



## Harlequin Duck – *Histrionicus histrionicus*

**Protection status:** Washington State endangered species listing

An estimated 400 harlequin duck pairs nest beside fast flowing mountain streams in the Olympic and Cascade Ranges and in northeastern Washington. They may also occur in the southeastern corner of Washington State in the Blue Mountains ecoregion. An estimated 3,000 harlequin ducks winter along the outer coast and in the northern Puget Sound, northern Hood Canal, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the San Juan Archipelago. Many birds that nest in Washington molt and winter in the Strait of Georgia, British Columbia, whilst others molt and winter in interior British Columbia, Alberta, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana.



Photo: L. Barnes

### Physical description

Harlequin ducks are between 14-20 inches long and weigh 1-1.5 pounds. Males have blue-grey bodies with chestnut colored sides, and white patches on the head and body that are outlined in black. Whilst in flight males show white and metallic blue on their wings. Females are brown with 2 to 3 white patches on the sides of their face. When harlequin ducks molt it is hard to distinguish between males and females.

### Life history

Harlequin ducks choose their mates beginning around October, with breeding beginning in May and June. They are seasonally monogamous meaning that pairs will form only for a single breeding season. A female will seek to choose a male with bright plumage, which is seen as a sign of good health and the ability to be able to protect her from other males during the breeding season. 5 to 8 eggs will be laid by the female, which will hatch after 27 to 29 days. After a female begins to incubate the eggs the male will leave and migrate back to the ocean to undergo the annual molt. Once hatched the female will take her offspring to the water within a few days to teach them how to fly and catch their own food. The female will continue to protect her chicks until they fledge after 5 to 6 weeks, at which time they migrate back to the coastal wintering areas. Breeding success for both males and females remains low until the age of 5, even though they become sexually mature at around 2 years old.

### Habitat use

Nests are built on the ground next to relatively undisturbed fast flowing streams with cobble to boulder size substrate and vegetated banks in river, subalpine or coastal habitats. The ducks prefer nesting habitats that include low acidity streams with high numbers of invertebrates, steep banks with vegetation, networks of small river channels separated by small islands, and gravel and sand bars. In Washington State's marine waters harlequin ducks occur primarily in water less than 1m (3.3 feet) that contains eelgrass (*Zostera* spp) and kelp communities.

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Washington State Department of Natural Resources • Aquatic Division

Winter distributions are related to the amount of available food, which is primarily an animal diet consisting of invertebrates and fish. They have also been reported to eat crustaceans, mollusks, insects and smaller fish.

### **Why are harlequin ducks included in the Aquatic Lands HCP?**

The Aquatic Lands Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) addresses 29 species of animals that depend on submerged or intertidal lands for either all or a significant portion of their life history. Specific threats that warrant protection of harlequin ducks include:

- Changes in habitat structure
- Increase in predation
- Decline in water and sediment quality
- Physical harm or harassment from covered activities

### **The Aquatic Lands Habitat Conservation Plan**

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the steward of more than 2.6 million acres of state owned aquatic lands beneath Washington's navigational lakes, rivers, marine waters, and estuaries. DNR sustainably manages these aquatic lands on behalf of the people of the state – to protect fish and wildlife and to provide opportunities for commerce, navigation, and public access.

The increased demand for the use of aquatic lands can be harmful to aquatic habitats and species. To encourage a balanced approach to managing and protecting these lands, DNR is developing an Aquatic Lands **Habitat Conservation Plan** (HCP). The HCP will provide a framework for managing the aquatic lands under DNR's stewardship to ensure the continued health of our state's marine and fresh waters and the species that inhabit them.

### **Learn more**

For more information about DNR's Aquatic Lands HCP and the other species that are covered in the plan, visit: [www.dnr.wa.gov/aquaticHCP](http://www.dnr.wa.gov/aquaticHCP)

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