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Clearly we have a brown duck. It may be quite large, but it is too short-necked to be a goose. It has a distinctive triangular head and bill, in side profile. Birders understand classification better than most. We mentally sift through the various groups of ducks, eliminating them very quickly. Many female pond/dabbling ducks are overall brown in tone like this bird, but none has such a triangular head and all have a classic duck bill. That is, they definitely do not have a bill process extending up toward the eye. Among the pochards or *Aythya* ducks (the scaup and their allies), only the Canvasback has a triangular head-bill profile, but it has smooth, unbarred plumage and its bill is essentially squared off at the base. The scoters in some ages and plumages have swollen bills, but again they do not have a section of bill extending posteriorly towards the eye. Moreover, they are all quite uniform in body plumage, lacking the richness and barring of this bird, and the females have patches or blotches of white on the head.

Say ... didn't we look at a duck such as this not long ago in the Photo Quiz? Is this déjà vu? Well, almost. Dig out the August 2000 quiz [*Ontario Birds* 18(2): 92-95], and let's compare photographs. If you go and get that edition and photo, you will much better appreciate the following analysis. I really mean it; go and get it.

Yes, we have another eider, one

of those husky brown sea ducks we spend so much time searching the waters of the Great Lakes for on bitterly cold winter days. This **Common Eider** was found by Jean Niskanen along the Burlington shoreline and spent several months there, allowing for ample study and excellent photos such as this one by Sam Barone. As it and the King Eider are both facing left and are about the same-sized images, we can make a point-by-point comparison of the two similar species.

Both ducks are females. By the time eiders reach our waters in late fall and into winter, immature males have molted from juvenal plumage to Basic I (first winter) and then on into Alternate I as the winter progresses. Unless they are very arrested in molt, the males would show some white and black plumage by mid-winter.

Aging female eiders is very tricky, even if we could see the wing and the pattern of the secondary coverts. We cannot here, as the wings are folded up under the scapulars. On adult female eiders, the tertials are longer and more downcurved. This is a relative feature, but the two which can be seen on the near side of the body just anterior to the rump do not seem particularly long or downcurved. The tips of the tail feathers are diagnostic. In this photo and indeed almost all field situations, these cannot be discerned. In the case of this bird, which could be viewed at close range from above,

the tips of the tail feathers appeared to be notched. Such notching would seem to corroborate this as a bird in its first winter, with retained juvenile tertials and remiges (tail feathers). In this case, the precise age is not integral to species and subspecific identification.

So let's go through the features, point-by-point, which distinguish this female Common Eider from the earlier King Eider.

1. The head-bill profile is distinctly triangular in shape in Common. The bill-forehead shape is close to straight, being only very slightly concave upwards in Common and considerably more concave in King. Be warned that depending upon individual variation, angle of viewing and observer enthusiasm, King can appear to be quite straight in forehead profile. In these photos, hold a straight edge along each from crown to bill tip to prove the difference to yourself. You'll see much more water in the King Eider photo.

2. There is a crease in the face of the King extending from the gape upwards, giving it an apparent "grin". There is no such smile in Common.

3. There is a broad whitish line over the eye and extending back towards the nape on this quiz bird. On the King Eider, the rounded light area above the eye is not so much a line as a crescent, and also note the pale line extending back from the eye, a

feature not seen in this (and most) Commons.

4. While the crowns on both birds are brown with fine black streaks, the white supercilium of Common accents the crown and results in a more dark-capped appearance. There is a light patch on the face of the female King Eider at the base of the bill. Common Eider's face is more uniform with no light patches.

5. Now look at bill colour. The bill on our Common Eider is grey with a yellowish-olive nail, quite different from the all black bill of female King. Pay particular attention to the bill frontal lobes and the feathering on the face. On the Common, the lobe is a long, narrow extension almost to the eye, whereas in the King Eider it is shorter and blunter. The lobe on the Common extends three-quarters of the distance between the rear edge of the nostril and the eye; in King, the lobe extends at most two-thirds of this distance. Obviously, this measurement can be done using photos but not in the field. Nevertheless, it serves to illustrate the different bill proportions. The long-faced look of Common is also exaggerated by the feathering extending in a point right to the nostril. Note on the King that the feathering ends in a rounded fashion, well short of the nostril. Above the lobe, the feathering on our Common extends half way down the bill lobe to the nos-

tril, whereas on the King it extends almost all the way to the nostril.

In the field, we probably would have noticed body plumage before we critically examined the face and bill. On both species, all of the mantle, scapular, sides of breast, flank and rump feathers are brown with transverse black bars. However, on the Common these are much more linear, resulting in striking vertical black bars on the sides of the body. On the King, these are more like chevrons. Similarly, on the back and scapulars, the black markings are not so arrow-shaped on the Common as on the King.

The bird is so close and the image so clear that we ought to be able to assign this bird to a subspecies. Most female Common Eiders that occur on the lower Great Lakes are quite greyish-brown and are likely from the mainly non-migratory *sedentaria* population from Hudson and James Bays. Indeed, with such birds, a grey eider might be the first indication that it is not a King Eider, which is richer brown. However, our bird is a rich, reddish brown which would seem to rule out *sedentaria* and points to the Atlantic Coastal *dresseri* subspecies.

The real key to subspecies is the form of the bill lobe. The best

Bob Curry, 3115 New Street, Unit 30, Burlington, Ontario L7N 3T6

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reference for this is R. S. Palmer's *Handbook of North American Birds, Volume 3, Waterfowl, Part 2* (1976). On page 31 are head drawings of seven subspecies. The female eider with the longest lobe extending three-quarters of the distance to the eye is *dresseri*, whose breeding range extends well up the St. Lawrence River Estuary. In addition, the lobe has a more rounded tip than other subspecies.

To sum up, our scrutinized duck is a female Common Eider, *Somateria mollissima dresseri* of the Atlantic coast, likely in its first winter.