

## A Harlequin Duck Reaches Sonora, Mexico

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*A notable record from Mexico's northern frontier.*

In this note we present documentation of the occurrence of a drake Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus* at Puerto Penasco, Sonora, in the spring of 1977. This evidently represents a first record for the state of Sonora and a first verifiable record for the Republic of Mexico.

The Harlequin was probably present at least as early as January 1977, since two malacologists from Phoenix, Hal and Char Norrid, later reported to us that they had noticed such a duck there during that month. However, its presence first came to our attention in late March, when Robert Moss of Tucson and Hugh Hanson of Tempe, Arizona, both independently reported having seen the bird during the week of 20 March. Over the weekend of 26-27 March the Harlequin was seen by at least 34 observers, including the authors; Robert A. Witzeman obtained a number of photographs for documentation, one of which is reproduced with this note. To our knowledge, the last sighting was by Dale A. Zimmerman on 9 April 1977.

All observations were made within a relatively small area around the tip of Pelican Point, a rocky promontory jutting into the Gulf of California a few kilometers northwest of the town of Puerto Penasco, northwestern Sonora (approximately 31° 30'N 113° 35'W). The shoreline to either side of Pelican Point consists of sandy beach or tidal mudflats. During the period of our observations (several hours on 26 and 27 March) the bird spent much time sitting among the rocks, and when in the water it was not seen to move more than about ten meters away from the shore, so that it could be approached rather closely. Its habitat choice and behavior were thus very similar to those of wintering Harlequins that we



Harlequin Duck  
*Histrionicus histrionicus*  
at Pelican Point, north-  
west of Puerto Penasco,  
Sonora, 26 March 1977.  
Probably the first con-  
firmed record of the  
species in Mexico. Photo  
by Robert A. Witzeman.

have observed farther north.

As far as we have been able to determine, there are no confirmable previous records for the Republic of Mexico. The "Hypothetical List" in Part II of the Mexican Check-list (Miller *et al.* 1957) quotes an older publication (Beristain and Laurencio 1898) to the effect that the Harlequin Duck is said to occur rarely in Baja California, but adds that "no specimens from there appear to be extant." While the occurrence of the species on the outer coast of Baja does not seem to be an unreasonable possibility, we doubt that it will ever prove to be more than accidental there, considering its extreme rarity in southern California.

The origin of the Sonoran bird, and the route by which it arrived at Puerto Penasco, are of course uncertain. Probably the simplest explanation is that it arrived via a southward overland flight from the breeding range in the interior of the northwestern U.S. and western Canada (most Harlequins from this area move westward, to winter on the upper Pacific coast). It is also possible, although less likely, that the bird reached the Pacific coast from somewhere in the northwestern North America/northeastern Asia breeding range and then moved southward, either going around or crossing the peninsula of Baja California. The most tenuous theory is that the Harlequin could have come from the disjunct population which breeds in northeastern Canada/southern Greenland/Iceland and winters in adjacent coastal waters, south into the northeastern United States.

In a normal year we might have dismissed the latter possibility, even though the species has been known to stray far from the breeding range, single individuals having reached Italy and even Hawaii (Palmer 1975). However, it may be worth noting that winter 1976-77 was phenomenally cold over much of eastern North America; many coastal waters that normally remain open froze over completely. Probably as a result of this, a record number of Harlequin Ducks wintered south to Virginia (Scott 1977), singles were reported in North and South Carolina, where extremely rare (LeGrand 1977), and at least two pushed even farther south to Florida (Stevenson 1977). By contrast, winter 1976-77 in western North America was quite mild, and no extralimital Harlequin Duck records (weather-induced or otherwise) came to our attention. In light of these factors, the possibility that the Sonoran bird came from northeastern North America may merit a vestige of credibility.

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