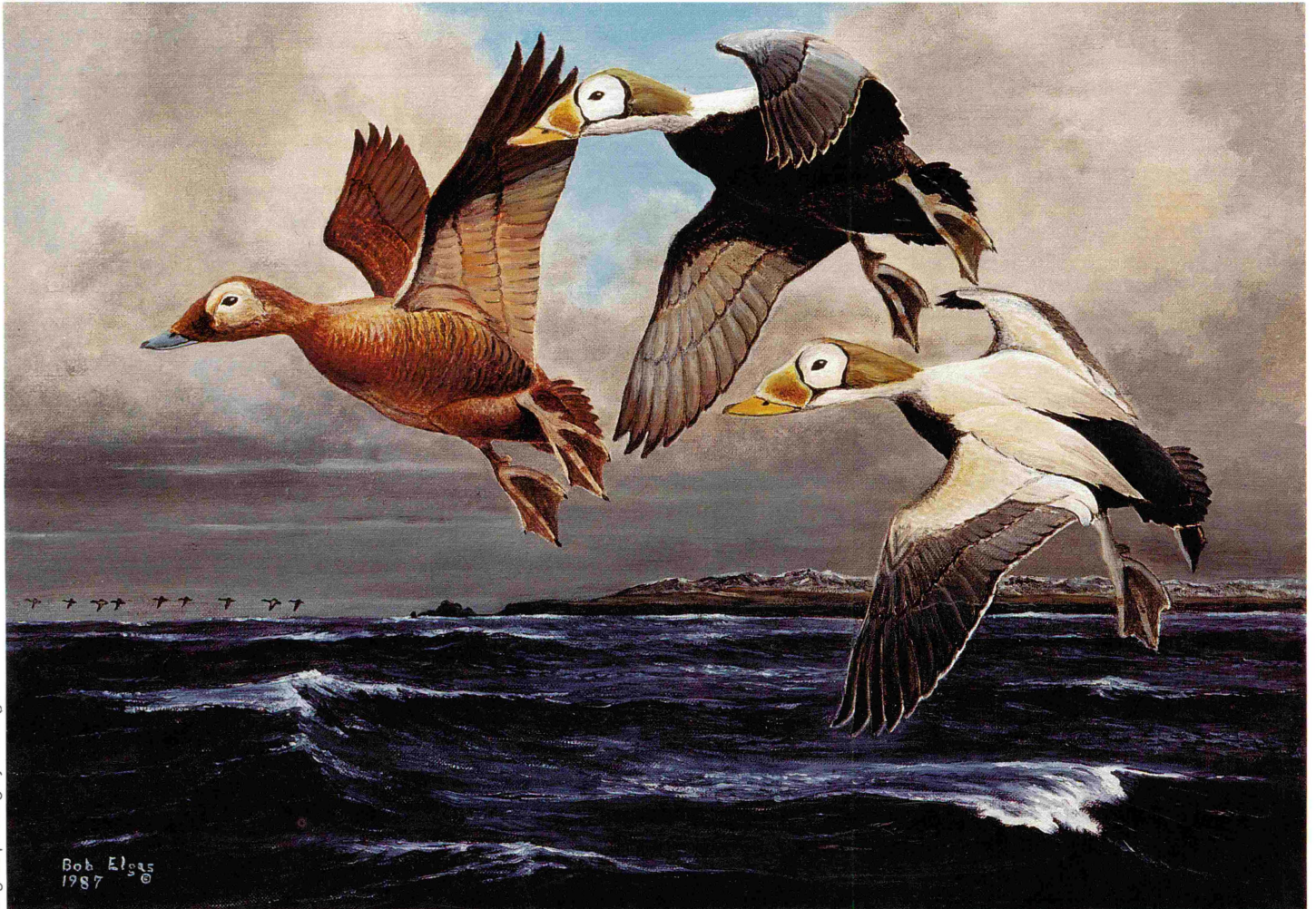


Harlequin male  
(captive bird)

One of the most interesting groups of North American waterfowl are those referred to as sea ducks. Included in this group are the various eiders, three species of scoters, Old Squaw Ducks, Harlequin Ducks, and the extinct Labrador Duck. With the exception of the three varieties of scoters, which are sombre black in color, sea ducks are quite spectacular being among the most striking of all

