



## Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

[www.mass.gov/nhesp](http://www.mass.gov/nhesp)

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

## Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*

State Status: **None**  
Federal Status: **None**

**SPECIES DESCRIPTION:** Drake Harlequin Ducks are among the most unusually colored of all ducks. The basic body color is slate blue, but the head and body are covered with a series of white crescents and spots, offset by chestnut flanks and a chestnut stripe on either side of the head. Females are a nondescript brown with a whitish patch on the cheek and whitish spots in front of and behind the eye. From a distance, both sexes appear dark. Harlequins are small ducks. The males range from 1 to 21 inches in length and weigh 1.3 to 1.6 pounds. Adult females are slightly smaller.

**DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE:** Harlequin Ducks are northern nesters with populations in western North America, eastern North America, Greenland and Iceland. In eastern North America, they breed in Quebec, with small numbers in Newfoundland and northern New Brunswick. Radio tagging has suggested some movement of Harlequins between eastern Canada and Greenland. Wintering is primarily in Maritime Canada south to Rhode Island, with some birds occurring on the Great Lakes. Concern over perceived declining numbers led to closure of the hunting season in the U.S. in 1989. In 1991, they were listed as an endangered species in Canada. Since then, more recent reviews of the literature suggest the decline was not as pronounced as originally thought, but poor recordkeeping during the early years

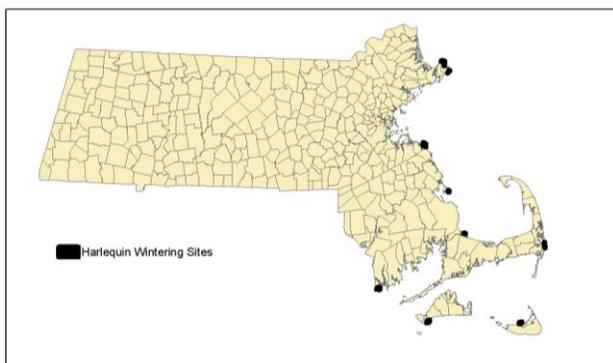
of survey work make assessing population changes questionable. A recent increase in numbers may be attributed to better surveying and monitoring. There is scant evidence that the eastern race was ever abundant, likely due to their special habitat requirements. The eastern North American population likely numbers no more than a few thousand birds. In Massachusetts, Harlequins are found in small numbers along Cape Ann, Plymouth, and Martha's Vineyard with a state total of only a few hundred wintering birds.

**HABITAT DESCRIPTION:** Harlequin Ducks use relatively specialized habitat, breeding along fast-flowing, sub-arctic rivers and streams and wintering on turbulent coastal marine habitat, especially along rocky shorelines. They feed in relatively shallow water, diving for food in water only 1 to 3 meters deep.

**THREATS:** Threats to the eastern population come from loss of breeding habitat to hydroelectric power plant dams which inundate river breeding habitat. Mining and associated ship traffic near staging areas in Labrador and northeastern Quebec may also disrupt populations. In Massachusetts, disturbance on wintering sites may have a negative influence. The closure of the hunting season for this species should be retained.

### REFERENCE:

Bellrose, F. C. 1976. *Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America*. 2nd ed. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.



Updated 2015

*A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan*

## Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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Please allow the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program to continue to conserve the biodiversity of Massachusetts with a contribution for 'endangered wildlife conservation' on your state income tax form, as these donations comprise a significant portion of our operating budget.

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