



Red-breasted Merganser



Dark-eyed Junco



Snowy Owl

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Winter Bird Notes

Mergus serrator (Red-breasted Merganser)

ORDER: Anseriformes (3 Family)

FAMILY: Anatidae (174 Species)

The weather this week was very cold because of the strong northerly winds making the wind chill as low as the mid-teens. The blue sky was mostly covered by thick grayish clouds. However, I was able to see sun dogs one afternoon this week. Sun dogs are bright rainbow patches seen at 22° to the right and left of the sun on the same horizontal plane. Red color is seen closest to the sun. They are caused by sunlight refraction with ice crystals formed in the atmosphere. Sun dogs are best seen on cold days and when the sun is close to the horizon and are good predictors for wet weather ahead. In fact, big puffy snow flakes gracefully and silently fell on Thanksgiving day. This was a special day because a white, dark barred, female snowy owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) was seen resting alertly on the large gray-white boulders along the shoreline near Lakeshore State Park (see right image above). This is a marvelous bird to find camouflaged in the winter landscape!

The Great Lakes offer open water habitat for wintering freshwater and sea ducks. But, when the winds are strong and the waves are tall and choppy, the ducks are usually seen closer in the calmer water within the break-water barrier. Female red-breasted mergansers (*Mergus serrator*) are the predominant diving sea ducks on the lake currently (see left image above). In fact, a few males are now starting to arrive. I have often wondered why the females and immature mergansers arrive before the males. The reason is because the males are finishing a molting period and they migrate later when the new plumage is fully formed [7]. I call red-breasted mergansers “little punk rockers” because of their spiky head feathers. This diving duck is very common in our region and I wanted to share some interesting characteristics.

First, they have thin, reddish-orange bills that have sharp backward and forward “teeth”. Thus, they are also called “sawbills” because of these tiny serrations on the bill. This bill is designed to capture fish, crustaceans and aquatic insects.

Second, red-breasted mergansers are one of the fastest waterfowl and have very fast wingbeats. They fly in nearly perfect straight lines with wider spacing compared to other species. Larger numbers will fly at mid-horizon height and smaller numbers will fly close to the water. These ducks have a heavy weight with respect to the wing area, also called “high wing loading” which causes them to run on the water to take off instead of taking off from a solitary spot. Additionally, they are unable to hover or soar because they must constantly flap their wings.

Courtship begins in March and is a ritual not to miss! The drake, or male, begins his display by stretching his neck up high which will highlight his broad white neck ring, metallic green feathers on his head, long crest, and narrow red bill. He will then open his bill wide and sing a nasal “whiddew” then pivot so his breast and neck are immersed in the water and tail is pointed upward. The head and neck motion will make a 45° angle from the vertical position. This display looks like a curtsy. What a formal dapper chap!!

Although the winter can be brutal in our region of the country, the waterfowl are a testament to strength, courage, and the will to survive. These birds can put a smile on any bird or nature enthusiast’s face during the dark winter season. Bundle up, get outside, and experience the joy of nature!



References:

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