

# Harlequin Duck (HADU)

*Histrionicus histrionicus*



Photo By: Larry Kirtley

## Description

The Harlequin Duck is a relatively uncommon sea duck. From a distance, Harlequin Ducks look black or dark gray and can easily be confused with more common sea ducks, such as scoters. At close range, however, the bright colouration of the adult male is more visible. It is characterized by slate blue plumage, with chestnut flanks, and streaks of white on its head and body. The female has plain, brownish-gray colouring that is darkest on its head, a white patch extending below and in front of each eye, and a prominent white ear patch.

## Known and potential breeding habitat

Harlequin Duck breeding habitat includes fast-flowing, rapid streams and rivers either in coastal estuaries or inland watersheds. In Labrador, Harlequin Ducks prefer narrower, warmer, and less acidic streams with steep banks, and more vegetative cover along the banks. In Newfoundland, breeding evidence has been observed from 15 May to 19 August. In mid-summer, broods disperse in their family groups to coastal areas, potentially far from the nesting site.

## Detection Tips

### Habitat

Harlequin Ducks spend winters along rocky coastlines, usually within 300 m of shore. Winter range is determined largely by availability of suitable prey. In summer they are found in fast-moving streams and rivers. Nests are often up-stream from where a pair is seen, and after chicks hatch, individuals may be seen more often in gentler areas of the stream.

### Vocalization

Harlequin Ducks do not vocalize often, but they have one call that can carry over the loudness of rushing water, described as a mouselike squeak. They typically only vocalize while on the water or perched on rocks, and not while flying.

### Behaviour

Harlequin Ducks form monogamous pairs and return to the same



Aquatic



COSEWIC Ranking:  
Special Concern



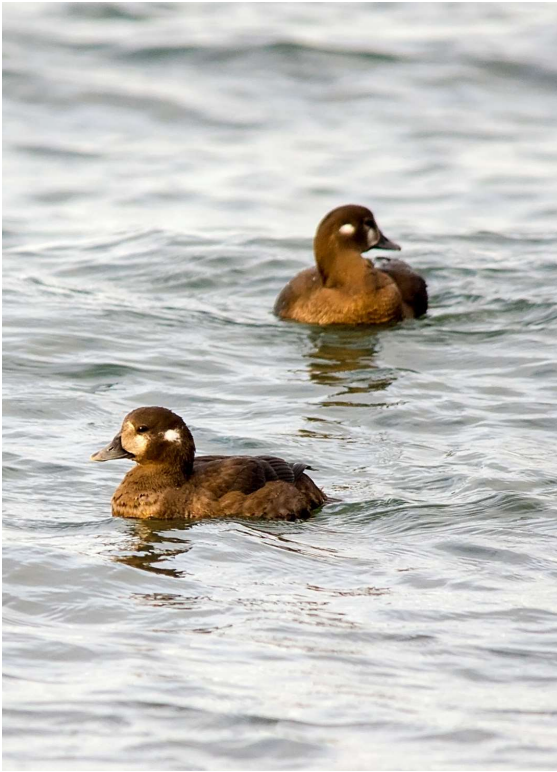
NL Designation:  
Vulnerable



Waterfowl

Photo By: Matt Hanns Schroeter on Unsplash





Female Harlequin Ducks.

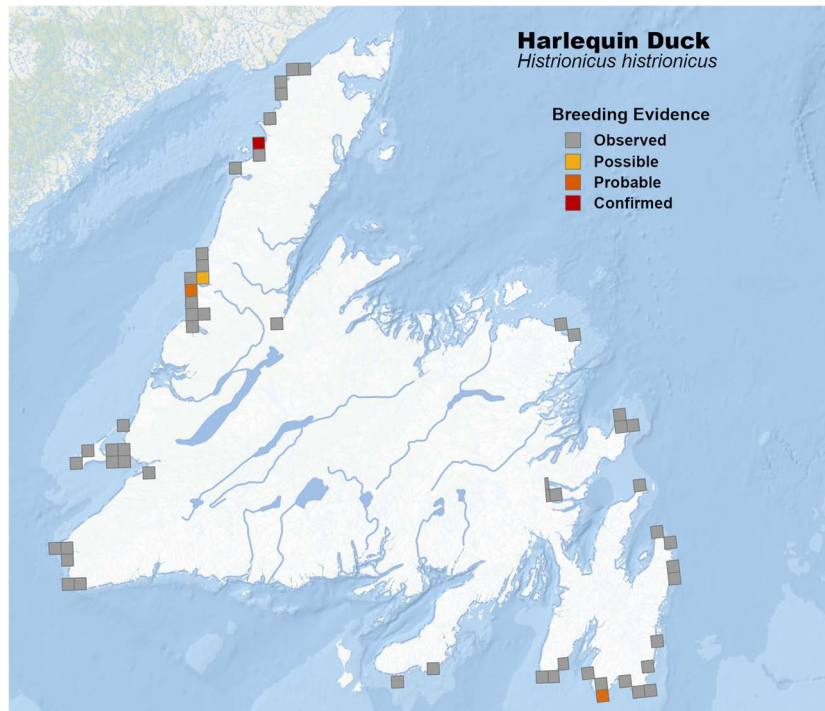
breeding and wintering sites year after year. Most diving ducks do not spend time on land, but Harlequin Ducks will comfortably rest on rocks, beaches, and small islets. They are very strong and acrobatic swimmers, managing well in rough surf and amongst boulders in fast rivers. They can be seen diving to find food. Males display for females by tossing their heads and vocalizing. Males travel to the molting grounds while females are still incubating eggs.

### *Nesting*

These ducks begin to form pairs (often with their previous mate) in October on their wintering grounds. When they arrive on the breeding grounds, the female selects a nest site by walking along the shoreline to inspect every potential site. In Newfoundland, they nest atop the banks of deep-cut rivers, up to 20m above water. There is no nest construction other than the addition of down to keep the 3-9 pale cream-coloured eggs warm. Chicks are able to swim soon after hatching but cannot dive until they are 3-4 weeks old.

### *Breeding Evidence*

Breeding evidence for Harlequin Ducks includes adult (H) or pair (P) in a suitable nesting habitat in nesting season, nest containing eggs (NE), adults entering or exiting a nest site (AE), and a female duck in breeding habitat with fledged young (FY). Use caution with H and P codes: make sure that the ducks are in proper breeding habitat, as males leave to molt in non-breeding areas in mid-summer, and pairs form before reaching the breeding grounds.



Harlequin Ducks (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) were detected in 57 squares in Newfoundland during the past ten years (2011–2021). Breeding was confirmed in 1 of these squares.