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The Passenger Pigeon

TO ENCOURAGE STUDY OF WISCONSIN BIRDS

Vol. II

October, 1940

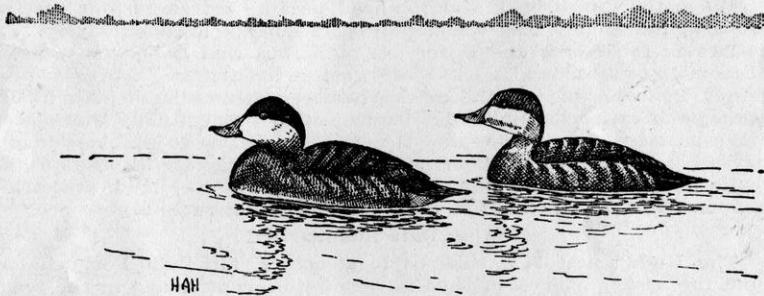
No. 10

THE RUDDY DUCK IN WISCONSIN

By F. R. ZIMMERMAN

Wisconsin Conservation Department

The Ruddy Duck, *Erismatura jamaicensis rubra* (Wilson), is one of the most interesting members of the waterfowl family. It belongs to a small sub-family, *Erismaturinae*, which includes the Masked Duck. The tail coverts of this duck are much abbreviated and they are stiff not unlike that of a Woodpecker's tail. It is very helpless on land like the Grebes; preferring diving to swimming. The Ruddy's neck is short and thick, the bill broad, rising at the base. This duck is further unique in that the male bird has a large neck sac which is distended through an opening in the upper trachea and becomes inflated during the mating season at which time the female is silent. Unlike the males of other species of ducks, the male Ruddy assists the female during the incubation period and caring for the young birds. The Ruddy does not go through a complete eclipse plumage period according to Roberts, although Bent says there is no eclipse plumage, but there is a complete molt in late summer and both sexes are alike throughout early fall and winter.



Ruddy Duck—Male and Female

By H. Albert Hachbaum, Courtesy Wisconsin Conservation Department.

In late winter, the male Ruddy goes through another complete molt at which time all feathers are shed with the exception of the flight feathers giving him gay colored breeding dress.

The Ruddy's breeding range is mainly in the prairie sloughs and rush lakes of central and western Canada and the north central United States, but it does occur, however, irregularly throughout most of North America, Lower California and the interior of Mexico and Guatemala. It winters on the Atlantic coast from Chesapeake Bay to Florida and the Bahamas and West Indies. On the Pacific coast, the Ruddy winters from southern British Columbia to Lower California, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. In the interior, it winters from central Arizona, southern Illinois, and western Pennsylvania southward.

Local Names For Ruddy Duck

The Ruddy Duck is known by many local names. Some of them follow: Ruddy, Butterball, Buck-ruddy, Pintail, Booby, Bobby Coot,

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Bumblebee Coot, Fool Duck, Deaf Duck, Bristle-tail, Sleepyhead, Spike-tail, Wiretail, Broadbill Dipper, Sleeper, Hardhead, Dumb Bird, Tough-head, Bullneck, Steelhead, Shot-pouch, and Spoonbill. During the Spring, the male's reddish back, black cap, and white cheek patch can be seen for quite a distance. Closer examination will show a bright blue bill and the habit of carrying the tail spread starlike over the back, during courtship, exposes the silvery white underparts. In winter, the color is gray with the other markings as they appear in the spring. The plumage of the female is the same as the male's winter dress with a slate colored bill and dark streak across the cheek.

As a game bird, opinion differs as to the palatability of the Ruddy. Many say that it's flesh is not unlike that of the mergansers or fish ducks. Barrows states, "Much difference of opinion exists as to the table quality of this duck, many writers averring that it's flesh is coarse, tough and fishy. My own experience is just the reverse of this, and I have found the bird in autumn uniformly tender and well flavored."

