

THE SMEW

by Robert M. Bushnell, North Providence, R.I.

On January 3, 1976, in Middletown, Rhode Island, Hugh Willoughby and I found what is apparently the first Smew (Mergus albellus) ever to be acceptably recorded in the contiguous forty-eight states. By now this famous bird has been seen by hundreds of birders from all over the United States and Canada. Since this adult drake Smew is such a beautiful and distinctive bird, and one with which everyone has by now become familiar, it is not necessary to repeat its field marks here. However, details of the sequence of events which led to its fame may not be familiar to the general reader. Certainly, it has been a unique experience which we shall not soon forget.

On that memorable day we arrived at Green End Pond at 9:35 a.m. The weather was cold and raw, with the sky overcast and threatening, but no rain had yet fallen. We began to examine the small portion of the pond which is north of Green End Avenue. Hugh used his binoculars while I methodically looked over all of the gulls and ducks with my gunscope. Suddenly, there it was. I knew instantly that it was not a North American species nor any other species with which I was acquainted. I blurted out my initial reaction: "What the hell is THAT?" Hugh turned to see where I was looking; spotting the rear view of a white duck, he said, "Looks like an Oldsquaw." But just as quickly the bird turned, and Hugh immediately negated his offhand remark. After a moment of thought he said that he thought it was a Smew, but that he could not be positive. We decided to study it more closely and to write down complete field notes. After studying the bird swimming and diving for approximately thirty minutes, we then left in order to bird another nearby area--where we were pleased to find several good species for our rapidly growing 1976 Annual List.

As you can see, our initial reaction to the Smew was one of decidedly suppressed excitement. For one thing, we were not yet certain of its identification. Further, we both felt that if indeed it was a Smew, there was only a slim chance of its being a wild individual. As we talked it over while we birded Sachuest Point, we gradually realized that it would be best to check out the various possibilities. About an hour after we had left Green End Pond, we stopped at Middletown's Norman Bird Sanctuary to examine a European field guide. Because the sanctuary was closed, however, we had to wait the additional hour until we had arrived home before we were able to verify the tentative identification. Since the hour was later than I had told my wife and family to expect me, I merely dropped Hugh off at his front door and drove home. As I was coming in the door, Hugh telephoned me. We were both happy with his report that our field notes matched perfectly with the description and color plate of the Smew in Roger Tory Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe. After conferring with me, Hugh then immediately called Charles Wood of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island to report the presence of this extraordinary record and to express our puzzlement about the question of whether or not it might possibly be a wild bird. I also called Charles a few minutes later to add my own information. Charles is, of course, the co-editor of our monthly Rhode Island Field Notes and has been an outstanding birder for many years. Charles felt, as we still did, that it must be an escaped bird, but he was nevertheless very much interested by the intriguing possibilities. We agreed that the situation should be checked further, but no definite plans to do so were made at that time.

Our next bit of data came in on the following afternoon (Sunday, January 4) when Charles rather excitedly called Hugh. He had arranged an excursion to Middletown to check things out, like the careful observer he is. The group consisted of Dr. Douglas L. Kraus, Eloise Saunders, T. Morton Curry, and of course Charles Wood--all of them members of the Little Rest Bird Club. They found the Smew actively feeding where we had left it the day before. They became increasingly interested as the bird was clearly very shy and wary and would not allow a close approach. In fact, when they tried to get within about 100 feet of it, the bird took off and flew very strongly to Easton's Pond, which is adjacent to Green End Pond. At this point Dr. Kraus, who is the dean of Rhode Island ornithologists and an extremely knowledgeable birder, expressed his conviction that this Smew could very well be a legitimate wild individual. This impression was certainly not shaken by an immediate check with the neighbors which was undertaken by Charles: local people who feed the domestic and wild waterfowl in the small pond stated emphatically that they had never seen the small whitish duck until the previous afternoon (that is, on January 3 at feeding time).

