

# Spectacled Eider Ducks

by Bob Elgas  
Big Timber, Montana

Of the various species of North American waterfowl, one of the most beautiful is *Somateria fischeri*, the Spectacled Eider Duck. It is also one of the least well known, and one that is seen but infrequently by observers. The lack of familiarity is due to their remote distribution. During the breeding season they inhabit the low coastal tundras adjacent to the Bering Sea, especially the Yukon/Kuskokwim Delta or southwestern Alaska. This is a vast area of low, open tundra characterized by thousands of small, shallow ponds and lakes. Vegetation is short, turfy grasses and low arctic shrubs. It is an area that teems with

wildlife, and some of the Spectacled Eider's neighbors are such species as Emperor, Cackling, White-fronted and Pacific Black Brant Geese, Tundra (Whistling) Swans, Lesser Sandhill Cranes, myriads of shore birds, and various other wildlife forms. It is the only area in North America where one can see the Bristle-thighed Curlew. Due to the remoteness of the area, other than the few native Eskimos, it is infrequently visited by humans. One of the ornithological mysteries surrounding North American waterfowl is where the Spectacled Eider spends its winters. Once the birds depart the breeding grounds, little if anything has been documented. It is presumed they may spend their winters somewhere on the Bering Sea, perhaps on the ice shelves at the edge of the ice pack, but as yet this remains unproven.

The name Spectacled Eider comes from the conspicuous head markings which are suggestive of an appearance akin to that of a person wearing glasses or spectacles. This feature is well defined, not only in male and female, but downy young as well. As is true with other members of the Eider family, they are powerfully built and well adapted to the harsh environment of the arctic seas. They feed largely on marine life such as various shellfish and crustaceans. Some vegetable food is taken, especially during the breeding season when they spend more time ashore. They are strikingly handsome, males being predominately black on the underside and white on the back. The head is spectacular with the feathers around the eye much like white velvet, ringed in black giving rise to the descriptive name. An interesting feature is the feathering of the upper mandible which is plushlike in appearance, a characteristic that is unique to the species. Again, the eye ring and feathered bill is prominent in both male and female, as well as downy young. Females are, in their own right, equally as handsome as males. Their plumage is much different, being a rich brown, strongly mottled and barred with black. Spectacled Eiders have short wings and are powerful and swift flyers. Their feet are large, and legs set well back on the

body, making them well suited to an aquatic environment. This tends to give them a more erect stance than other ducks, yet they are surprisingly agile on land.

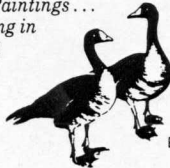
Spectacled Eiders are less inclined to be colony breeders than other eiders, and their nests tend to be more widely dispersed. They also breed further inland, frequently as much as ten or fifteen miles from the coast. Favorite nest sites are margins of tundra ponds. Nests are well constructed and copiously lined with luxurious layers of dark colored down, for which eiders are famous. Clutch sizes vary, but seven or eight is common. Eggs are fairly large and are an attractive olive color. Incubation, which is 24 to 25 days, is performed by the female alone. Once incubation has been initiated, males depart, leaving the females with sole responsibility for hatching the eggs and rearing young.

One of the identifying characteristics of eiders, including the Spectacled Eider, is the beautiful eye. Almond in shape, it is sufficiently dark as to appear black. It imparts a decidedly oriental impression that lends an aura of mystery to these beautiful birds. The voice is rather different from what one might expect, and is low pitched and soft. During courtship, males have a multisyllabic call which sounds like, for lack of a more accurate description, "groo groo rrrrooo." Females have a low, croaking call. Unlike most eiders, which soon after hatching take their young to sea, Spectacled Eiders choose to remain near the nest vicinity and rear their young on the brackish and fresh water tundra ponds.

My first experience with Spectacled Eiders was in 1962 when four of us — my wife Elizabeth and a couple from Pennsylvania — spent the better part of two weeks encamped on the Aphrewm River about three miles inland from the Bering Sea. This is the heart of an immense breeding area where thousands of birds come each year to rear their young. It is a land of great beauty, and altogether unique in character. Here the tundra is completely flat, with thousands of small lakes and ponds a distinguishing feature. Because the tundra is so flat, one has the illusion of being in a huge bowl, always walking toward the rim, but never quite reaching that goal.