When the Canvasback and Redhead became scarce, on our eastern seaboard, the Ruddy was relentlessly persecuted. Forbush says, "as late as 1885 these ducks were so numerous that Cape Cod gunners got from 20 to 30 a day, and 25 to 30 was the average bag to a boat near Chester, Pennsylvania . . . the species has been decreasing steadily and is in danger of extinction unless better protected." The Ruddy was placed on the protected list in 1933 and is now restricted as to numbers taken. They are an easy bird to shoot because of their friendly disposition and they decoy readily. They cannot be induced to fly over land, preferring the open water which results in their subsequent destruction.

Nesting Data Summarized

The Ruddy nest is a basket-like structure, although Forbush has found the nest in a mass of floating vegetation, constructed in the reeds and rushes about 8 inches above the water. There is no lining in the nest except bits of reeds and rushes (Bent). The Ruddy lays a very large egg —too large for a small duck. They are as large as those of a Turkey or Great Blue Heron. The Ruddy, like the Cowbird, will lay it's eggs in the Redhead's or Canvasback's nest and has also been known to use the abandoned nest of the Coot and Grebe. The usual number of eggs is 6 to 9 or 10, according to Bent, although he says they have been known to lay as many as 20 eggs. The eggs average 2.50 x 1.80 inches and Bent found, in examining over 80 eggs in his collection and those in the United States National Museum, the average in millimeters to be 62.3 x 45.6 mm. They vary in shape from short ovate to elongate ovate or from oval to elliptical oval. They are rough shelled and dull to creamy white in color. The young are hatched in July and are fledged before September. According to Major Allan Brooks, the young begin diving for food as soon as they leave the egg, unlike other ducks which feed on the surface for a short time.

Ruddy Status in Nearby States

Before reviewing the status of the Ruddy Duck in Wisconsin, let us note what breeding records there might be in our neighboring states of

Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota. Barrows says, "In Michigan the Ruddy Duck is almost universally distributed during migration, but probably does not often nest within our limits. The late W. H. Collin reported taking its eggs, presumably at St. Clair Flats, and McIlwraith says that he has seen it there in summer and has been told that a few pairs breed there every season."

Ford, et al, (for Illinois) says, "An uncommon migrant and rare summer resident . . . There are several references to their breeding in our area. Birds with full grown young were seen at Waukegan, Lake Co., Illinois in mid-September, 1875 (Nelson, 1876), and Coale (1912) states they were breeding at Butler's Lake, Lake Co., Illinois, no date given. A female was seen at Lake Calumet, Cook Co., Illinois July 23, 1927 (Stevenson and Bredkorb, 1933)."

Du Men, (for Iowa) writing in 1933, . . . 'The Ruddy Duck was reported as breeding in Hancock County in 1903. A specimen in the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences was taken by W. L. Abbott in Dickinson County during July, 1881. Leopold (Outdoor America, 1932-33) has reported this species as breeding in Palo Alto and Allamakee Counties since 1920. Logan J. Bennett reports a nest found on Mud Lake, Clay County, May 25, 1933."

In Minnesota the Ruddy Duck was formerly an abundant breeding bird in the western and southern part of that state nesting in the rush sloughs. Since 1900 it has become much reduced in numbers. In recent years, however, it has appeared again as a breeding bird over much of the old range. Thomas says, "In June and July, 1924, it was a surprise to find so many nesting in Grant and Big Stone counties. . . . In late May and June, 1929, it was found throughout the western part of the state from Lincoln County to Kittson County and was evidently nesting in many places (Breckenridge)."

Wisconsin Nesting Records

The Ruddy Duck was never a common nester in Wisconsin as revealed by early naturalists. Dr. P. R. Hoy says, "Met occasionally fall and spring. Not abundant." Barry gives the following information on the Ruddy Duck, "Rare." Grundtvig states, "Measurements of males shot in Shioe meadows May 5, 1883. . . . Saw no more." C. F. Carr has this to say about the Ruddy, "This duck according to Mr. Gross breeds in limited numbers about Pewaukee. A nest was found at Lake Waubesa two years ago (1888). I also secured a young bird of this species unable to fly, on Lake Wingra, in the summer of 1888. The eggs are pale buff and will average 2.42 x 1.80, and from seven to twelve constitute the usual complement." W. E. Snyder, unpublished notes, says, "Common migrant. Breeds on Horicon Marsh (Geo. A. Morrison to DeLos Hatch)." Said to have bred on upper end of Beaver Dam Lake in 1901. Few pairs seen there all summer."

