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NOTES ON NEBRASKA FAUNA

COMMON GOLDENEYE

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ONE OF THE rewards for braving the remnants of a Nebraska winter by venturing out to newly thawed reservoirs, lakes and sandpits is the prospect of seeing a flock of common goldeneyes. Hard on the heels of winter, goldeneyes begin moving out of their wintering areas in the central and southern Great Plains and testing the waters to the north as soon as they become partially ice-free.

Fair numbers of birds, sometimes in the thousands, often winter in western Nebraska, especially along the North and South Platte rivers, and in adjoining areas of eastern Wyoming and Colorado, but very few winter in eastern portions of the state. But by early March they make their presence known in wetlands along the Missouri Valley, where the mostly white males stand out in flocks of other early migrant waterfowl like proverbial sore thumbs. They are substantially larger than the somewhat similar and closely related bufflehead, and not so long and rakishly streamlined as the common merganser, although all three of these species commonly are seen together during early spring in Nebraska. But a mostly white-bodied duck, with a large blackish (under cloudy conditions) to green-glossed (in sunlight) head, save for an oval white spot between the eye and bill, can be confidently identified as a common goldeneye. Rarely, the more westerly Barrow's goldeneye appears in Nebraska, but males of this species have a distinctive white crescent in front of the eye, and the head appears to be glossed with blue or violet.

Once having located a male, the attentive observer can nearly always find a female or two nearby, although her much smaller size and mostly grayish body with a contrasting chocolate brown head, make her much harder to find in the often wave-tossed, deeper waters that are favorite feeding areas for goldeneyes. Mature females typically have a yellow-tipped, grayish bill (which helps separate them from breeding females of the Barrow's goldeneye, whose bills are all yellow). First-year males are female-like in plumage, but lack yellow on the bill, and a hint of the adult male's oval, white cheek patch is normally evident. Immature birds of both sexes require special care in identification. Only males more than a year old assume the full nuptial plumage, and only then do they participate fully in the exuberant mating displays that make the goldeneye such a delight to watch in early spring.

Courtship display in common goldeneyes can only be described in near superlatives: dazzling, exciting, complicated, spirited, and amusing spring to mind. Additionally, the display can be readily seen by anybody with the patience to watch any group of goldeneyes in spring that has two or more males and at least one adult female. It doesn't take long to locate a courting group. The sprays of water kicked up by males, and the piercing calls associated with these postures, attract not only human eyes but almost certainly the eyes of females looking for possible mates. The males alternate displays to the hens with aggression toward other males, engaging in short, above-water chases, threats, and occasionally in sneak underwater attacks. Starting from a nearly prone posture, with the head and neck stretched out toward a rival, a male may quickly submerge from view until its successful submarine attack is signalled by the sudden take-off, amid a flurry of wings, of the victim, and the victorious bird emerges to take its place. But such direct attacks are relatively rare as compared with the more stereotyped gestures of aggression that are "encoded" in a variety of head-throw and backward-kicking activities that probably simultaneously attract females and keep other males at a respectful distance.

By the time the goldeneyes leave Nebraska in late March or April on their way to nesting areas that center in Canada's coniferous forests, many are already paired. The birds lay fairly large clutches, averaging about nine or 10 eggs, and are cavity nesters, depending for sites mainly upon natural tree cavities similar to those used by wood ducks. Indeed, goldeneyes sometimes nest in boxes erected for wood ducks, and occasionally females of both species compete for a box. These interactions often end in nest desertion or hatching failure for both species.

With luck, the female will complete her incubation of about 30 days and bring her clutch to hatching. Like wood ducks, goldeneye ducklings must leave their elevated nests by jumping out the entrance, tumbling to the ground 200r more feet below, occasionally bouncing off vegetation or even tree trunks on the way down. Yet, they seem unscathed, and the female soon regroups her brood at the base of the tree prior to setting off for water.

Even after hatching, mortality of the young is high. Although the major causes of post-hatching mortality are uncertain, it is typical of female goldeneyes to spend a great deal of time threatening or attacking all other waterfowl anywhere near their broods, thereby neglecting her young and exposing them to scattering and danger.

Goldeneyes are relatively late fall migrants, often passing through the state shortly before freeze-up in November. They are not very popular birds with hunters, as they have a distinctly fishy taste because of their invertebrate-dominated diet. Furthermore, they favor deeper waters and thus rarely come into the range of shoreline-based hunters. But "whistlers," as hunters often refer to them, are harvested in small numbers each year.

Original art of the common goldeneye was done by Neal Anderson He can be contacted through NEBRASKAland Magazine Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503.