

HARLEQUIN DUCK AT REGINA

by Frank H. Brazier, 2657 Cameron Street, Regina

"The British Columbia observation helped me in identifying the birds in this instance, but I wish, on aesthetic grounds, that these birds had still been in possession of their spectacular breeding plumage!" With these words Dan Brunton, of Ottawa, concluded his comprehensive account of "The Harlequin Duck in Saskatchewan" (Brunton, 1968), referring to his discovery of three drakes on Regina's Wascana Lake, September 6, 1968. Had Dan Brunton been with us on June 5, 1971, he would have had his wish.

The afternoon of Saturday, June 5, was dull, with a heavy overcast. After we had concluded the day's shopping at about 4:15 p.m. near the southern end of Regina's Albert Street, my wife Margie and I decided to take a short run into the country. Two miles south of the No. 1 and No. 6 Highway traffic interchange we turned east for no particular reason, admired the 60-odd Canvasback drakes loafing on the flooded field at Cinema-6, and then went on.

"Let's see if we can pick up some McCown's Longspurs," I suggested, for on occasion it has been our pleasure to show this little fringillid to eastern and southern visitors who need it for their "life lists". Two miles from Highway 6 we turned south. About one-half mile further we reached a shallow depression, water-filled, which contained some emergent growth. Going by, I noticed a resting bird very low in the water near the weeds in the centre of the pond, a round-backed creature with a white blob at the front of the head, and white in the plumage. "Probably a coot," I remarked as I brought the car to a stop and peered at it with my 10x50s. At that time the bird was resting with its bill buried in the breast feathers (a fact I did not determine until later) so all I could see was what I thought was a large white bill, a white head-patch and two white stripes across the fore-

part of a body which, in the poor light, seemed to be uniformly gray.

"What is it?" asked Margie.

"I don't know, but if that's a coot it's the dangdest coot I ever saw! Where's the book?" Since the book was sitting uselessly on the piano stool at home, I turned the car around and headed there. "I've never seen that bird before," I acknowledged. "I'll see if Elmer's home, get a book and return." The puddle was six miles from my door so I was back about 5.00, when the light conditions were even poorer. Elmer Fox had not been at home, but no sooner had I stopped to again examine the duck, (which had obligingly moved a little closer) when Elmer and his son Douglas drove up. They had seen my car while cruising the area.

This time the bird was floating with head up. The duck bill could be clearly seen as could the curved white face patch, the two white headpatches and the white stripes and chestnut sides. This curious marking makes the drake Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) about the most bizarrely patterned duck there is. Later, I returned with George Ledingham to view the distinguished visitor, and he readily confirmed the identification made by Elmer Fox and myself.

Striking as is the Harlequin's appearance in the spring, he could hardly have chosen a more contrasting stage to show himself to us. (His name is derived from the Latin, *histrion* — a stage-player, having reference to his spectacular dress.) The pond was very shallow, a few inches deep at the most, certainly an extraordinary situation for a bird which, as F. H. Kortright says in *The ducks, geese and swans of North America* (1962): "... is found ... frequenting the rocky shores and revelling in the rough, tempestuous waters and the tumult of breakers on the exposed surf-washed



Photo by F. W. Lahrman

Male Harlequin Duck with Shovelers at Regina

beaches. These ducks may be seen climbing nimbly over the jagged, slippery rocks and ledges with the same ease and facility with which they ride the foaming crests of the sea. There is no weather too rough nor habitat too wild for these truly maritime little birds." The shallow pond in the flat Saskatchewan grainland presented the greatest possible contrast to the Harlequin's normal breeding range, the mountainous country of eastern Siberia and western North America from Central Alaska to northern California.

At 6:30 a.m. on the following morning I was at the pond, to find the drake still there, prospecting along the edges, dabbling under water like any self-respecting prairie duck. Presumably he found enough to eat by this means, although he may also have flown off on occasion to feed elsewhere. That morning I could plainly see the chestnut head stripes, which were pale chestnut in colour, and which appeared to be the same shade as that depicted by Kortright for the Western race of Harlequin Duck, a point, of course, which could only be determined by comparisons.

At times pairs of Gadwall, Shoveler and Mallard seemed also to find sustenance by dabbling in the mud. At any rate, our duck appeared to be

hugely content. Each evening of the following Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday the bird was there when I arrived, sitting serenely on his puddle. On a couple of occasions I observed him dabbling for whatever "small beef" (a delightful, all-inclusive, self-explanatory term of Dr. Ivan Sanderson) the pond afforded. (Since the species normally consumes about 98% animal matter, it is not sought by gunners.) I never saw him flap his wings, or preen, or stretch. For a spectacular fellow, he turned in a singularly dull performance. Had there been a Columbine to play to his Harlequin it would do doubt have been different!

When the last half of the week remained fine and sunny, I expected the duck to disappear and was glad to learn that Elmer Fox and Fred Lahrman had already taken pictures of him. At 6:00 a.m. on Friday, June 11 he had indeed gone—I could not see him among the weeds in the pond, nor was there any good cover nearby—but when I checked the rapidly shrinking puddle twelve hours later he was back on station. He was not there Saturday, either at 4:30 p.m. or 7:00 p.m., but Elmer Fox told me he was there at two separate times on Sunday, June 13. This was our last record of his appearance.