

COMMON EIDER: A FOURTH BRITISH COLUMBIAN RECORD

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Abstract -- A male Common Eider, first seen in sub-adult plumage in West Vancouver in November 1996, provides the fourth confirmed record for British Columbia, and the southern-most for the Pacific Coast of North America. Presumably the same bird was observed frequently in the greater Vancouver area until 6 April 1998.

Key words: Common Eider, extralimital occurrence, *Somateria mollissima v-nigra*, Vancouver.

The Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*) is an abundant Holarctic seaduck and the largest duck in North America. Significant wintering populations occur in the Bering Sea south of the pack ice to the Aleutian Islands (Johnson and Herter 1989), and wintering has occurred in the Beaufort Sea area. In Alaska, Common Eiders are considered rare visitants along the North Gulf Coast and Prince William Sound and breeders in Glacier Bay (Isleib and Kessel 1973). In spite of its abundance, it rarely wanders south of its main Pacific Coast wintering range (e.g., Roberson 1980; Campbell *et al.* 1990). Godfrey (1986) indicates the Common Eider as "rare" in British Columbia with three late fall records. These were from Hardy Bay, Vancouver Island on 26-27 or 27 October 1934, Masset, Queen Charlotte Islands on 4 December 1945, and six miles east of Prince George on 31 October 1949 (Roberson 1980; Campbell *et al.* 1990). The Queen Charlotte Island specimen has been re-examined and identified as the similar King Eider (*Somateria spectabilis*), and three other records are considered as unconfirmed ("hypothetical") or probably from Alaska (Campbell *et al.* 1990). A more recent sighting was of a female at Skidegate, Queen Charlotte Islands on 13 May 1996 (Bowling 1996). Thus, only three previously reported records of Common Eider in British Columbia are considered confirmed.

On 11 November 1996 at 08:00 P.S.T., I discovered a "very large" immature male eider amongst a diving raft of about 150 foraging Surf Scoters (*Melanitta perspicillata*) and some Barrow's Goldeneyes (*Bucephala islandica*). They were approximately 3 m. from shore in Larsen Bay, West Vancouver, British Columbia (49°22'N, 123°17'W). I immediately consulted several field guides to determine whether it was a King Eider or a Common Eider.

I initially suspected it to be an immature King Eider, given its more regular occurrence in southern British Columbia (i.e., 14 records by the end of 1986, Campbell *et al.* 1990). However, the prominent large yellow-orange bill and overall body size (approximately 25% larger than Surf Scoter) which first drew my attention to the bird, cast some doubt on that assertion. Later that day (about 14:00 P.S.T.), I relocated this bird in a bay 300 m. southeast from the initial site with other observers. A close examination (30 m.) of the bird

revealed the distinctive bill processes and the lower feathering on the upper mandible anterior to the exposed culmen mid-line (Figure 1).

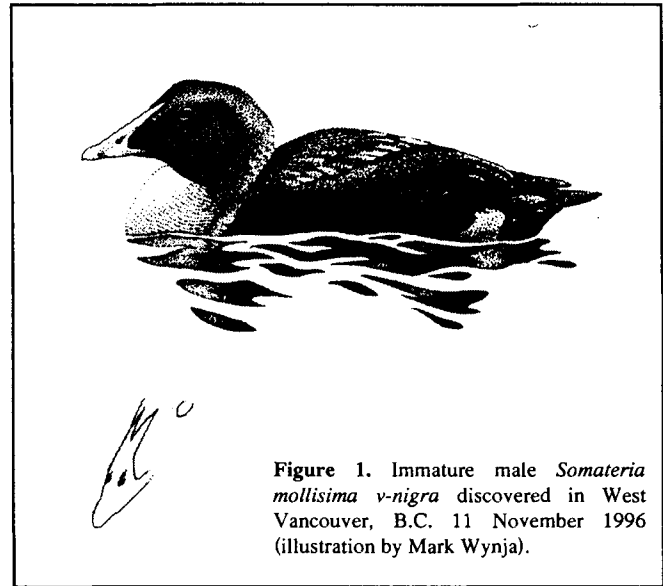


Figure 1. Immature male *Somateria mollissima v-nigra* discovered in West Vancouver, B.C. 11 November 1996 (illustration by Mark Wynja).

Some white contour feathering on the breast and scapulars was also evident, possibly indicating a sub-adult male. On the following day, many Vancouver Natural History Society members observed the bird, drew field sketches, and/or took extensive field notes.

By 13 January 1997, the eider had moved through the Howe Sound and English Bay area, and was seen associating with scoters at Ferguson Point 10 km. from where he was discovered (M. Wynja personal communication). He continued to associate with a large flock of Barrow's Goldeneyes and Surf Scoters, Vancouver's two most abundant seaduck species. Presumably the same bird appeared at numerous sites along the greater Vancouver waterfront throughout that winter (Figure 2) until early May 1997 (Bowling 1997), reappeared off Iona Island in June 1997 (Bain and Holder 1997), continued to be seen in a variety of sites throughout fall 1997 as he moulted into adult plumage (Bain and Holder 1997-1998) and throughout the winter (Bain and Holder 1998) until at least 6 April 1998, the



Figure 2. First winter male Common Eider among Surf Scoters, Kitsilano Beach, Vancouver 24 January 1997. Photo by Jo Ann MacKenzie.

date of the last report to the Vancouver Natural History Society's Rare Bird Alert (Prue Spitmann personal communication to M. K. McNicholl 1 July 1998).

This constitutes the fourth confirmed record of a [Pacific] Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima v-nigra*) in British Columbia, and as noted in the introduction, the most southerly record for western North America.

The Common Eider's southern distribution may be limited by the presence of fowl cholera (*Pasteurella multocida*), which causes significant outbreaks in the southern edge of the species' range in eastern Canada (Goudie and Reed in preparation). The warmer waters off the British Columbia coast likely harbour this disease, possibly explaining the paucity of records here.

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