

# BIRD OF THE MONTH

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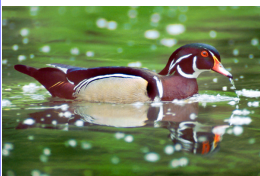
## Beak-to-beak: Woodies vs. Harleys

There are only two serious contenders for the most dazzling duck in western Montana. The male Wood Duck and male Harlequin Duck are easily our most decked-out waterfowl. But other than looking outrageously handsome, there are surprisingly few similarities between these two Montana natives.

Trying to describe the feathers on these fellows is like trying to describe a box of crayons. A male Woody wears iridescent emerald head feathers, a white polka-dotted mahogany breast, and smooth almond flanks. The male Harley sports a midnight-blue body, chestnut flanks, and white patches that vary in shape from round to crescent. The females and young of both species are mottled brown, and the female Woody wears a striped, white eye patch while the Harley hen has a round, white cheek patch.

Think of these two smallish ducks as Montana's "common cosmopolitan" and "rare recluse." While Woodies are pretty common in summer, Harleys are twice as rare as grizzly bears. Woodies spread out across most riparian habitats, but they prefer the slow waters of beaver ponds, creeks and oxbows. Harleys are just the opposite. They spend the nesting season on just a handful of fast-flowing Montana streams, though they'll occasionally show up on lakes and rivers during migration.

Some Woodies stick it out and stay in western Montana year-round. But starting in early April, most of them migrate north from southern California and Mexico. Harleys, on the other hand, migrate east-west, and begin arriving in Montana by late April from the Pacific coastlines of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia.

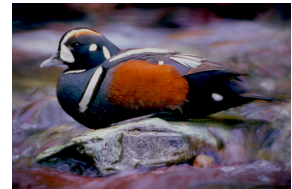


Woodies nest almost exclusively in tree cavities, with a strong preference for naturally occurring holes. They do no excavating, but will occasionally use old Pileated Woodpecker cavities. They're also quick to move into correctly sized and placed man-made nest boxes. Nest trees might be located half a mile or more from the nearest body of water. Not so with Harleys, who are almost exclusively ground nesters; most Harley nests are well-hidden within just a few feet of the water's edge. They are incredibly secretive while nesting. In Montana, you can count the number of reported nests on one hand -- and still have a couple of fingers left over.

Female Woodies often nest as yearlings, but most female Harleys won't attempt to nest until they are 4-5 years old. While some of the Woody hens return to nest in the same wetland where they were

born, almost every Harley female returns to her natal stream for nesting. Woodies lay twice as many eggs (10-15) as Harleys (5-7); some Woodies even manage to raise two broods in a summer. Harleys attempt only one nest per year. Once the females start incubating eggs, the males of both species leave and do not help raise the young. Apart from their mates, the adult males of both species will molt their colorful breeding feathers and wear a more female-like plumage for the rest of summer. Male Harleys migrate back to the coast in early summer, before the eggs even hatch.

The eggs of both species hatch after 28-30 days of incubation, usually in late June and July. Both species are precocial, so mom will guard her chicks but she won't feed them. All of the downy chicks start out eating aquatic insects, but after about two weeks, young Woodies change to the mostly vegetarian diets of their parents. Harleys stick to a carnivorous menu.



Juveniles of both species are able to fly at 6-8 weeks. Their first set of real feathers -- for young males and females alike -- will look a lot like their mother's plumage. Young Woodies will eventually wander away from mom while learning to fly. They'll disperse widely before turning south for migration between mid-September and early November. Here in Montana, most young Harleys will get left behind on the natal streams when their moms migrate back to the coast in August or September. A month or two later, the young Harleys somehow know to migrate west to a place they've never been before. They will end up on the same rocky coastlines with the adults, but they won't reunite with their parents or siblings.

Woodies are monogamous during a breeding season but can change mates from year to year. Once paired, Harleys mate for life. Harley pairs reunite on the coast to spend the winter; in the spring they arrive in western Montana together.

Spring is the best time to look for both of Montana's handsome duck species. The more common Woodies can be spotted in many local waterways, including Spring Creek, Ashley Creek and McWeneger Slough, but the easiest place to see them is Woodland Park in downtown Kalispell. About the only way to see the rare Harleys in spring is to drive as far as you can up Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park, park your car and hike or ride a bike even farther. Keep a keen eye on the swirling waters of McDonald Creek, and prepare to be dazzled.