



Red-breasted Merganser



Snowy Owl



Dark-eyed Junco

Photos and Text by Heidi Meier
 > meierdvm@hotmail.com
 November 9, 2021

Winter Bird Notes

Clangula hyemalis (Long-tailed Duck)

ORDER: Anseriformes (3 Family)

FAMILY: Anatidae (174 Species)

The warmer weather this week has been delightful. Walking in nature on crisp mornings this time of year is simply breathtaking. The fall foliage colors are ranging from lemon yellows to acorn squash-oranges to cranberry reds. These colors and the cool sensations make you want to make homemade apple pie and experiment with harvest recipes.

The temperature today was in the mid-50s and a gentle northerly breeze could be heard rustling through the little bluestems in the prairie at Lakeshore State Park. Additionally, whistling howls from the wind were heard passing through the metal on the walking bridge and around some metal sign posts. The sky was partially filled with long rows of puffy clouds or cirrocumulus clouds. I think it is amazing that these clouds also look like ripples in shallow water, or waves, or the sand below the water surface, or the sand on a wind swept beach, or on ancient rock formations that were once under water, or the roof of your mouth. So many similar patterns are seen in nature. At any rate, these clouds are typically seen in cooler months and often are preludes to stormy weather.

Why are many winter birds in contrasting black and white? For example, snowy owls, common goldeneyes, male mergansers, dark-eyed juncos, snow buntings, long-tailed ducks, arctic terns, greater black-backed gulls, and the darling diving buffleheads. I think of questions like this often during walks. Great naturalists have taught me the importance of asking questions and attempting to find answers. This curiosity leads nature observers to appreciate all things that are great and small.

Most of the waterfowl were seen in the calm water west of the island. Whitecaps from north wind squalls were causing the birds to sequester in calmer water. Among these birds was a distinguished, small, black and white female long-tailed duck (*Clangula hyemalis*). She was preening alongside mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and American coots (*Fulica americana*). The male mallards are in bright new plumage after a summer molting period as they begin to pair bond with females for the winter ahead. The long-tailed duck has one of the most complex molting patterns and was thought to have *three* molting or plumage changes each year. But, the molting is now known to have two distinct cycles annually, just like other ducks. The plumage shape and coloration is based on hormones and independent of the molting process. Long-tailed duck pairs have distinct plumages or sexual dimorphism just like the mallard. This particular female had the typical pale face below a brown cap and the distinct large dark round spot on her cheek and short tail. The male in this species has the long tail seen in the wood block below.

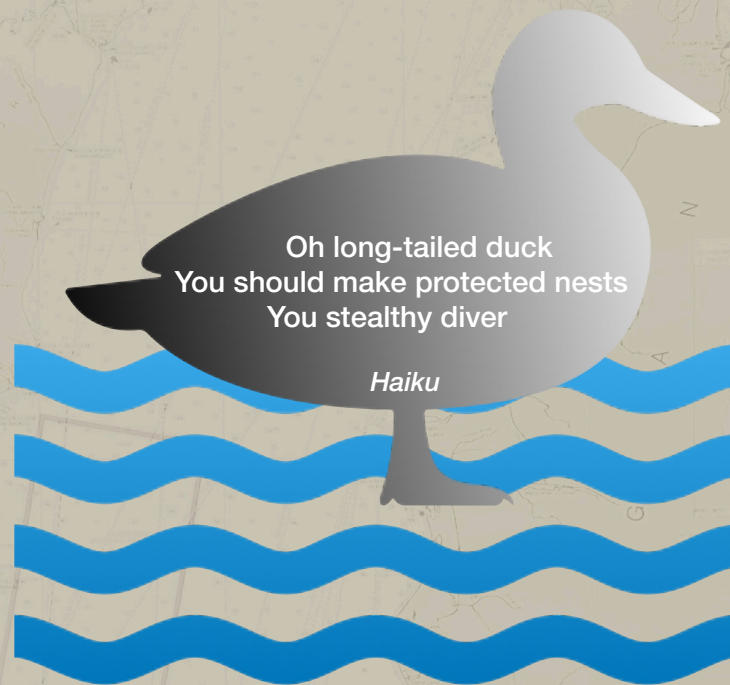


L. Roper - Horicon area artist

Long-tailed ducks are in the family *Anatidae* which includes 19 species of sea birds. This duck was formerly called Oldsquaw and is one of the hardiest winter ducks because it can survive the icy North Atlantic and Great Lakes during the winter. Here are some of my favorite attributes of the duck:

- I have to say their flight pattern is quite unique and can be distinguished from very long distances. If there was a time of year to have a spotting scope, this would be the season so you could watch migrating water birds. I am saving many pennies to purchase a good scope in the distant future. At any rate, they fly together in a loose line and every once in a while, one will bob up and down then settle back into the vertical line with the others. Additionally, the flock will undulate by flying close to the water then rise higher for a period of time, then return close to the waves. And yet another flight pattern you might see is the rocking from shoulder to shoulder of some individuals in the flock. This will look like some ducks are showing the upper body while others are showing the lower body in flight. They are certainly not like the murmuration of European starlings in perfect unison on the wing!
- This diving duck does not fold its wings in completely when diving. The partially folded wing will conceal the white regions and allow for a dark stealthy fishing machine. Additionally, their legs are positioned closer to the tail making them more powerful divers and swimmers.

- Long-tailed ducks, like many other sea ducks, have sturdy, short bills that are good for finding shellfish between rocks and probing deep in the sand.
- Large flocks of already-formed pairs migrate to nesting sites in the Arctic tundra in February. They make nests close to the ground which is unfortunate since this allows for easy predation from skunks, foxes and minks. Thus, the diminished survival success rate in this species. During early egg incubation, the male will leave. Additionally, many females will leave their flightless offspring. The abandoned offspring will form larger groups with others that have no parental care. The adults will migrate far offshore forming a flock of tens of thousands during non-breeding season.



References:

1. The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior. David Allen Sibley. 2001. Andrew Stewart Publishing, Inc., NY and Toronto.
2. Peterson Reference Guide to Seawatching, Eastern Waterbirds in Flight. Ken Behrens and C Cox. 2013. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York, NY.
3. Waterfowl of North America, Europe and Asia. Sebastian Reeber. 2015. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
4. The Handbook of Bird Families. Jonathan Elphick. 2018. Firefly Books Ltd., Buffalo, NY.