

Local Sightings (March 27-28, 2010)

by Michael Huebschen

I spent part of Saturday and Sunday, March 27-28 2010, watching waterfowl and attempting photos. From Oshkosh, down along the west shore of Lake Winnebago and at City Park in Fond du Lac, I would estimate that there were several thousand Tundra Swans along the southwest perimeter of the lake. A great number of them took wing Sunday morning from the southwest corner of the lake and headed north. On my return to Oshkosh in the afternoon, I noted thousands of ducks and many Tundra Swans in the vicinity of Wendt's Marina. The swans seem to be partial to patchy ice in the shallow zones for secure resting places.

Among the ducks seen in those last two days were thousands of Scaups (more Lessers than Greater), hundreds of Canvasbacks (scattered over a wide area), and a scattering of Redheads, Ringnecks, Buffleheads, Ruddy Ducks, Common Mergansers, Redbreasted Mergansers, and Mallards.

The Canvasbacks, Scaups and Redheads all were dominated by a huge preponderance of males. I believe that sex ratios with big surpluses of males are well reported in the literature for these species.

I observed with some sympathy, a very aggressive courting party of nine Lesser Scaup drakes pursuing a single hen with what human observers might characterize as "reckless abandon". The hen would often dive to seek relief from their overly enthusiastic attentions only to be followed by the whole troupe of "romeos". I am led to wonder if the males ever force their breeding activity on these unreceptive hens underwater. I am led to speculate that these flocks are often composed of unpaired males pursuing an as yet unpaired female; or a gang of unpaired males attempting to breed with the female of an established pair. If the latter be the case, I had no luck in identifying the "paired" male in the whole group. I observed a similar sized group of Redheads engaged in essentially the same activity.

My greatest amusement was derived from watching a troupe of three Male Redbreasted Mergansers fishing (at times very close to shore). I was able to identify a number of their catches as Yellow Perch and Gizzard Shad. Their fish catching proficiency is amazing! A lot of their fishing activity has been going on in the vicinity of a large effluent discharge culvert due north of the city waste water treatment plant.

The distribution of these birds changes rapidly with shifting and diminishing ice cover. The south half of the lake as much more open Sunday afternoon than during my drive down in the morning.