Schoenebeck, writing in 1902. "Rare resident, but quite common in migration. I met with this species on the 14th of June in 1896, but have not found the nest as yet." Richter, adding later data to Schoenebeck's notes, states, "No longer common in migration and I have never seen it during the breeding season."

Kumlien and Hollister, 1903, writing on the birds of Wisconsin, "Common migrant, but not nearly as abundant as formerly. Until within a few years this duck was considered almost worthless for food by most people, and, as a consequence, escaped systematic hunting, especially as it seldom decoys or flies past a blind. . . . A rather late arrival in southern Wisconsin, it moves southward again as soon as the ice forms. A few breed in the state, as about Lake Koshkonong, Pewaukee Lake, Lake Horicon (Goss), etc., but sparingly of late."

Nelson, 1906, writes, "It breeds regularly in southern Minnesota and casually in Wisconsin."

Cory, 1909, quotes most of his material from Kumlien and Hollister summing up as follows: "It is common during the migrations in spring and fall, and a few remain in summer, and breed in both Illinois and Wisconsin. Nelson mentions young birds of this species having been seen

in northern Illinois, and Cooke states that it is known to breed casually in Ohio and Illinois."

Cahn, writing about the birds of Waukesha County, states, "A common migrant, steadily decreasing. Arrives about the middle of April, and is more common on the fall migration during late October and November. At the present time a very doubtful breeding species though undoubtedly more common in this capacity formerly. Commonly called the 'Bull-necked Teal', and not highly thought of as a 'food' bird."

I am very grateful for an important note received from Mr. John S. Main. On July 18, 1926, Mr. Main and his nephew Judd Kempton, observed a male Ruddy with a brood of from 6-8 birds on Mud Lake in Columbia County.

Schorger, writing in 1929, says, "Migrant in small numbers. . . We are within the breeding range of the Ruddy Duck and it may nest occasionally. An adult male was seen on a pond near Verona on July 16, 1927."



Ruddy Duck Nest Found on August 9, 1940, at Rush Lake, Winnebago County, Wisconsin, by F. R. Zimmerman and Conservation Warden Arthur C. Chase.

Mr. O. J. Gromme, of the Milwaukee Public Museum, sent me the following note: "Mr. Earl Loyster, of the Statewide Museum Project, while hunting on Lake Maria in Green Lake County in 1930, saw a flock of six Ruddies. He killed two and upon examination he found the wings still in pin feather and the birds were of course unable to fly. He states that they were unquestionably young of the year."

Brackett had an interesting note in the July, 1939 issue of THE PASSENGER PIGEON. On June 13, 1939 he observed about 6 pairs of Ruddies on Dushack's Pond, near Sun Prairie in Dane County. It may be that these were nesting birds having been seen at such a late date. On the other hand it is highly probable that they were non-breeding birds.

There are numerous field records in THE PASSENGER PIGEON on

the Ruddy Duck, but none of them seem to indicate nesting records.

