a boat.

Following are some guidelines that may help to lessen your disturbance of any Harlequin Ducks you may encounter:

- learn to recognize Harlequin Ducks and places where they may be feeding or resting;
- go to the other side of the river; avoid paddling directly towards them;
- avoid moving unnecessarily; float quietly by without paddling, talking, pointing or waving;
- reduce spacing between boats if possible so that you only disturb them once;
- if you see a hen and brood consider eddying out and waiting awhile for the birds to find a secure spot to hide; and
- Harlequins are particularly vulnerable on narrow rivers and streams; perhaps you could consider another waterbody during critical times.

