

**The Nature Study Class.—I.  
A Hardy Winter Bird and its Habits.**

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Nature students, you are no imaginary class, many of you have been met personally at outings, at different times and places. The outing for January will be along the river, where some of you may get a chance to observe one of our hardy winter birds.

We take this trip at this season because we will have better walking now than later in the winter, when the snow will be deep and our bird will be more difficult to approach. Doubtless many of you have snow-shoes, and as you walk through the woods you will notice many tracks of animals, some large and some very small. You should learn to know animals by their footprints, and we will try to help you later.

The subject for this month will be the American golden-eye whistler. Do not be alarmed, it will not hurt any of you, for it is only a duck. There! See! Over there in that air-hole in the river you notice a number of dark specks appearing and disappearing. We will go along the bank behind this cluster of red willow bushes and so be enabled to approach closely to our point of interest. As we go along just notice the colour of the twigs of the willows, for about June your attention will be drawn to it again. Yes, we will stop here, for this is the best place for the whole class to observe the birds, and there is quite a flock.

Quite right you are in thinking there are two species of ducks here. No, those white fellows are not eiders, they are the adult male whistlers, and those dark coloured ones are the females and young males. The males do not get the white plumage before the second year. This accounts for the small number of white birds in the flock. If we are fortunate enough to have a good field glass with us we will be able to observe the difference in size of the bills of the two sexes, the bill of the female being the smaller. Where do they go for food? Why they are feeding now while they stay under water. They remain down from half a minute to a minute and one-half, and you will notice they come to the surface near where they go down. But there seems to be no grass there for food! No, they feed upon fresh water molluscs, both bivalve and univalve, and for these snails the ducks must dive to the bottom and gather them from among the stones

of the river bed. No, the snails do not hibernate, but congregate where there are warm places in the water. Warm places in the water? Yes, where this open water is, we seldom find ice, for there is a good stream of spring-water flowing in here. This is a favourite roosting place for ducks.

They come here for miles from up and down river out of the other air-holes. When coming in to roost they fly low over the water, and against the wind, in flocks of from two to twenty; the time of arrival being from about sundown until after dark. The whistler, although capable of seeing well by daylight, is greatly handicapped by being unable to see well after the light gets dusky. Rarely can a man approach them within two hundred yards in daylight, unless he tries to come upon them unawares. It is most interesting to watch this species during their mating season, which begins here late in March and continues throughout April. Should one flock, consisting of males, both old and young, and females be swimming about and observe another flock approaching on wing and about to alight, the adult males, which are really beautiful birds, swim out in advance, as also do the males of the newly arrived flock, and proceed toward each other. Occasionally one will throw its head back until its crest rests on the back and the bill points upward, and will utter a note sounding like *s-s-s-eet*. It is a difficult note for one to imitate, but once heard and its source observed, it is not readily forgotten. After this introduction, as it were, the members unite in one flock and proceed to enjoy themselves in duck fashion. The males also perform these gesticulations after they have chosen a mate, and one may frequently see the male throw back his head and give vent to his feelings by uttering this pleasant note, which I have heard only in spring time.

In May or June, when the female is engaged in incubating her half-dozen or more of eggs, the male is ever on the lookout for enemies, and is very successful in alluring man from the vicinity of the nest, which is placed generally in a hollow of a dead tree or stump, or, it may be, in an old crow's nest.

How well I remember walking along the tree-grown shore of an island and being accosted by an adult male, which flew near, making a piteous whining sound. After alighting upon the water a short distance away, he would keep some distance between us so long as I followed in a certain direction. If I returned to the place of our first meeting he would promptly begin his alluring performances. After