*"Northern Seas Run Cold," spectacled Eider Ducks fly near Aleutian Island wintering grounds.*



# Sea Ducks

by Bob Elgas  
Big Timber, Montana

waterfowl. As the name implies, they spend much of their time at sea and are rarely encountered inland. As a result they are less well known than other waterfowl. Most breed in the far north and nesting is normally near salt water. When the young hatch the mother soon takes them to sea. Males do not assist in rearing the young. Once the female begins incubation the male departs and males then gather in groups of their own gender to molt and grow new plumage. The new plumage, which lasts through the summer and early fall, is known as the eclipse. It is quite different from the breeding plumage, being much less spectacular, and decidedly subdued.

Sea ducks feed almost exclusively on animal matter, shellfish and mussels being favorite fare. They are powerful swimmers and can dive to considerable depths for food. As one might imagine, the diet imparts a strong flavor to the flesh and they are not highly regarded as food. New England gunners refer to scoters as coots. A favorite recipe among the old time gunners for coot stew was as follows, "Take one freshly killed coot, nail it solidly to a hardwood board, boil until tender, throw away the coot and eat the board." I cannot verify this fare from personal experience. However, I have eaten dried eider with the Eskimos in Alaska, and can attest to the fact that on a rating of one to ten the flavor would at best be perhaps a negative seven. They are incredibly fishy and quite disagreeable.

There are three species of scoters — Surf Scoters, Black Scoters, and White-winged Scoters. They are much less spectacular than other sea ducks, being almost entirely black. The Surf Scoter has some interesting white and yellow markings on the head and bill,

but is otherwise black. As the name implies, the Black Scoter, indeed, is black. The White-winged Scoter has a small white patch behind the eye, and the wing speculum is white, otherwise it, too, is black. The Surf Scoter is peculiar to North America, but the other two are also found in Europe and Asia. Sea ducks are not easily maintained in captivity. Scoters in particular are rarely encountered in collections. Not only are they difficult to acquire, but because they are difficult to maintain, and are not colorful, little effort has been made to establish them in captivity.

As a group, the eiders are one of the most spectacular of the northern hemisphere ducks. Males are predominantly black and white, with the underside being largely black and the upper portions white. There are some delicate pastel patterns on the head and bills tend to be brightly colored. Exclusive of the tiny Steller's Eider, which is little more than teal size, eiders are large and powerfully built.

The Steller's Eider has a white head, with a slight colored crest at the nape. The eye is dark and surrounded by a black ring. The throat is black as is the back. A band of white extends along either side while the breast is cinnamon, which merges to black at the posterior part of the body. All eider females are an overall rich brown with considerable dark barring. Although females are somewhat less spectacular than males, they are none-the-less quite beautiful in their own right.

Eiders have long been famous for their luxurious down, which is one of the finest insulating materials known. In Iceland and Norway, where eiders nest in colonies, the down has long been collected by eider "farmers". These farmers care for and protect the

colonies, and, in exchange, collect the down for commercial purposes. The practice is not legal in North America, so commercial eider down comes largely from those countries. The down is a rich brown in color and is incredibly light and fluffy. I have seen hatched eider nests on the Alaska tundra that, when abandoned after the hatch, would puff up like giant mushrooms all about the tundra ponds. Quite a remarkable sight.

There are five races of eiders which are generally grouped together, and are referred to as the common eiders. They are widely distributed across North America and Eurasia. They consist of the Pacific Eider, the American, Faroe, Northern, and European Eider. All are similar in plumage, but have slight differences in bill shape and color, and there is a variation in size. Males in breeding plumage are white above, with black undersides. Head and neck is white with a black cap running from the base of the bill, across the crown to the back of the head. There are pastel patches of green at the back of the head and the chest is a pale pinkish buff. The eyes of all eiders are black, and commonly almond-like in shape. As stated above, all female eiders are a rich brown with dark barring. The group is typically marine, nesting on islands and coastal areas. Once hatched, the young accompany their mothers to sea. They feed largely on animal matter, especially mussels and shellfish.

