

Waterfowl identification can be quite straightforward, particularly where drakes in breeding plumage are concerned. However, where juveniles, males in eclipse plumage, or females are concerned, identification difficulties frequently arise. As has been noted previously in this column, for certain groups of birds (e.g., hawks, shorebirds, sparrows), shape and profile can often be as useful as plumage characteristics when trying to make a correct field identification. This criterion can also sometimes be applied to waterfowl. This month's mystery bird is a good case in point.



*Photograph by O.J. Murie*

A close examination of the bird in question reveals a most distinctive head profile. From the tip of the duck's bill to the top of its head is almost a perfectly straight line; that is, there is little or no angle at the point where the bill joins the bird's forehead. A thoughtful look at a field guide plate or at a variety of duck species will reveal that most waterfowl display either an abrupt "forehead" above the bill, or at least show a gently concave contour from the top of the bill to the top of the head. These features are conspicuously missing in the pictured bird.

Having established that the facial profile of the mystery duck is uniquely flattened, there are several approaches that can next be taken to determine the bird's identity. First, on the basis of head profile alone the viable possibilities are almost reduced to one of three choices — Canvasback, Common Eider, or King Eider. No other Massachusetts waterfowl so dramatically display such a distinctive head profile. Once the choices are narrowed down to these species, the solution is easy. Female eiders are virtually unique among ducks in having horizontal barring on their feathers instead of a uniform color or a complex pattern of scalloped, scaled, or streaked plumage. This feather barring is

especially evident on the pictured bird's scapulars, rump, and upper tail coverts, in marked contrast to the rather uniform appearance of the head. If the duck in question were a female Canvasback, its plumage would appear lighter in color and would be much more uniform in pattern. Additionally, a female Canvasback would usually possess a thin eye ring and often a pale line extending back behind the eye. Using these characters alone, it is safe to declare that the duck in the photograph is a female eider, not a Canvasback.

The female King Eider — a relative rarity in Massachusetts waters — is similar to the female Common Eider; however, the lobes on its bill are shorter and more rounded, and the feathering on top of the bill extends farther down the "bridge of the nose." This last feature makes the bill profile of a King Eider appear stubby, not long and flat as in the pictured eider. Also, the head of a female King Eider, especially the back of the head, is considerably more rounded than a Common Eider, giving the head a less angular appearance. Additionally, if the markings on the sides and flanks were visible in the photograph, they would appear crescent-shaped on a King Eider, not evenly barred, as they are on a female Common Eider. Because of these differences, the pictured eider is a female Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*), not a King Eider.

The discerning reader may also note that the pictured eider looks a little different from the thousands of female eiders that one regularly encounters along our coastlines in winter. Specifically, the lobes on the upper portion of the bill that are such a distinctive feature of both Common and King Eiders are relatively short and notably pointed, and they barely extend halfway to the bird's eyes. In most Common Eiders seen in Massachusetts, the bill lobes are long, extend much closer to the eye, and are conspicuously rounded at the top. Such long, rounded bill lobes are typical of the eastern subspecies of Common Eider (*S. m. dresseri*), while the more northern, western, and European populations tend to have shorter and more pointed bill lobes like the eider in the photograph. Although the specific location at which this photograph was taken is unknown, because Olaus J. Murie took it, it was likely taken in Alaska, in which case the eider is probably of the subspecies *S. m. v-nigrum*.

In Massachusetts, Common Eiders are abundant in migration and winter, especially in the waters around Cape Cod and the Islands. There is a small breeding population in Buzzards Bay, and summering nonbreeding individuals occur in many coastal areas.

## AT A GLANCE

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Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen



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