Observations on Recent Rush Lake Nest

The Ruddy nest, shown in the accompanying photograph, was found on August 9, 1940 by Conservation Warden A. C. Chase and the writer on Rush Lake in Winnebago County while making a check on waterfowl food and cover conditions. Rush Lake is a shallow body of water with many beds of hardstem bulrush, *Scirpus acutus*, and cattails, *Typha latifolia* and *Typha angustifolia*. These plant associations furnish excellent nesting habitats for the Ruddy, Redhead, and Canvasback Ducks which is not unlike the sloughs of North Dakota where there are extensive areas of cane grass, bulrushes and cattails. The nest was found well concealed in a dense clump of hardstem bulrush. The base of the nest was just above the water line and had been recently submerged by high water. Other aquatic plants present were: water lilies, *Nuphar variegatum* and *Nymphaea tuberosa*, water milfoil, *Myriophyllum* sp., bladderwort, *Utricularia* sp., and muskgrass, *Chara* sp. There had been six eggs in the nest, three of them hatched previous to our arrival. Egg measurements were taken on two of the three eggs remaining at the Oshkosh Public Museum. The third egg was broken and upon examination it was found to contain a young duckling just ready to hatch. The measurements of the two eggs follow: 2.50 x 1.81 and 2.44 x 1.94. The eggs were oval in shape, granular, and dull white in color. The nest and eggs are now in the Oshkosh Public Museum.

Wisconsin Studies in Progress

It is probable that the Ruddy nests in Wisconsin more than we suspect and next spring we hope to be able to secure additional nesting data on Wisconsin's breeding waterfowl. The breeding range of waterfowl has been decreased, as it has elsewhere, by settlement, agricultural developments, and periodic droughts. The Wisconsin Conservation Department now has in progress a research project on waterfowl management, made possible through funds from the Pittman-Robertson Act. It is hoped that through this study, waterfowl habitats in Wisconsin can be increased and that those already in extant can be made more productive.

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SEPTEMBER FIELD NOTES

By N. R. BARGER, EDITOR

(Kindly send field notes to N. R. Barger, 132 Lathrop St., Madison, Wisconsin, at the end of each month. Use A.O.U. order.)

Observers to be introduced this issue are from Green Bay. They are all senior members.

Mrs. Clara Hussong. Beaupre Ave., R. 3. Organizer of the Green Bay Bird Club, Mrs. Hussong has 26 years experience with bird-study. She conducts a news-paper column on nature and is director of the Green Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. She also contributes magazine articles and teaches night school nature class.

Mr. J. B. Kendall. 215 Gray St. Mr. Kendall is director of the Green Bay Wildlife Sanctuary; photographs birds and does some writing. Mr. Kendall is a member of the Green Bay Bird Club and has been an active observer of bird habits since its organization.

Mr. Edward O. Paulson. 879 Hubbard St. Mr. Paulson has been working with waterfowl for 35 years, turning his attention also to the song birds during the past five years. He is vice-president of the Green Bay Bird Club.

Mr. E. W. Strehlow. 1376 Crooks St. A member of all the above mentioned clubs, Mr. Strehlow has been actively recording bird records for the Green Bay region since the local club was organized. He keeps in touch with the hunting clubs and has had printed a model form for daily bird records by all observers in his neighborhood.

Egrets Pickup in September

Records and the opinions of many observers show a migration this fall that is rather late. This refers to the southward migration, but with it come last minute reports of Egrets straying northward. Evans saw one Sept. 22 in Winnebago County; Jackson one Sept. 12 in Madison; Bussewitz one Sept. 21 in Poynette and Grange one Sept. 20 in Babcock, where he had seen four or five on previous days this fall. Another heron record of possible interest was that of F. H. King, who saw an immature Black-crowned Night Heron, Sept. 28; rather late since he recalls finding one in the same stage of development, Aug. 22. King reports from Manitowoc. Summer-strays among the ducks were Canvasback in Sheboygan County, Sept. 7 (Stevens) and female Scaups in Manitowoc County, from Sept. 17 to 28 (King). Holterman found Pintail (two) and Redheads (two) in Green Bay, Sept. 7; while Paulson recorded three Green-winged Teal, Sept. 11 and two Hooded Mergansers, Sept. 22, also for Green Bay. Canada Geese began to increase noticeably in the bay after Sept. 15 according to Kendall and Strehlow.