Two other forms, the Spectacled and King Eiders, are unique. They are represented by a single species each, and the plumage pattern, particularly that of the head, is distinct from other eiders. The King Eider has the forward portion of the body white, with a pinkish buff coloring on the chest.

The posterior part of the body is black, with white on the wings and a white patch forward of the tail. The head of the King Eider is quite spectacular. The bill structure is unique in that there is a large shield at the base which covers much of the front portion of the head. The bill and shield are bright orange, and the shield is outlined with a narrow band of black. The eye is black with a small black mark below. The face is white with the back of the head and nape a pale pastel blue-gray. It is difficult to portray the beauty of eiders as much is lost in a verbal description. One must see them first hand to realize just how spectacular they are.

The Spectacled Eider also displays typical eider plumage with white being predominate on the upper side and black below. As is true with the King Eider, the head markings are quite unusual. The eye is black and decidedly oriental in shape. A large velvety patch of white, outlined in black, surrounds each eye, giving the impression the bird is wearing spectacles — thus the name. The back of the head and nape are bright green, with

feathers somewhat elongated and shimmering. A unique and unusual characteristic is a plushlike area of feathers covering the upper mandible from the base of the culmen forward to the nostrils. Interestingly, the Eskimo women of the Yukon/Kuskoquim delta utilize the heads of these eiders in making dolls. The skins from the heads make quite handsome faces.

The descriptions given are largely for males in breeding plumage. As is true with most northern hemisphere ducks, once the breeding season ends males go into a molt and assume what is known as an eclipse plumage. This is quite different from the breeding plumage, and more closely resembles that of the female. Males begin to emerge from the eclipse in early fall, and attain the breeding plumage through the winter and spring mating season.

Most eider populations remain relatively stable. This is largely a result of the remote nature of the breeding grounds. This, coupled with the fact that much of their lives are spent off shore at sea, largely insulates them from human interference. One notable exception is the Spectacled Eider. A major portion of their breeding range is on the Yukon/Kuskoquim delta of southwestern Alaska, where there is a substantial Eskimo population. Spectacled Eiders, and their eggs, are much favored by the native people. These eiders nest further inland than others, which makes them more vulnerable. The spring breeding season has historically been the time when natives hunt eiders and collect eggs. The breeding females, and their nests, are especially vulnerable. In recent years Spectacled Eiders have decreased alarmingly. Fortunately most other eiders have sustained their numbers comparatively well.

A third branch of the sea duck family consists of three species, each of which is distinct. They are the Harlequin Ducks, the Old Squaws, and the Labrador Duck. The latter species is extinct. It was specific to eastern coastal areas of North America, and appeared to center its abundance in the vicinity of Long Island Sound during the over wintering season. The breeding grounds were undescribed and remain unknown. During the early 1800s, market gunners occasionally shot Labrador Ducks, which made

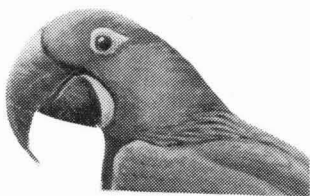
their way to the New York markets. By 1850 they had become rare and the last known record was in 1875. All that remains now of the Labrador duck are the few skins that have been preserved in museums. I can testify from experience it is indeed a sombre feeling to open a museum drawer to reveal the skin of such a species and realize they are gone and no human will ever see one again. Extinction is utterly final. It is forever!

