

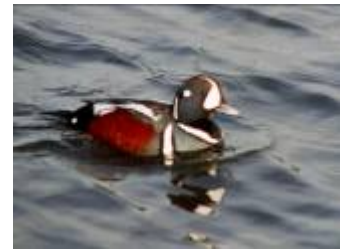


Time for Nature



Things are looking better for the Harlequin Duck Forillon National Park of Canada

Lucky visitors to Forillon National Park of Canada may catch sight of a colourful little creature called the Harlequin Duck. The Harlequin took its unusual name from a character in an Italian comedy who wears a multi-coloured costume. One look at the male sea duck's strange colouring will tell you why. It is a blue-grey duck with reddish-brown sides and odd white patches and spots.



The male harlequin's plumage accounts for its name, which refers to a colorful character from Italian comedies. © Parks Canada, Serge Brodeur, 1996.

When the Harlequin was designated as endangered in 1990, biologists realized how little they knew about the Harlequin's habitat, movements and population size. A research and monitoring program was launched which, in just over a decade, discovered some very good news about the Harlequin's status.

Tracking down the Harlequin

With its complex migration patterns, it's not surprising that scientists knew little about the Harlequin's range. It winters in shallow waters off rocky coastlines, where it feeds on small shellfish and blue mussels. Come spring, it migrates inland to clear, fast-flowing rivers and streams to breed. Then, after the breeding season, males and females migrate to different locations.



The female is less striking in appearance. © Parks Canada, Serge Brodeur, 1996.

Scientists initially believed that there were four distinctly different populations of Harlequins: the Pacific, Greenland, Iceland and eastern North America. In 1990 when the species was declared endangered, they believed that Harlequins wintering in eastern North America accounted for all Harlequin Ducks of eastern North America. That population was estimated to number about 1000 individuals.

But in the late 1990s, researchers using radio telemetry in Forillon National Park uncovered a link between the Greenland and eastern North American populations.



The Greenland connection

The research showed that the eastern North American and Greenland populations were in some ways interlinked. Since the Greenland wintering population is believed to number between 10,000 and 30,000, the Harlequin's status looked less grim. This led in 2001 to the Harlequin's down listing from endangered to special concern.

Still a sitting duck

Of course the Harlequin isn't out of threat yet. Since 1990, it has been protected from hunting by law in eastern North America. However, females continue to be killed accidentally because of their strong resemblance to buffleheads and surf scoters ducks. Naturalists and wardens at Forillon National Park are working to raise public awareness about how to tell these ducks apart.

Everyone can contribute to helping the Harlequin population recover by keeping a respectful distance when observing the birds and avoiding disturbing Harlequin habitat when hiking, canoeing, kayaking and fishing.

For more information visit www.pc.gc.ca/forillon



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