Goshawk Receives a Band Very Early This Fall

Stevens trapped and banded a Goshawk in Sheboygan County, Sept. 8. Although an early date, we find Strehlow with two sight records for

Green Bay, Sept. 1 and 2. One bird was seen on each day. Another Turkey Vulture record comes from the Wisconsin river, this time at Spring Green, Sept. 6, by F. Jones of Madison. Scott reports a Krider's Hawk, shot Sept. 29 in Douglas County by a hunter, and sent in to the Game Farm to be mounted. It was exceptionally pale in color. Jackson, of Madison, covered the 22 mile stretch of the Wisconsin river from Sauk City to Spring Green, on foot, Sept. 24 and 25. He found hawk migration 'good'. Previous to this date he had seen two flocks of Broad-winged Hawks in the same vicinity, numbering as high as 150 individuals. Stevens reports a melanistic Marsh Hawk in Sheboygan County. Robbins saw a Duck Hawk, near Madison, Sept. 22; and Bussewitz a Pigeon Hawk, Sept. 22 in Watertown. A few Bald Eagles were mentioned: Scott, one in Monroe County, Sept. 26; Mrs. Rogers, one in Door County, Sept. 29; and Deusing one in Sheboygan County, Sept. 3 and again on the 17. Only the one mentioned Sept. 3 of all the records was an adult.

Sharp-tailed Grouse were numerous in Sawyer County, Sept. 24 (Scott) and Prairie Chicken and Rufed Grouse were about normal. Richter reports 3 Sandhill Cranes over Peshtigo Marsh, Sept. 3. Grange saw two Sandhill Cranes, Sept. 18, in Wood County and Searls, eleven, Sept. 28, in Adams County. The Chukar Partridge was seen in the vicinity of Green Bay. Liebmann reports two, Sept. 8.

Several Knot Records

Emphasis was placed upon Knot records by several Milwaukee observers. Two were found in Sheboygan County, Sept. 2 (Deusing and Stevens); four in Milwaukee County, Sept. 5 (Loyster); two, Sept. 10 and 11 by Jones and Strelitzer, the two observers went on different days; three, Sept. 16 by Schaeffer; and six, Sept. 30 by Kinzel. The Semipalinated Plover was found as late as Sept. 22 in Dane County (Robbins). He also noted a single Golden Plover on the same date and place. Schaeffer notes a Ruddy Turnstone, Sept. 16 for the Milwaukee area and King sends a record of one in Bayfield County, Sept. 5. Ruegger finds the Woodcock about normal in Sawyer County, but Snipe and Killdeer have fallen off in nests. Grange heard the Wilson Snipe winnowing, Sept. 18 at Babcock. He does not remember hearing this in the fall before. Robbins records the Long-billed Dowitcher for Dane County, Sept. 22, rather a late date.

Ring-billed Gulls declined in numbers toward the end of the month in Manitowoc (King), but Bonaparte's Gulls remained common. Strelitzer found the latter (one bird) still in the mating plumage, Sept. 20. The same is true of some Franklin's Gulls (Schaeffer), Sept. 25-26. Seven Caspian Tern were in Manitowoc, Sept. 7 according to King. Three Forster's Terns were seen by Paulson, Sept. 8, in Green Bay. Three Yellow-billed Cuckoos lingered until Sept. 29 in Green Bay (Strehlow). Richter saw a Short-eared Owl in the Town of Little River, Sept. 4.

Mathiak, of Milwaukee, saw several hundred Nighthawks at Shawano Lake, Sept. 1, but the next day Strelitzer found but six in the near vicinity. They reached a 'high' at Oconto, Sept. 4 (Richter) and at Green Bay, Sept. 6 (Strehlow). The Ruby-throated Hummingbird lingered until Sept. 21 at Watertown (Bussewitz), and until Sept. 29 at Green Bay (Strehlow). Three Red-bellied Woodpeckers had strayed eastward to Milwaukee County, Sept. 21, and were seen by Throne. Robbins and F. Jones secured a late date for the Olive-sided Flycatcher in Dane County, Sept. 19. Tree Swallows reached a 'high', Sept. 12, when hundreds were seen at Appleton by Mrs. Rogers. Strehlow places it at Sept. 5, for Green Bay. Purple Martins were seen as late as Sept. 8 in Watertown (Bussewitz), and in Green Bay until Sept. 15 (Strehlow). While in Forest County, Sept. 19, Scott, Feeney and Grimmer saw two Canada Jays. Crows increased in numbers toward the end of the month in Marinette County (Miss Heisel). On Sept. 22 a Raven was shot by a hunter, in Forest County (Richter). Mason, of Milwaukee, counted 22 Brown Creepers this fall in as many minutes. Nine were in one flock. Short-billed Marsh Wrens remained until Sept. 20 in Green Bay (Strehlow).

