

Some little lords and ladies

BY SANDY BURNETT

If you should chance to see a group of delicate little waterfowl with sharply plattered slate-blue, white, black and rusty plumage swimming in the sheltered waters of some rocky cove or among scattered islands, stop and take a second look. And if you should happen to be carrying a shotgun, hold your fire.

The birds are Harlequin Ducks, widely known as "lords and ladies", and there are likely fewer than a thousand left in eastern North America.

Their small numbers in this region are something of a mystery. In Iceland, there are estimated to be more than 5,000 breeding pairs of the tiny sea-ducks. In southern Greenland, they are reported to be "fairly common", and the Pacific coast harbours a population of more than a million.

A review of writing by hunters and ornithologists over the past century suggests that Harlequins have never been very numerous in these parts. The earlier accounts refer to winter flocks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, off Newfoundland and south to Cape Cod which numbered in the hundreds. Mid-twentieth century observers speak of flocks of a few dozen; yet, last month, aerial surveys of known wintering spots in Nova Scotia found only about 100 birds - in small, scattered groups.

For some reason the Harlequins of Atlantic Canada are declining, little by little, towards the point of no return. Why this should be happening is a question on which wildlife biologists are currently focusing their attention.

Most Harlequins in eastern Canada nest along turbulent streams which flow into the Atlantic Ocean and Ungava Bay from the rugged Torngat Mountains of Labrador. Even there, in prime breeding territory, they are uncommon. A survey last summer revealed a probable density of about one pair for every ten kilometers of suitable habitat. In other parts of the world ten times this density - i.e. one per kilometer - is considered to be low. Is it possible that the food supply in these cold, nutrient-poor streams is too limited to sustain a greater number of breeding birds?

Harlequins winter in sheltered coves along rocky shorelines, where they forage for prey among the seaweeds of the intertidal zone. They tend to be close to a few traditional sites, a habit which could make them especially vulnerable to unexpected calamities. An influx of heavy pack ice could block access to their feeding areas. A spill of oil or toxic chemicals could devastate an entire wintering flock.

Last but by no means least among possible reasons for their decline is the pressure of hunting. Although in recent years significant numbers of Harlequins have been taken only in Newfoundland, they are no strangers to east coast hunting lore. Evidence of this appears in the wide variety of popular names by which they are known in various parts of the region: "rocks ducks" from their preferred feeding sites; "lords and ladies" and "white-eyed divers" with reference to their elegant plumage; "squeakers"

