



Red-breasted Merganser



Snowy Owl



Dark-eyed Junco

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Winter Bird Notes

Bucephala clangula (Common Goldeneye)

ORDER: Anseriformes (3 Family)

FAMILY: Anatidae (174 Species)

The weather this week was brutal, to say the least. Strong northwesterly winds and changes in atmospheric pressure caused a seiche, or a mini low tide. You could see the lake level was lower near the shore by the water marks left on the boulder barriers and by the longer exposed beach. The wind also made the snowflakes undulate up, down, and sideways from slow to rapid descent. The breaks in the cumulus clouds allowed sunbeams or crepuscular rays to be seen. Did you know these rays are actually parallel and not convergent? It is visual perspective, meaning closer images are larger than distant images. For example, the road you stand on narrows to a point on the distant horizon. If you were to see these rays from space, they are nearly parallel down to the earth's surface. At any rate, sunbeams can be seen on hazy days at dusk, dawn, and through breaks in the clouds.

I saw the first male common goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) at Lakeshore State Park this week. These diving ducks are one of the later migrants to our region. The male has distinguished markings like the white oval spot at the base of the bill, a large greenish head shaped like a mushroom top, short neck, bright yellow iris, and white body. Distinguishing markings of the female include a hazelnut-brown head, a white collar that separates the grayish-brown body, and a pale yellow iris. This duck has many unique characteristics and I would like to share a few of my favorites.



First, this cavity nesting duck can be parasitized by other goldeneye females laying eggs in the nest. This is also called ***intraspecific brood parasitism***. Females in this species can modify their brood number by how many “extra” eggs are laid in the nest. For example, the female will continue to lay eggs if she has been parasitized with one egg. However, she will stop laying eggs if she was parasitized with several eggs and then she may choose to incubate the clutch or she may abandon the nest. Because of parasitism, female goldeneyes have been known to incubate more than 30 eggs at one time!! This is a significant responsibility for the female to accomplish alone. However, once the eggs hatch, the nestlings fledge in a short **24-42 hours**. This precocial trait helps to lessen the caring burden of the female and has potentially led to parasitism occurring in the species. Another possible cause of brood parasitism may be that females tend to nest where they were hatched. Therefore, mothers, daughters, and sisters might lay eggs in the same nest. Many websites, like the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, stream live bird nests around the world. Wouldn't watching a common goldeneye nest full of 30 precocial hatchlings be action packed!?

Second, courtship display is unlike any other duck. This may be because common goldeneye ducks tend to congregate in the same small habitats with other duck species. Therefore, the male goldeneye must perform a unique complex display to attract a female common goldeneye. The male does just that, but his display is super fast! He throws back his head at an average speed of **1.29 seconds** and a range of 1.13 and 1.44 seconds! The male also produces a nasal *peeent* sound. This is very similar to the *peeent* sound made by the male American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) before he performs his amazing courtship sky dance display in early spring at dusk and dawn. The mating routine of both birds should not be missed! You can see male goldeneyes practicing and perfecting their duck display on Lake Michigan during the winter.

And finally, common goldeneyes fly fast but they look like they are flying slow and with effort because they are bulky ducks with big heads which makes them easy to spot from a distance. Additionally, they are often seen at mid-height in an upward, disorganized, small flock. This duck is also called the “***whistler***” because of the loud sound made from the flapping wings in flight.



References:

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