Albino Brown Thrasher Found

An albino Brown Thrasher with brown shoulder marks was seen in Sawyer County by Scott, Sept. 25. The first Hermit Thrush for Green Bay arrived Sept. 30 according to Paulson. Robins and Grackles flocked about ten days later this year than usual according to Rossman of Waukesha. He finds some correlation between this and the late ripening of black cherries and elderberries this year. King found a Robin feeding young out of the nest, Sept. 16, in Manitowoc. Golden-crowned Kinglets and Pipits arrived on time in Madison, Sept. 27 (Robbins). This date coincides with that of Krawczyk in Green Bay for the kinglet.

Mrs. Rogers identified at close range a Philadelphia Vireo in Appleton, Sept. 30 (a late date). Rossman banded one Sept. 2 at Waukesha. Kendall of Green Bay notes the Yellow-throated Vireo still there Sept. 15. Myrtle Warblers put in their appearance at Green Bay, Sept. 1 this year according to Strehlow. An immature Yellow-headed Blackbird was seen by Bussewitz near Poynette, Sept. 11, and two by Strehlow at Green Bay, Sept. 17. Both are late records. Jackson reports an almost entirely albino grackle in a flock of Bronzed Grackles, in Madison, Sept. 13. Ten White-crowned Sparrows arrived on time in Green Bay, Sept. 29 and were seen by Mrs. Hussong.

A FEEDING OBSERVATION ON THE CROW

By CARL STRELITZER

Milwaukee Bird Club

On October 3 Miss Audrey Pribbanow and I witnessed an unusual procedure concerning the feeding habits of the eastern crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). We were observing birds in Lake Park and had seen crows several times, when we came to an open, grassy plot with one large tree growing in the open. Three crows then attracted our attention. One was in the tree, feeding among the branches. The other two were on the ground. At intervals they would spring into the air and grasp the lower branches of the tree, which were about three feet from the ground. Sometimes one would jump and cling to a branch, using only the beak. Other times one would grasp the branch with his feet and hang upside down, looking for all the world like a giant, black chickadee.

We watched this performance for some time, then walked up and scared the birds away. The tree was a Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*) and the crows evidently had been feeding on the seeds, since the wings of the samaras were lying under the tree with the seed part missing. It seemed that when the crows used only the beak, they were trying to pull the seeds off with the weight of their bodies; while they clung with their feet, they pulled the seeds off with their bills and ate them from the ground. We watched them for a period of twenty minutes and the birds would have continued if we hadn't scared them.

NEWS AND NOTES

Mr. H. H. Porter of the town of Greenfield, Sauk county, saw hundreds of hawks migrating over that vicinity on September 14 (near Wisconsin river). He was not able to identify these birds.

Mr. Fred Aliesch of Pepin has sent in a very detailed record of three White Pelicans observed on Lake Pepin between the period of June 20 and July 23, when two of them disappeared. The third Pelican had been shot in the wing and was captured by Mr. Aliesch on September 8 and was sent to the State Game Farm for exhibition and recuperation. Aliesch states that these birds always spent the night at Bogus, which is a long sand point formed by the mouth of a creek and remained there until 10 a. m., when they left to return about 7 p. m. They were reported seen at the foot of Lake Pepin every day and were only once seen elsewhere when he found two of them about two miles above Lake City, the last day the two birds were observed. As there is an early day report of Pelicans nesting on Lake Pepin, this record secured by Mr. Aliesch is most interesting and valuable.