

## FIELD NOTES

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### Drakes are From Mars; Hens are from Venus

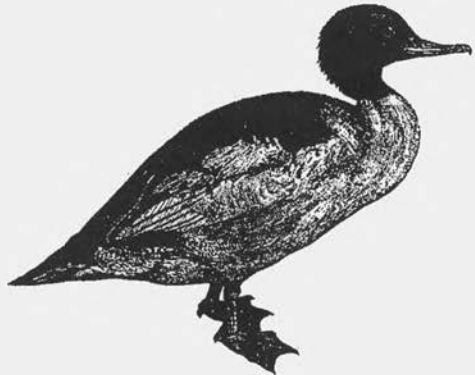
*Paul Roberts*

On March 20, I had one of my more memorable birding experiences on the Mystic Lakes in Medford, not including the Bald Eagle seen a few days before. I went to the lakes early to look for the eagle, but did not see it. The crows may have, because around 7:15 a.m. there was raucous crow cawing from over the ridge to the west of the lake, but the eagle never made an appearance.

I walked to the Upper Lake to look at the ducks in the gorgeous morning light, and found fifty or so Common Mergansers swimming around in small groups, along with a few Ring-necked Ducks and one drake Wood Duck. The birds were close and spectacular in the brilliant early light. What particularly struck me was a female Common Merganser, who was swimming with a male. She was prone, swimming with her body flat against the water surface. Her tail was splayed on the water, reminding me of female Common Goldeneyes I've seen mating in the spring. Her neck was stretched forward, extremely low, just above the surface of the water, so she looked like a red-billed laser pointer doing her imitation of an Anhinga rather than a duck. I don't recall ever seeing a female Common Merganser behaving like this, or seeing any hen duck pursue a drake aggressively.


What was most amazing was that she was swimming around and around this gorgeous drake Common Merganser. I've often seen coveys of drakes swimming around a hen, each strutting their bodies around typically bored females. On Sunday Renee LaFontaine, David Godine, and I had watched a half dozen drake Commons swirling around a blasé female for at least ten minutes, until they each gave up after eliciting not the slightest hint of interest on her part.

This morning, however, this hen swam alongside an apparently oblivious drake. With her body flattened, she swam circles around him, while he blithely ignored her. I wondered how long she would keep this up. The longer he avoided her, the more intent she appeared, imitating a Wahabbi Anhinga, i.e., a whirling dervish, spinning in place. She would swim alongside and behind him and then cut across his path. She gave him ample indication that she was willing, but he was clearly not. This went on for over fifteen minutes. I was getting ready to call it quits when, suddenly, the drake swirled around behind the hen, grabbed her crest in his bill, and mounted her. Copulation lasted no more



than five seconds, after which the drake continued on a forward course unperturbed, acting as though he had merely done what he had been required to do.

After this conjugal act the hen dunked herself and then reared up on her hind legs and flapped her wings several times, smoking a metaphorical cigarette. She appeared revitalized, energized. He appeared bored and continued his apparent aimless swimming to and fro. They totally ignored each other.

I began to wonder about what I could learn from this experience. I won't go farther here, but I was wondering about that drake. Was he successful because he had been playing so hard to get? What made him so special? Why hadn't other drakes tried to take advantage of the obviously aroused female when the drake she was pursuing ignored her? All those questions remain unanswered, but I enjoyed the drama I had seen on Upper Mystic that morning. 

## “Three's Company”

*Joey Mason*

For several years I have monitored numerous bluebird nest boxes around various cranberry bogs in Southern Plymouth County, Massachusetts. However, one nest box in particular will always stand out in my mind. During the spring of 2000, three adult bluebirds tended to nine eggs and reared seven young in Carver. This has never happened before with bluebirds during the eleven years that the Cranberry Country Banding Project has been in operation. According to Patricia Adair Gowaty's and Jonathan H. Plissner's account of Eastern bluebirds in *The Birds of North America*, No. 381, 1998, this phenomenon, called polygyny, has happened only five times out “of 4,299 nesting attempts in field seasons 1977-1991” in South Carolina.

I monitored over 130 bluebird nest boxes every week to ten days last year. This nest box monitoring enables me to schedule when I can band the young with U. S. Fish and Wildlife bands. There is a narrow window of a couple of days in which banding can be done with bluebirds, so I have to age them by their visual appearance during these nest checks and come back on the scheduled day to band them.