Our camp was on the bank of the Aphrewm River, about three miles

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inland from the Bering Sea. At that point the river was approximately 200 yards wide, and was influenced by ocean tides. On the ebb tide the river flowed outward toward the sea, and on the incoming tide reversed direction and flowed inland. We soon learned to use the river as a convenient means of transportation. With an inflatable raft we could float either inland or toward the sea according to the flow of the tide.

Our nearest neighbor was a lovely pair of Emperor Geese, whose nest was but little more than a hundred yards distance. They accepted us in good faith, and paid but scant heed to our comings and goings. All about were nesting birds, and parents with babies were everywhere. Although that far north, at that time of year it was never completely dark. From about 11 p.m. until 1 a.m. a soft twilight would descend and most wild-life activity would cease. On the river in front of our camp the call of Artic Loons and Old Squaw Ducks floated across the quiet waters as hauntingly beautiful music. Indeed this could be a beautiful and peaceful land. Inasmuch as the nearest Eskimo settlement, the tiny village of Chevak, was some 25 miles inland, and Bethel, the nearest town of consequence, was over a hundred miles to the eastward, it was as though we were the sole custodians of this remarkable land.

One of our special interests was collecting young Spectacled Eiders. Nesting females were abundant, as were females with newly hatched broods. Collecting was not difficult inasmuch as the depth of the ponds was only a few inches. Once taken, young eiders are easily maintained. Unlike many puddle duck babies which can be wild and flighty, baby eiders have remarkably docile dispositions. They show little fear of humans, accept food well, and in general are easily maintained. They accept commercial foods, such as chick or turkey starter, which is excellent for converting them from the natural food to which they are accustomed. However, their dietary requirements are for a high protein diet, and this need must be provided as they become established. Baby eiders are very hardy and growth rate is rapid. However, over an extended period of time some very real problems exist in maintaining them in captivity. Eiders, and certainly this is true of Spectacled Eiders, once removed from northern latitudes to more

southern areas, are susceptible to respiratory infections — especially aspergillosis. Such infections affect them severely and result in high rates of mortality. It is my opinion that because most eiders seldom leave northern areas, where they have but little contact with causative agents for such infections, their systems have but little natural immunity. Evidence suggests that those individuals who survive the first year appear to develop a level of resistance to such ailments. It also appears that aviculturists who have best results with eiders are those who live furthest north, at higher altitudes, and who have a good source of cold, clean water. Despite the fact that spectacled eiders appear comfortable in a captive situation, they have been bred but infrequently — perhaps not more than three or four times. This can be attributed to the fact that so few have found their way into avicultural collections. In those situations in which they have been established, and where proper conditions are made available, they appear to breed relatively well.

Despite their rarity in captivity, most eiders enjoy comparatively good populations. Because their natural habitat is normally in areas substantially removed from most human habitation, they are subjected to little disturbance or hunting pressure. Most losses in eider populations result from natural conditions such as severe weather disturbances, especially during the breeding season when they are especially vulnerable. Severe weather is a natural phenomenon with which eiders have survived for eons. They can manage natural disasters so long as man doesn't despoil their environment. Fortunately, due to the remote nature of their distribution, man has thus far had but little impact.

Returning to our 1962 collecting expedition, young birds taken at that time were almost certainly the first Spectacled Eiders collected for an avicultural program. Even today few eiders are taken by aviculturists. There are numerous reasons for this, among them being the difficulty sometimes encountered in obtaining permits. Frequently it is difficult to gain access to native controlled lands where most collections must be made. Breeding areas are remote, difficult to reach, and usually entail expensive travel arrangements. Not the least difficult factor is the lack of



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predictability of northland weather which at times can be brutal.

