

OUTDOORS

Finding justice with a colorful quacker

Labor Day has come and gone and even with the extended spell of pleasant warm weather we've had, signs of fall are showing. The trees in the Marengo Valley are turning, my gang of hummingbirds — the ones who were consuming about five cups of nectar a week — have migrated and the Canada geese are flocking up and making racket.



SARAH MORRIS

Other waterfowl are also preparing to move south or hunker down wherever they can find open water. Local residents are familiar with the geese who overwinter at the Hot Pond at the Ashland power plant or the hardy mallards who can be seen around the artesian spring in Prentice Park. Perhaps the prettiest waterfowl in the Northland, the wood duck, is also getting ready to move south, or at least a ways downstate.

Most people who like to walk in the woods have encountered — or been startled by — wood ducks at one time or another. These gorgeous birds live in wooded, swampy areas, so if you hike anywhere there's water and trees you'll eventually run into them. Floodplains, with their forested swales and oxbows, are a good bet for spotting them. Usually when we think of wood ducks we picture the impressive male's plumage, with their green crested heads, bright red eye ring, and intricate colorful plumage. Females also cut an elegant picture with their soft gray heads, white teardrop eye rings and bright blue wing patches. The wood duck's thin neck adds to their graceful profile. One of their unusual traits is their ability to perch on branches and grip bark: they actually have claws along with webbing on their feet.

A stuffed wood duck known as the Duck of Justice also serves as the mascot and a comic foil for the Bangor, Maine Police Department — and has become a local tourist attraction there, where people travel to have their photos taken with the duck and buy shirts bearing his likeness and motto: "Keep your hands to yourself. Leave other people's things alone. Be kind to one another."

Wood ducks that aren't stuffed and sitting in a police department lobby usually will hear you coming before you



The male wood duck's colorful plumage gets all the attention, but females with their blue wing patches and white, teardrop-shaped eye rings are also lookers. (Image by Jack Bulmer from Pixabay)

see them and will flush out of the water while making a loud whistling call. A stealthy approach or a duck blind is probably the best way to spot them, and you'll probably see all manner of cool stuff if you can tolerate the bugs while you're sitting there.

Wood ducks famously nest in cavities on or near water, and even more famously expect their newly hatched ducklings to leave these nice warm cavities after one day and plunge into the unknown. There are videos of these adorable ducklings jumping from nesting boxes into the water, but often the nest is up to a mile away from water and the babies just have to plop onto the ground (sometimes from over 50 feet up!) and then trundle along until they hit water. Get this: the mothers call to them so they know where to go, but don't provide any other assistance. It's a good thing that baby wood ducks hatch fluffy and fully alert.

The other thing these duck moms do is, they lay their eggs in other wood duck nests. This happens most often in places where there are multiple nesting boxes helpfully provided by humans. Some nests have been found with 29 eggs thanks to these freeloaders. Wood ducks usually nest in cavities formed by fallen branches and occasionally woodpecker holes. They



aren't too picky about homemade nest boxes, so just make sure there's a guard built in to keep out nest-raiders and that it's put up in late winter or very early spring before the breeding season.

Wood ducks live year-round over most of the eastern U.S. and, for some reason, in Cuba. They also like the West Coast and Pacific Northwest region. Like so many other birds with

beautiful plumage, they were nearly wiped out at the end of the 19th century. They eat mostly vegetation including non-aquatic treats like acorns that are easily found in their habitat. They've made a strong comeback thanks at least in part to conservation efforts by sporting groups and wetland restoration.

Those ubiquitous duck boxes have helped them as well, although the duck parents

with 29 ducklings may have something to say about that. Readers in the Eau Claire area may see them around in the winter, but those of us further north will have to enjoy them while we can.

Sarah Morris is a bird-watcher and outdoors-woman who explores northern Wisconsin from her home base in the town of Gingles. She can be reached at morrisoutside@gmail.com.

Taking life in stride

From the brushy riverbank on this warm September afternoon, I stare into a small pool of stagnant water that the river flow — what there is of it — has bypassed. The more I stare the more I see aquatic life in and on the water. Bidding high for my attention are gangly-legged insects only about a half-inch long but appearing as giant mosquitos moving atop the still water.

They are water striders, though the name doesn't exactly fit what they are doing, for there is no striding happening here if it means taking long steps. No, the water strider is gliding, scooting, skimming, skating or any other similar word

that could describe its rapid propulsions across the water.

Nature has provided the water strider with two short front legs to grab and hold prey, and two legs to push the insect forward. But wait:

As with all insects, there's a third pair of legs. The strider's two hind legs boost power and also provide steering and braking.

I watch the water striders scoot forward a few inches on the water surface, which in turn is only a few inches above the tannish silt bottom. The strider suddenly stops and seamlessly changes direction. All the time, the insect stays atop the water as the long legs flex and



DAVE GRESCHNER PHOTO

The dark spots under the bugs are shadows made by the dimples their feet make in the surface of the water.

ride the buoyancy created by their microscopic hairs.

I suddenly realize I have been staring downward, mesmerized somewhat for some time. And

apparently I have been as still as a stump, for my eye catches something dark poking out of the riverbank to my left. A muskrat cuts the water only yards in front of me, and now I make a con-

scious effort to remain still. The muskrat disappears in the weeds overhanging the bank, and for the first time I notice the jewelweed gracing the river's grassy edge. Horn-shaped touch-me-nots in yellow, red and orange sprinkle color in the swampy setting.

I turn back to the striders and study how they aggressively race toward ripples, which at first baffled me. Later I learned that the ripples can either be a sign of prey in distress or a female strider ready to mate. I am motionless again, drawn to the striders' maneuvers as much as the striders are drawn to the ripples. Meal or mate.

Later, I was again puzzled as to why my photos of the water striders showed six dark blobs dancing on the silt below each leg. The slightly ob-

long shadow spots were many times larger than the strider's feet. Then I recalled a mention of water striders in Annie Dillard's book, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek." In Dillard's words, the mystery was solved: "I watch the water striders skate over the top of the water, and I watch the six dots of shade — made by their feet dimpling the water's surface — slide dreamily over the bottom silt."

So the dots are dimples. All day long the water strider dimples the water, taking life in stride as the river passes by.

Dave Greschner is the retired sports/outdoors editor for the Rice Lake Chronotype. He writes about nature and the outdoors and pursues nature photography and can be reached at davegreschner@icloud.com.