



Threatened and Endangered Species

Spectacled eider (*Somateria fischeri*)

Status

Threatened throughout its range (*Federal Register*, May 10, 1993)

Description

Spectacled eiders are large sea ducks, 52-56 centimeters long (20-22 inches). In the winter and spring, adult males are in breeding plumage with a black chest, white back, and pale green head with a long, sloping forehead and white spectacle-like patches around the eyes. During the late summer and fall, males are entirely mottled brown. Females and juveniles are mottled brown year-round with pale brown eye patches.

Range and Population Level

Historically, spectacled eiders nested along much of the coast of Alaska, from the Nushagak Peninsula in the southwest, north to Barrow, and east nearly to the Canadian border. They also nested along much of the arctic coast of Russia. Today, three primary nesting grounds remain; the central coast of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, the arctic coastal plain of Alaska, and the arctic coastal plain of Russia. A few pairs nest on St. Lawrence Island as well. Their fall and winter distribution was virtually unknown until satellite telemetry lead to the discovery of spectacled eiders at sea in 1993. Important late summer and fall molting areas have been identified in eastern Norton Sound and Ledyard Bay in Alaska, and in Mechigmenskiy Bay and an area offshore between the Kolyma and Indigirka river deltas in Russia. Wintering flocks of spectacled eiders have been observed in the Bering Sea between St. Lawrence and St. Matthew islands.

Between the 1970's and the 1990's, the breeding population on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta declined by over 96%, and only about 4,000 pairs nest there today. Historical data for other nesting



As their name suggests, male spectacled eiders in breeding plumage have distinctive patches around the eye which resemble eyeglasses, or spectacles. Female spectacled eiders, like the bird on the left, are mottled brown with faint eye patches. Reprinted with permission from an original painting by Joseph Hautman.

areas are scarce, but recent data and observations by native elders suggest populations may have also declined on the arctic coastal plain of Alaska. Biologists estimate that about 9,000 pairs currently nest on Alaska's arctic coastal plain, and at least 40,000 pairs nest in arctic Russia. The current worldwide population estimate is 360,000 birds, which is derived from winter surveys in the Bering Sea and includes non-breeding birds.

Habitat and Habits

Spectacled eiders are diving ducks that spend most of the year in marine waters where they probably feed on bottom-dwelling molluscs and crustaceans. Around the time of spring break-up, breeding pairs move to nesting areas on wet coastal tundra. They establish nests near shallow ponds or lakes, usually within 3 meters (10 feet) of water. During this season they feed by diving and dabbling in ponds and wetlands, eating aquatic insects, crustaceans, and vegetation. Soon after eggs are laid, males leave the nesting grounds for offshore molting areas, usually by the end of June. Females whose nests failed

leave the nesting area to molt at sea by mid-August. Breeding females and their young remain on the nesting grounds until early September. Molting flocks congregate in relatively shallow coastal water, usually less than 36 meters (120 Feet) deep. While moving between nesting and molting areas, spectacled eiders travel along the coast up to 50 kilometers (31 miles) offshore. During the winter months of October through March, they move far offshore to waters up to 65 meters (213 feet) deep, where they sometimes gather in dense flocks in openings of nearly continuous sea ice.

Reasons for Current Status

Causes of the decline of spectacled eiders are not well understood. Lead poisoning, caused by eiders ingesting spent lead shot as they feed, has been documented in spectacled eiders on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Hunting also poses a threat to spectacled eiders.

Predation by foxes, large gulls, and ravens on the breeding grounds may be increasing in areas where populations of these predators are enhanced by the year-round food and shelter provided by human activities and garbage dumps.

