



Red-breasted Merganser



Snowy Owl



Dark-eyed Junco

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Winter Bird Notes

Bucephala albeola (Bufflehead)

ORDER: Anseriformes (3 Family)

FAMILY: Anatidae (174 Species)

What gorgeous, warm, non-seasonal weather this week! And, what thrilling birds to see on Lake Michigan! Some new arriving waterfowl this week are the common goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*), the common merganser (*Mergus merganser*) and a solitary red-necked grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*). Every walk along the lakefront offers a new landscape of birds to identify. Everyday there is new exciting glimpses of avian behavior in the winter freshwater habitat. Who ever said living in Wisconsin was boring during the winter has not taken up bird watching as a past time!

There are so many wonderful winter bird highlights to share, that sometimes I have a difficult time choosing *one* bird to discuss. However, this week I have been anxiously wanting to give interesting information on my favorite little duck, the bufflehead! This toy-looking diving duck is the smallest duck and can be seen from a distance by the distinct contrasting markings! The male has an all white body and contrasting black neck and back. Additionally, he has a white patch on the head that I call "marshmallow earmuffs". The male head markings is where the bufflehead or "buffalo-head" name came from. The female is brown and has a white, oval, "beauty" mark on the cheek behind the eyes. In flight, the male center inner wing has a solid white patch that passes from front to back. In contrast, the female has a small white patch on the secondary wing feathers. These are examples of specific sexual dimorphism traits in this species. They are common winter birds and are frequently seen close to shore. I love watching them dive into tall crashing waves near Lake Park across from the running track/soccer field. They are courageous active ducks that can be often seen bobbing and diving into the strong waves! In fact, buffleheads prefer diving in water depths of four to 15 feet, so you can see them frequently near shore. If you have some extra time, I encourage a drive or walk along the lakeshore to experience the joy of watching the buffleheads. I often wonder why "pop culture" does not use the bufflehead as icons like it uses the lady beetle. They both have such charisma, uniqueness and talent!

Here are a few of my favorite bufflehead characteristics:

First, these ducks are in abundance and likely because they lay their eggs in more protected locations. They typically will re-use northern flicker or pileated woodpecker tree cavities, especially poplars, that are within 30 feet from water. Additionally, they can nest in shoreline banks and nesting boxes that have entrance openings of 2.5 - 3 inches in diameter. Females will start laying annual broods in June and incubate the eggs alone for 29 days. Amazingly, the nestlings will fledge only **24-36 hours** after hatching. The young will be able to fly as early as 50-55 days.

Second, buffleheads are ultrafast, so fast that their wings in flight are a blur. Additionally, they fly in tightly packed, small flocks very close to the water. In fact, they will “disappear” in deep wave troughs during flight. The flight pattern is likened to “going nowhere fast” because they constantly rock back and forth which cause them to change direction and even fly in wide circles.

This small duck is usually silent. However, during courtship, the male will make squeaky sounds and the female will make rapid, prolonged *kek-kek-kek* sounds. The male and female form a long-term pair bond.



References:

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