Harlequin Ducks are comparatively small and are represented by two clines an eastern and a western race. The differences are slight, being largely one of distribution. The eastern race breeds in Iceland and Greenland and winters along eastern coastal areas of North America. The western form breeds in eastern Siberia and Alaska, wintering along the eastern Asiatic coast and western America. Interestingly, there is a small segment of western Harlequins that fly inland to nest along the rushing mountain streams of the northern Rocky Mountains. Virtually nothing is known of the specifics of this population, neither the route they take in moving inland, nor that which they take as they return to sea. All that is known is that suddenly in the spring they arrive on their chosen mountain stream, where they breed and rear their young. Once the breeding season is past, and the young are grown, they return again to the sea. As an example of this, my home is on the lower Boulder River in south central Montana. The Boulder has its source high in the mountains just north of Yellowstone Park. It flows northward for approximately fifty miles where it empties into the Yellowstone River near the town of Big Timber. Each year a small group of Harlequins makes its way to the upper reaches of the Boulder where they breed and rear their young. The Boulder River is widely known as a blue ribbon trout stream, and the area favored by these little ducks has heavy human visitation. The favorite breeding area is one in which the river flows swiftly through a narrow canyon. There is only enough width for the river itself, a road alongside, and a few small meadow areas before raising upward in steep mountains. Much of the road is within a few feet of the river. The Harlequins pay scant attention to the traffic and it is not unusual to see a number of them

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perched on a rock or log in mid-stream relaxing and sunning themselves, scarcely noticing the flow of traffic frequently within fifty feet or less.

Harlequin Ducks are among the most beautiful of all waterfowl. The plumage pattern is so complex as to be virtually impossible to describe. Males in breeding plumage have heads of bluish-gray with intricate patterning of white, black and chestnut. The body also has much bluish-gray with white and black markings which blends into chestnut on the underside. The posterior portions, including the tail, are black. Females are brown with white markings on the head.

Old Squaw Ducks are unusual in that they have a breeding plumage and an eclipse plumage which are quite different, but both are bright. Both are mostly black and white. The breeding plumage displays the head and neck white with a large patch of black on the cheek below and to the rear of the eye. The lower chest is black and the posterior portions of the body white. There are black markings on the back and sides. The eclipse is equally handsome with most of the head and forepart of the body black, the rear portion white, and the back has black feathers bordered in brown. Males in both winter and summer plumage have the central tail feathers much elongated — six to eight inches. Indeed, in Europe they are known as Long-tailed Ducks because of the tail. The American name Old Squaw refers to their garrulous and talkative nature. Their voice is quite unusual and might be likened to a reedy musical instrument performing a three note arpeggio. I can vividly remember being encamped on the bank of the Kahunuk River in southwestern Alaska, at a point about three miles from where it flowed into the Bering Sea. During the time period near midnight, when the arctic sun dipped briefly below the horizon, a calm twilight covered the land. The call of Arctic Foxes drifted across the tundra. From the river itself came the eerie calls of Arctic Loons. Interspersed were the flutelike calls of the Old Squaws. It was an experience that would last a lifetime.

In captivity, sea ducks are something of an enigma. Most efforts to establish them have been initiated by acquiring permits to collect eggs or

downy young on the breeding grounds. Surprisingly, most newly hatched sea ducks are quite easily started. They are calm by nature and accept commercial feed well. As a result they normally develop satisfactorily. As they begin to feather, losses begin to appear. These losses invariably are the result of respiratory infections, especially aspergillosis. Treatment is difficult and even when birds reach adulthood they remain highly susceptible to such disease.

In my opinion there are at least two reasons for this. Since most sea ducks breed in northern areas where the type of bacterial action which causes respiratory infections is low, they have a low natural immunity to such infections. Once the breeding cycle is completed they spend almost their entire time at sea — again where they are much less subject to respiratory infections. When placed in captivity it is almost impossible to isolate them from these causative agents. It appears, however, if they can survive the first year or so in captivity they tend to build at least some level of immunity and survivability is im-

proved.

Even so, sea ducks are difficult to maintain in captivity and only a few breeders are successful with them. These few are usually located in northern areas where temperature and humidity levels are moderate and where cold, clean water is available. Sea ducks are not difficult to feed and do well on high protein diets. It is, however, especially important to make certain food and food containers are kept clean. It is especially important to keep them as free of dust as is possible. Spores of such respiratory ailments as aspergillosis are carried by dust laden air, or are found in dusty food. If the environment can be kept relatively dust free, and clear, cold water provided and sanitation be made a watchword, sea ducks can be maintained in captivity. Certainly they are among the most beautiful of waterfowl.

Hopefully, with the passage of time, treatment methods which will control respiratory infections will be perfected. When that happens sea ducks will then take their rightful place in aviculture. ●

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