



Steller's Eider

(Polysticta stelleri)

Status

The Alaska breeding population was listed as threatened (62 FR 31748) in 1997.

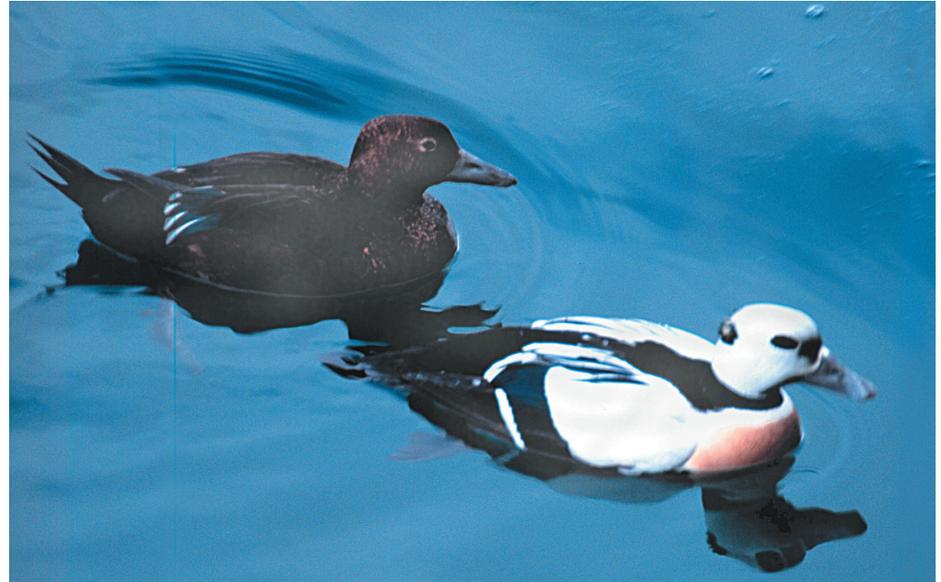
Description

Steller's eiders are the smallest of the four eider species, averaging 43-47 centimeters long (17-18.5 inches). In the winter, spring, and early summer, adult males are in breeding plumage with a black back, white shoulders, chestnut breast and belly, a white head with a greenish tuft, and small black eye patches. During the late summer and fall, males are entirely mottled dark brown. Females and juveniles are mottled dark brown year-round. Adults of both sexes have a blue patch with a white border on the upper wing, similar to mallards.

Range and Population Level

Three breeding populations of Steller's eiders are recognized, two in Arctic Russia and one in Alaska. The Russian Atlantic population breeds in western Russia and winters in the north Atlantic Ocean while the Russian Pacific population breeds in eastern Russia and winters in the southern Bering Sea, including southwest and south-central Alaska. Neither Russia-breeding population is listed as endangered or threatened; only Steller's eiders that nest in Alaska are considered threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The Alaska-breeding population historically nested in western and northern Alaska. In western Alaska, once they were locally common in portions of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and were recorded nesting on Saint Lawrence Island, the Seward Peninsula, the Alaska Peninsula, and Aleutian Islands. Today, however, they are extremely scarce on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and have not been found breeding elsewhere in



Michele M. Johnson/USFWS

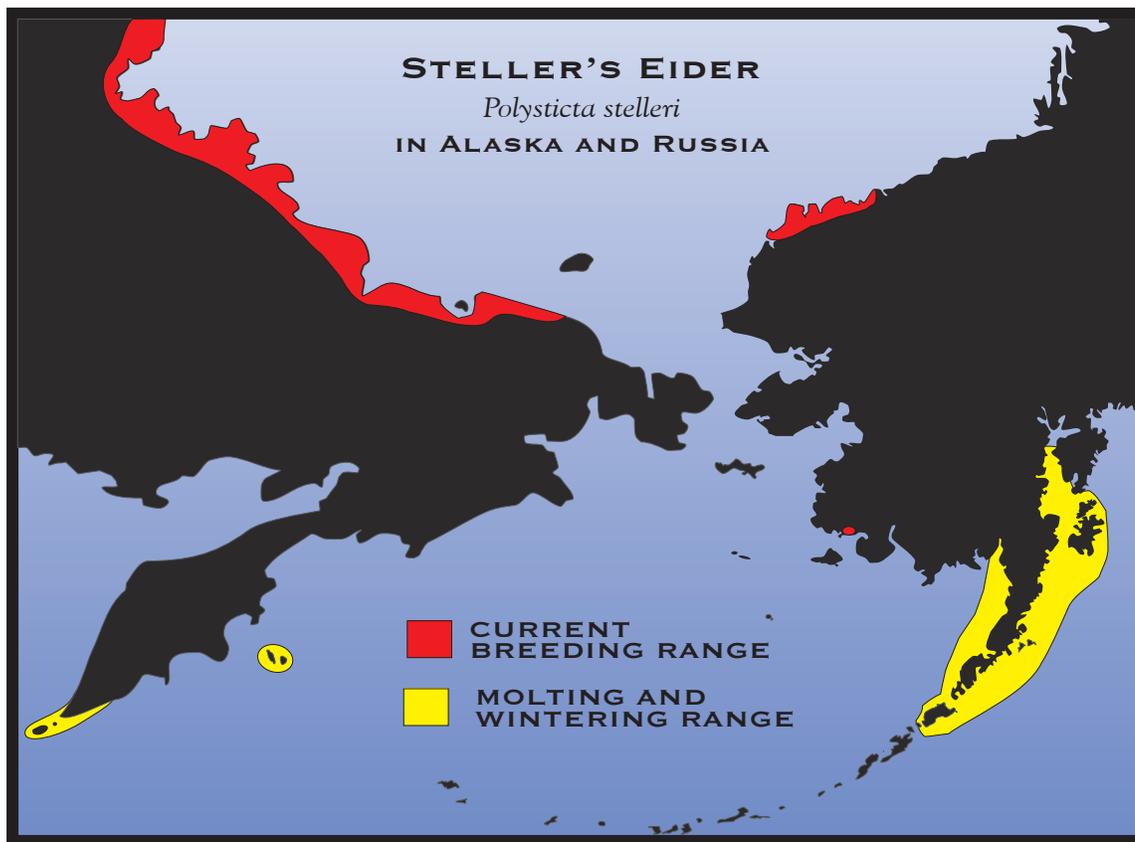
Named after Georg Steller, who first described the species to western science, Steller's eiders are the smallest of the four eider species. An adult female is on the left, and an adult male on the right.

