

ABOUT THE COVER: Common Eider

The Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*) is the most widely distributed and abundant of the eiders. North American populations have been estimated to be between one and two million birds, and winter counts from western Europe and Siberia total close to two million. Breeding Common Eiders prefer the rocky seacoasts and offshore islands of the arctic and subarctic regions of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Eurasia. New England populations (*S. m. dresseri*) breed along the coast of Labrador, Newfoundland, eastern Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Maine. Wintertime finds the birds mainly off the coasts of New England with the largest concentrations being in the shoals off Cape Cod.

Tough and hardy sea ducks, Common Eiders are well-equipped to handle winter temperatures and conditions. They are expert divers, preferring to feed around submerged ledges and reefs. If necessary, they can swim to depths of 35-60 feet. Their food supply consists largely of mollusks and crustaceans with blue mussels being the favorite. The mussels are swallowed whole and are then broken into fine pieces by the eider's powerful gizzard.

It is always worth checking flocks of Common Eiders for King Eiders, their slightly larger cousins. Separating adult male Common and King eiders is a relatively easy exercise. Female and subadult birds are trickier to identify. However, differences in the bill and head profiles provide one of the more useful field marks. The head of a Common Eider has a distinctive "Roman-nosed" profile (similar to a Canvasback's) formed by a long bill sloping to a high crown. Feathering extends along the sides of the bill to or beyond the nostril. The head of the female or immature male King Eider is less triangular in outline, with a rounder crown and feathering extending only slightly along the sides of the bill, well back from the nostril. These characteristics give King Eiders a round-headed, stubby-billed appearance when compared with the long-headed, larger-billed look of a Common Eider.

The illustrations below (traced from S. Madge and H. Burn, *Waterfowl*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988) show the head shape and bill feathering of a female Common Eider on the left and a female King Eider on the right.

J.B. Hallett, Jr.



A BIG THANK YOU TO GORDON MORRISON

The Common Eider of the cover is the third black-and-white rendition of the paintings of Gordon Morrison to grace the cover of *Bird Observer* this year. In our second year of featuring the works of nature artists, we owe a particular debt of gratitude to artist Morrison. To learn of Gordon's career and background, please refer to the February 1988 issue, which featured his *Bobwhite Quail* on the cover. This New England artist of expanding reputation, who has illustrated *Newcomb's Wildflower Guide*, *The Birdwatcher's Companion*, and Peterson field guides and whose work is exhibited in galleries from Massachusetts to Florida, accepts commissioned work at his home studio at 52 Bulfinch Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760.

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