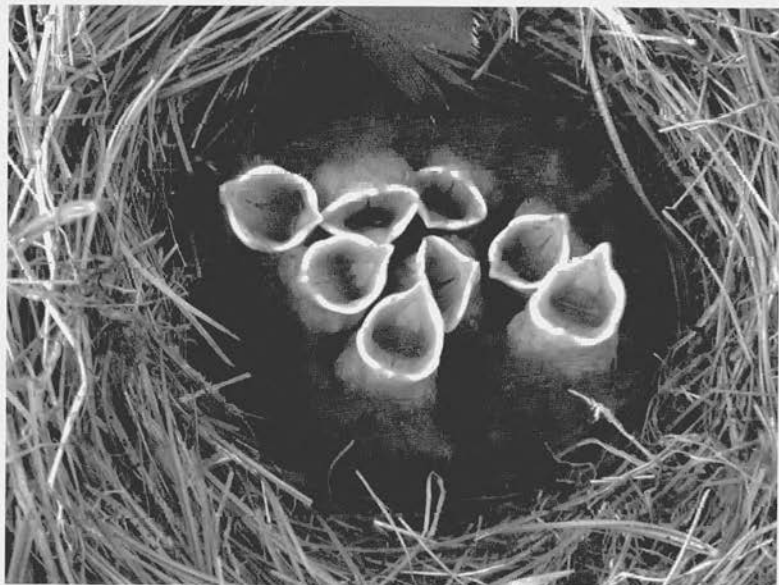
I feel privileged to have permission to access large privately-owned parcels of land and not feel like I am intruding. Most of my visits to the cranberry bogs are after work or on weekends when the bog owners and their help have all gone home. With the problems in the cranberry industry lately, I appreciate it even more for fear that the birds and I will lose this open space to developers. Some growers are forced to sell their land because the price of producing cranberries costs more than what they are getting paid for them.

On May 12, I was doing my routine box checks and thought nothing of four bluebird eggs cupped in a neat nest of pine needles and fine grasses. There were a

couple of pine needle strands on top of the eggs, so I removed the few strands before I closed the box. When I returned on May 20, I was startled to see two bluebirds fly out of the box as I approached. They both appeared dull blue, but it didn't seem possible to have two females in the same box. I opened the box and there were nine blue eggs spread out neatly in a widened nest cup. I could only stay and watch a few minutes to see if the adults were banded. I had more boxes scheduled to check, so I couldn't watch for long. Ten minutes time enabled me to determine there were two unbanded females and one banded male in the immediate area.


On May 27 I was eager to find out what was going on, and the two females flew out of the box again as I approached. I opened the box and saw the nine eggs were still there. I wondered if they'd all hatch. I touched them gently to see if they were all equally warm and they were. I decided that I wouldn't wait a week to recheck the box, so I came back to check it four days later, on May 31.

Bluebird eggs take about fourteen days of incubation. I looked at the date I had first checked the box of four eggs, May 12, and added five days to that. It is said that bluebirds usually lay one egg a day and start incubation when the last egg is laid. Bluebirds can start incubating earlier or later than the last egg laid, but this is a good basis for estimating when the eggs will hatch. Therefore the estimated date that incubation may have started for all nine eggs would be May 17. This would make the estimated hatch date May 31. One female could have started to incubate on May 12, but luck had it that on May 31 there were eight young, ranging from just hatched to one day of age, and one egg. I came back briefly to take pictures two days later, and all eight mouths opened wide for the picture-taking when I did my imitation bluebird call. Another visit on June 8 had me worried because the young seemed hungrier than they should have been, but with all the rainy weather, I wasn't surprised. Also, there

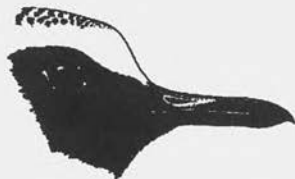
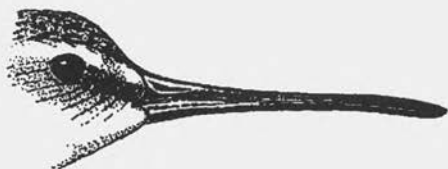


*Photograph by the author*

were three adults bringing food instead of the usual four adults for this number of young, so that may have added to the stress the young were undergoing. The ninth egg and one chick had disappeared, but there are only guesses as to what happened to them.

I banded the seven young on June 10. On June 17, I could make out that there were five young left. I was very careful not to disturb them. The others must have fledged, and disturbance of the remaining five at this time of development could pre-fledge them. When I came back on June 23 the pine needle cup, now flat, was empty of all its inhabitants, so I cleaned it out for the next nesting. Although I did not witness the young fledge, there was no reason to think that they hadn't made it out safely. In July, four more eggs were laid in this same box, and I couldn't help but wish there would be another five eggs laid in addition. However, that didn't happen, but at least there is the memory. 

## Alternate Image Quiz:



Can you name these birds, and where you might find them together?  
Answers will appear in the next issue.

*Drawing by George West*