During that day Hugh had remembered reading an article by Richard Ryan of West Orange, New Jersey, in a 1972 issue of Birding magazine which stated that any Smew appearing in the wild in North America would very likely be a genuine vagrant because the species is so rarely maintained in captivity. Thus it seemed that the more we learned, the more likely

it was becoming that our little discovery was legitimate! At this point our excitement was beginning to build, but we still could not be certain of the origin of this scarce Eurasian merganser.

On Monday, January 5, Charles Wood made a major decision: he called the Massachusetts Audubon Society to report the Smew's presence to their staff. He asked for Peter Alden since Peter has often birded in Rhode Island and is in fact a frequent leader on the Block Island fall round-ups of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. But Peter was in Caracas or some such place--as usual! The word reached Mrs. Ruth P. Emery that evening at the Nuttall Ornithological Club meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Accompanied by Bruce A. Sorrie, Mrs. Emery was at Easton's Pond on Tuesday morning. The bird was not to be found! Guided by Robert A. Conway, one of the leading Rhode Island field men, the little band of searchers checked out every pond on the southern end of Aquidneck Island which Bob could think of. No luck! Bob had to get back to his professional duties, so Bruce and Mrs. Emery made one more attempt to locate the bird on Easton's Pond. There it was! Drawing upon her familiarity with the species in Europe, Mrs. Emery had no difficulty whatsoever in confirming the Smew. She also ran into Hugh, who was just arriving after a morning at work; Hugh gave her a copy of an article which he had written hurriedly the previous evening in which he had presented his opinion (with several reasons stated) that the bird was very possibly and indeed rather probably a natural occurrence. His major point was the fact that a once-in-a-lifetime giant storm had just ravished western Europe. Its very strong winds were in just exactly the required directions to bring a storm-tossed waif to North America from the British Isles or even from southern Scandinavia--both of which are areas where Smews are regular in that season. In any case, Mrs. Emery returned home, presented her findings to her colleagues at the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and The Word went out.

The staff at MAS alerted the National Audubon Society in New York; with their assistance Dick Forster and others determined the identity of all aviculturalists who just MIGHT keep Smews in captivity. All of them were contacted, and all of them took a census of their Smews, if any. The continental grand total of eleven Smews were all accounted for. Meanwhile, continually adding further data were the excellent birders who came to see for themselves. For example, on Wednesday, January 7, Davis W. Finch found the Smew sitting on the ice and noted that it did not have a leg band or any other form of marking which a captive bird might have. He also noted that it was feeding in a normal merganser manner; he remarked that if it had ever been a tame bird, then someone had done an excellent job of getting into a SCUBA outfit to teach it how to dive! The evidence was becoming very convincing indeed. On Thursday, January 8, the good news was announced: the Smew was almost certainly wild! Thus we added another species to the previous Saturday's list. That same Thursday the news made the headlines of newspapers across the nation, largely through the efforts of William I. Claiborne, staff writer for the Washington Post. The race of birders to Little Rhody was on.

Throughout the episode of the Smew, Hugh and I have been impressed by the efforts of all those who helped in establishing the authenticity of this rare record. It was very gratifying to see so many sincere people were interested not only in listing the bird but also in helping with the big job of verifying its wild status. Several of these good people have been mentioned here, but obviously there are many others whose important involvement is not specifically known by us. On behalf of all birders, we would like to thank each of these people--although of course the real thanks in most cases was a good look at the Smew itself. We sincerely hope that everyone who came to see the bird has succeeded in doing so.

As of February 4, 1976, the Smew is still present and very healthy despite the exceedingly cold weather of January. It appears to be finding sufficient food, and it resolutely refuses to become pauperized--as the Ivory Gull has been. In our turn, we are asking very little of our local Smew: only that it be on public display during good weather and on all weekends! Its contract runs through the remainder of the winter, but (as all good birders know from sad experience) wild birds can be very independent thinkers and do not necessarily have a reliable history of meeting their contractual commitments. We can only hope that The Official Bird of the City of Newport, Rhode Island, continues to honor the solemn ceremonial obligations of its august position.