During our expedition ours was the good fortune to enjoy unusually good weather — bright, sunny days with gentle breezes. One cannot depend upon nature to be so generous in the far north, and it was necessary to be prepared for difficult conditions at any time. We did, however, have one interesting involvement. To reach our final destination, we enlisted the aid of a flying service in Bethel which flew us the 100-plus miles to our campsite on the bank of the Aphrewm River. It was arranged that if weather remained favorable the flying service would return for us in ten days — sooner if difficult weather should prevail. As it developed, the weather remained perfect, necessitating no need for an early return. Chartering by light aircraft means that only necessary gear is taken. Everything was carefully planned, including each day's food supply. Our provisions were programmed for a ten day time period. On the tenth day our charter did not return as scheduled, nor did they come on the eleventh day. At that time our food supply was largely exhausted. By rigging a makeshift net we were fortunate enough to catch one of the salmon running upstream to spawn. By the twelfth day we were preparing to take 3/4 incubated eggs from nesting birds to sustain us . . . we were indeed becoming desperate. Fortun-



*The tundra with its many lakes and ponds — home of the Spectacled Eider Duck.*



*Eider nest lined with the famous Eider down.*



*Eider youngster.*

ately at that time, a boatload of Eskimos came down river — the only humans we had seen in 12 days. When they returned to the village of Chevak they relayed our plight to the village priest who radioed our plight to the flying service in Bethel. As it turned out, the flying service had somehow lost track of us and we





Adult female Eider.



Adult male Eider.

were forgotten completely. Needless to say, they came post haste to rescue us. Understandably we were hungry, more than a little concerned, and I have often speculated upon what might have happened had it not been for the unlikely chance of that boatload of Eskimos happening by!

One must never underestimate the

arctic, nor can it be taken lightly. While it is a land of unbelievable beauty, it can also be viciously unforgiving. Northern weather can change swiftly, and it is necessary to be prepared when such conditions exist. We were fortunate that our adventure ended safely. It might well have been otherwise. ●

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**SURPLUS STOCK FOR BREEDING:** male Indian Hill mynah \$160, male blue fronted Amazon \$300, male double yellow headed, \$650, 2 proven pairs grey cheeked parakeets \$350 pr., female greatbills \$325 ea. Species Survival Aviaries, (619) 726-1305, So. Calif.  
1(X1)

**TAKING ORDERS FOR 1990 SEASON.** Scarlet, blue and gold, hyacinth, greenwing macaws, African greys, Amazons, umbrellas, Moluccans, Major Mitchell's cockatoos and conures. Send S.A.S.E. for complete list to: Birds, P.O. Box 2601, Wichita Falls, TX 76307.  
1(X1)

**MACAWS — PROVEN PAIRS AND BONDED PAIRS:** Hyacinths, blue & golds, scarlets, greenwings, militarys, red-fronted, mini macaws. Also double yellow heads, yellow napes, African greys, red lores, caiques. Phone (713) 973-6924. Texas.  
1(X6)

**HAND RAISED '88 & '89 BLUE & GOLD MACAWS**, Vosmaeri & Solomon Island eclectus. Blue ringnecks and split to blue, Bourke's, rose breasted cockatoos. Heinz Wissen, (415) 345-5068, No. Calif.  
1(X4)

**ASIAN PARAKEETS**, macaws, cockatoos, African greys, cockatiels, lovebirds, and misc. Send request, S.A.S.E. to Moctezuma Bird Gardens, P.O. Box 1973, Escondido, CA 92025-0340. Call (619) 745-8697.  
1(X6)

**WHITE BELLIED CAIQUES**, yellow thighed, s/s '88 and '89 babies, closed banded, several bloodlines. Toco toucans, s/s pair, \$2200 or sell as singles. Keel billed toucans, s/s pair \$1600. White faced cockatiels, several varieties. Ralph Lima, (818) 703-1112 after 6 p.m. PST. So. Calif.  
2(X3)

**PAIR ADULT GALAHS \$5,000.** East African Crowned Cranes, sexed adults, \$950 each. Wick Commer, (615) 822-4172, 824-3782. Tennessee.  
2(X3)

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5(X6)

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1(X1)

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1(X3)

## MISCELLANEOUS

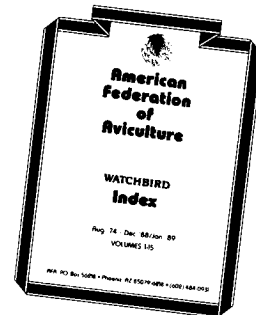
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3(X3)

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