western Alaska for several decades. The species' current breeding range in Alaska is primarily confined to the Arctic Coastal Plain between Wainwright and Prudhoe Bay, with a notable concentration near Barrow. Here, at the core of their North American range, they breed only once every few years. After nesting, Alaska's Steller's eiders move into the nearshore marine waters of southwest and south-central Alaska where they mix with the much more numerous Russian Pacific population. Adults undergo a flightless molt in autumn; most molt in the Kuskokwim shoals and lagoons on the north side of the Alaska Peninsula, most notably Izembek and Nelson lagoons. Although some remain in molting areas throughout winter, others disperse into the coastal waters of the eastern Aleutian Islands, south side of the Alaska Peninsula, Kodiak Archipelago, and southern Cook Inlet. During spring migration, Steller's eiders concentrate in

Kuskokwim and Bristol bays to await the retreat of sea ice and opening of overwater migratory routes. Population sizes are only imprecisely known. The Russian Atlantic population is believed to contain 30,000 to 50,000 individuals, and the Russian Pacific population likely numbers 50,000 to 100,000. The threatened Alaska-breeding population is thought to include hundreds or low thousands on the Arctic Coastal Plain, and possibly dozens on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Steller's eiders do not breed on the North Slope every year.

Habitat and Habits

Steller's eiders are diving ducks that spend most of the year in shallow, near-shore marine waters. Molting and wintering flocks congregate on exposed shoals, in protected lagoons and bays, as well as along rocky headlands and islets. They feed by diving and dabbling for molluscs and crustaceans in shallow water. In



Distribution of Steller's eiders in Alaska and Russia.

For more information on this and other threatened and endangered species, contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Ecological Services Field Office near you. Contact information is on page 5 of this publication.

summer, they nest in tundra adjacent to small ponds or within drained lake basins. During the breeding season they frequent tundra ponds, lakes and wetlands.

Reasons for Current Status

Causes of the decline are unknown but several potential threats have been identified. Lead poisoning, caused by ingesting spent lead shot, may have affected Steller's eiders on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Predation by ravens, large gulls, and foxes on the breeding grounds may be increasing in areas where populations of these predators are enhanced by food and shelter provided by human activities. Marine shipping and commercial fishing create risk of oil spills and disturbance of feeding flocks in marine waters. Other possible threats include disease, marine contaminants, and changes in the Bering Sea and North Pacific ecosystem that may affect food availability.

Management and Protection

Subsistence and sport hunting of Steller's eiders is prohibited under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. In Russia, hunting of Steller's eiders has been closed since 1981, but subsistence harvest occurs in Siberia at an unknown level. Sport hunting of Steller's eiders in Alaska has been closed since 1991 but some illegal

sport and subsistence harvest still occurs. Non-toxic shot must be used for all waterfowl hunting. Use of lead shot for waterfowl hunting has been prohibited throughout the United States since 1991.

All federal agencies must consult with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on any project they authorize, fund, or carry out that may affect Steller's eiders or other listed species (16 USC 1531).

To protect Steller's eiders and their breeding, molting, and wintering habitat, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service recommends the guidelines below for projects and activities within the range of Steller's eiders. Adherence to these guidelines will help avoid the illegal take of Steller's eiders, and reduce the potential for adverse effects to the species. For projects within the breeding range of Steller's eiders:

- Assess whether Steller's eiders are likely to use the project area for nesting or brood-rearing. Contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Ecological Services Fairbanks Field Office for assistance. For projects conducted during the breeding season, a Service-approved survey for Steller's eiders should be conducted in the year of construction, prior to initiation of construction.

- Determine if Steller's eider nests are in the project area. If present, the following activities require special permits within 200 meters (656 feet) of nest sites: (1) Vehicle and foot traffic from May 20 through August 1, except on existing roads; (2) Construction of permanent facilities, placement of fill, or alteration of habitat; (3) Introduction of high noise levels from May 20 through August 1.

Eiders are present on breeding grounds from mid-May through mid-September, but activities any time of year may affect them through habitat modification.

For guidelines and recommendations for projects in coastal marine waters around the Alaska Peninsula, the Aleutian Islands, Kodiak Island, the western Alaska coastline, lower Cook Inlet, and Nunivak Island, contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Anchorage Field Office. For North Slope projects and northwestern coastal Alaska, contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Fairbanks Field Office.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
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