display," and a brief aerial display has been described as a "parachute display." Often, several males may court a single female, resulting in fights and chases—courtship is very dynamic in this species.

Oldsquaws nest in the tundra in depressions of moss and grass, lined with leaves and down. They often nest in loose aggregations near shallow tundra pools. The usual clutch is 6-7 buffy-olive eggs, and occasional clutches of a dozen or so are attributed to "egg-dumping" by other Oldsquaws. Incubation, performed by the female alone, lasts 3.5-4 weeks. The young are precocial and move about soon after hatching. The young may be herded into creches containing the chicks of several broods, or up to a hundred or more chicks, tended by older females. The nests are subject to predation by foxes and other mammals, and Oldsquaw females give elaborate distraction displays when predators approach the nest. The young fledge in 5-6 weeks.

Oldsquaws feed primarily on aquatic invertebrates, including crustacea (e.g., shrimp, crabs, and amphipods), molluscks, and insects. Fish are only a minor component of their diet. They are supreme divers, with some reports of birds getting caught in nets set at a depth of over 200 feet. They prefer, however, to forage in water up to 25 feet in depth. They reportedly can stay under water for more than a minute and a half.

Oldsquaws may be one of the few duck species that have not diminished in numbers in historical times. Their strong flavor makes them a poor food choice, and they nest in areas generally remote from man and pesticides. There was, however, severe mortality in gill nets in the Great Lakes during the 1950s when as many as 20,000 per year were killed in Lake Michigan alone. This situation has been largely corrected, partially at least due to a diminished fishing industry. Their major predators are foxes, gulls, and jaegers on the breeding grounds, but weather conditions are probably the major factor that constrains populations size. It appears that thousands of these charming little seaducks will continue to provide the great flight shows at Nantucket indefinitely into the future.

W. E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Paul Donahue's artwork has frequently appeared on *Bird Observer*'s cover, much to our delight. Some of our readers may also enjoyed the experience of visiting the rain forest canopy walkway at the Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research (ACEER) off the Rio Napo in the Department of Loreto in northeastern Peru. This canopy walkway, the world's longest, is the creation of Paul and Teresa Wood. Paul can be reached at P.O. Box 554, Machias, Maine 04654.

The Oldsquaw drawing first appeared in a catalog of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT). *Bird Observer* gratefully acknowledges the permission of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours for use of this drawing. Founded by Victor Emanuel in 1975, VENT is one of the oldest, largest, and best natural history tour companies: their 1997 schedule includes nearly 140 tours to over 100 U.S. and foreign destinations, all led by expert birders and organizers. Always innovative, VENT was the first tour company to run birding camps for young birders and to offer brief, intensive workshops on bird I.D. and natural history. The company is committed to supporting local conservation organizations and using local drivers and guides at tour destinations. For more information, call VENT at 800-328-VENT or write to P.O. Box 33008, Austin, TX, 78764.

AT A GLANCE *December 1996* _____ *Wayne R. Petersen*

In the last issue of *Bird Observer*, readers were invited to puzzle over a under exposed photograph of a shorebird that displayed ambiguous characteristics. As a result, the correct "identification" was that no positive identification was truly possible.

Readers are reminded that similar scenarios also occur in the field. Occasionally, adverse field conditions or an anomaly in a bird's plumage or behavior render a bird unidentifiable. Although few birders like to admit defeat in matters of field identification, sometimes leaving a bird unidentified is the prudent course to follow.

Having made this point, let me say that the last of the 1996 *At a Glance* mystery photos is also a tough call, not so much because of the conditions described above, but rather because of reality. With some groups of hawks, variation *within* a species can be almost as striking as differences *between* species. Since structure is subject to less variation than plumage, hawks are (paradoxically) often harder to identify at point-blank range than they are when they're just specks on the horizon. The December photo shows a hawk perched *very close at hand*. And so begins the problem.

When presented with a good look at a perched hawk, one can usually reduce the choices to one or two species. This assumes a good enough view to assign the unkown raptor to its correct genus. Ordinarily, the genera incorporating Ospreys, eagles, and Northern Harriers don't pose much of a problem to Massachusetts birders. But the genera—*Accipiter* (e.g. Sharp-shinned Hawk), *Buteo* (e.g. Red-tailed Hawk), and *Falco* (e.g. Peregrine Falcon)—can be more difficult.