

Photo Quiz

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Ontario birders, living as we do surrounded by several Great Lakes and their associated bays and marshes, spend lots of recreational hours examining waterfowl. So when we see swimming an essentially all brown bird with a short neck and roughly triangular bill and head profile, we know it is a duck. It is not a goose, as they have longer necks and a cone-shaped bill with, usually, a tomium or “grinning patch”.

Of course, there are plenty of brown ducks to consider. Generally, the next step is to determine whether our duck is a member of the “pond ducks” or dabblers, or whether it is a diving duck. Frequently, habitat and behaviour can do this. The “puddle ducks” occur in marshes and ponds and tip-up to feed off the bottom. The various diving ducks usually occur on deeper bodies of water where they dive to feed at the bottom or on fish, depending upon the group. But what if, as in this case, our duck frequents shallow water and accompanies dabblers but does not seem quite right to be included with them?

From the photos, we can see that we have a “solid”, chunky duck but we are not afforded direct size comparisons with females of the

Mallard complex (Mallards, American Black Ducks, and their hybrids). However, those birds have longer necks, and bills that have varying amounts of yellow or orange-yellow. In addition, a close inspection of the bill shows extensions from the base towards the eyes, a feature not possessed by any dabbler.

Among the diving ducks, the scoters are moderately large and have bills which are basally swollen. However, they are darker in colour, not buffy brown in overall tone. Female White-winged Scoter, with the white secondaries concealed, would still be darker blackish-brown and with at least some suggestion of two rounded whitish patches on the sides of the head. Surf Scoter has a triangular head and bill in profile, but again the overall colour is blackish-brown and there are two large white patches on each side of the head. Female Canvasback has a sloping bill-head profile, and thus a triangular head and bill, but it has rather smooth, unpatterned brownish-grey plumage, and in particular, a grey back and flanks.

All of the above mental sifting can be done in a few seconds or minutes depending upon the experience of the observer and brings us



to the conclusion that our large brown duck is an eider. Now it gets interesting! Both large rather plain-faced eiders can and do occur on the Great Lakes, usually in winter. The King Eider is a regular but rare winter visitor to the lower lakes. Usually it occurs singly or in very small numbers, but it has occurred in flocks. Rick Snider and I counted 91 on 12 March 1997 along the south shore of Lake Ontario, west of Jordan Harbour. The Common Eider is much more rare. In recent years, since the zebra mussel has colonized Lake Ontario, usually one or two Commons are found each winter.

Adult and immature males of these two species are comparatively easy to distinguish. Eiders undergo an almost continuous body molt from juvenal to a Basic I plumage in early fall and into an Alternate I in late fall and through the winter. As a consequence, immature males of both species acquire enough white and dark plumage to be relatively easily distinguishable. The same cannot be said for females.

However, there are several features apparent on our quiz bird which when carefully noted serve to separate the two female eiders. Head-bill profile can be an early clue; King Eider has a more concave upward maxilla and rounded forehead than Common, which is straighter. Think of the profile differences of Redhead and Canvasback, or the more subtle differences of

Tundra Swan versus Trumpeter Swan. But beware that some King Eider females seem to have a more sloping bill-head profile and look very much like Commons.

There are some body-plumage differences between the two females. However, these are more different in adult females so it is useful, although not critical to final identification, to age the bird. Again, remember that body molt is virtually continuous so that statements about age are relative rather than absolute. Take particular note of the flank markings. On Common Eider, by late winter when the bird is in Alternate I plumage and in its second calendar year, the flanks are barred vertically in black. On King Eider, these are black chevrons. Are these bars straight or curved on our bird? Or somewhat in-between! Some other features indicate that the photo bird is in its first winter. First, the offset long scapulars (see these just forward of the folded primaries) are not as long or as curved as they would be in an adult female. Second, note also the white tips of the secondaries and greater upper wing coverts creating two white lines (these bound the speculum so well known in dabblers) which tend to be much-reduced in older females of both species. So this bird appears to be in its first winter of life and the flank markings seem to suggest King Eider.

Our young female eider is of a rich tawny hue. Common Eider

females vary in plumage from greyish brown to warmer tawny colour in some populations (subspecies). Despite the fact that there is considerable colour variation even within Common Eider populations, a greyish or dull brown bird has a good chance of keying out as a Common Eider and a reddish-brown bird is much more likely to be a King Eider, especially in Ontario.

The head and bill is the key area to examine closely as the species' diagnostic features are found herein. Note the broad, rounded light area immediately above the eye and the faint light line extending down the side of the head from the eye. Common Eider too has white "around the eye" but in that species it is a broad light superciliary line which extends back from the eye. This feature also tends to create a darker-capped appearance in Common. Note also the dark gape line, which curves slightly upwards from where the mandible and maxilla meet. In Common Eider, this line is straighter. Some texts and observers suggest that King Eider is smiling, although it seems more a Mona Lisa smirk to me! There is also a tendency towards a lighter area on the face at the base of the bill in King.

So, it looks as if we have a **King Eider**. Close examination of the bill will clinch it. Note that the entire bill is blackish grey. Most Common Eider females have a yellowish-green nail. The bill lobe is rather broad and does not extend close to the eye. In Common, this lobe that extends closer to the eye approximates in shape the tine on a tuning fork, although in some subspecies it is somewhat broader. Now note that the feathering on the forehead above this lobe extends as far forward as the feathering on the sides of the head. In Common, the feathering on the sides extends in more of a point and right to the nostril, and the forehead feathering does not extend as far forward. This feature, which can be seen by careful study with a good telescope, is absolutely diagnostic.

So next time you go to see an eider, even if it has been reported as one species or the other, take the time to study it carefully and look for the features described herein. It will be satisfying to know that you are identifying the bird rather than "going with the flow".

Barry Cheriére photographed this immature female King Eider on 20 February 2000 at LaSalle Dock on Hamilton Bay, in Burlington.

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