



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Threatened and Endangered Species

Spectacled Eider

(Somateria fischeri)

Status

Listed as threatened throughout its range in 1993 (58 FR 27474).

Description

Spectacled eiders are large sea ducks, 52-56 centimeters long (20-22 inches). In the winter and spring, adult males are in breeding plumage with a black chest, white back, and pale green head with a long sloping forehead and white spectacle-like patches around the eyes. During the late summer and fall, males are entirely mottled brown. Females and juveniles are mottled brown year-round with pale brown eye patches.

Range and Population Level

Historically, spectacled eiders nested along much of the coast of Alaska, from the Nushagak Peninsula in the southwest, north to Barrow, and east nearly to the Canadian border. They also nested along much of the arctic coast of Russia. Today, three primary nesting grounds remain; the central coast of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, the arctic coastal plain of Alaska, and the arctic coastal plain of Russia. A few pairs may nest on St. Lawrence Island as well. Their fall and winter distribution was virtually unknown until satellite telemetry led to the discovery of spectacled eiders' molting and wintering grounds at sea in 1995. Important late summer and fall molting areas have been identified in eastern Norton Sound and Ledyard Bay in Alaska, and in Mechigmenskiy Bay and an area offshore between the Kolyma and Indigirka River Deltas in Russia. Wintering flocks of spectacled eiders have been observed in the Bering Sea between St. Lawrence and St. Matthew islands.

Between the 1970's and the 1990's, the breeding population on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta declined by over 96%, and only about 4,000 pairs nest



there today. At least 40,000 pairs nest in arctic Russia. Historical data for other nesting areas are scarce. Scientists don't know if populations ever declined in northern Alaska or Russia, where about 3,000-4,000 pairs currently nest. Winter surveys in the Bering Sea, which include non-breeding birds, indicate a worldwide population of about 360,000 spectacled eiders.

Habitat and Habits

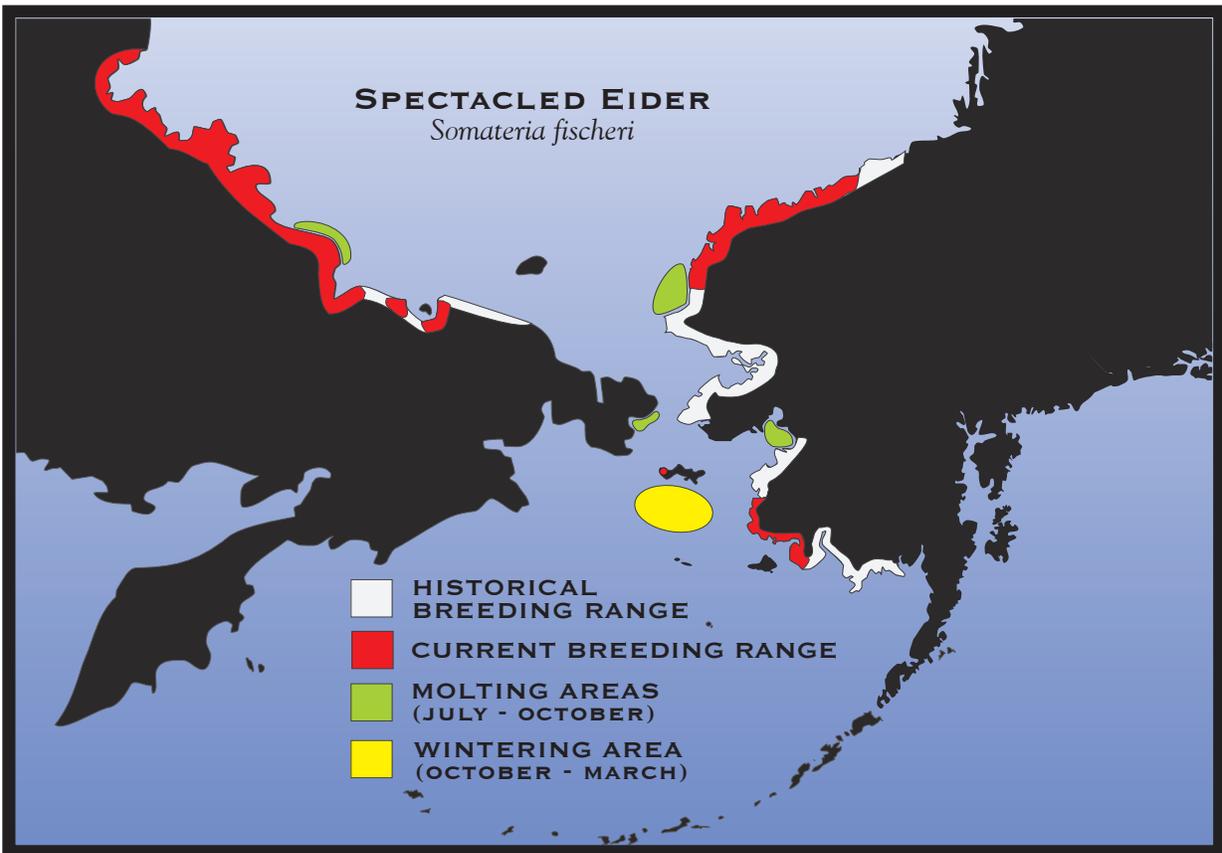
Spectacled eiders are diving ducks that spend most of the year in marine waters, where they feed primarily on bottom-dwelling molluscs and crustaceans. Around the time of spring break-up breeding pairs move to nesting areas on wet coastal tundra. They establish nests near shallow ponds or lakes, usually within 3 meters (10 ft) of water. During this season they feed by diving and dabbling in ponds and wetlands, eating aquatic insects, crustaceans, and vegetation. Soon after eggs are laid males leave the nesting grounds for offshore molting areas, usually by the end of

As their name suggests, male spectacled eiders in breeding plumage have distinctive patches around the eye which resemble eyeglasses, or spectacles. Female spectacled eiders, like the bird on the left, are mottled brown with faint eye patches. Reprinted with permission from an original painting by Joseph Hautman.

June. Females whose nests fail leave the nesting area to molt at sea by mid-August. Breeding females and their young remain on the nesting grounds until early September. Molting flocks gather in relatively shallow coastal water usually less than 36 m (120 ft) deep. While moving between nesting and molting areas spectacled eiders travel along the coast up to 50 km (31 mi) offshore. During the winter months of October through March, they move far offshore to waters up to 65 m (213 ft) deep, sometimes gathering in dense flocks in openings of nearly continuous sea ice.

Reasons for Current Status

Causes of the decline of spectacled eiders are not well understood. Lead poisoning caused by consumption of spent lead shot has been documented in this species on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and is a known threat. Predation by foxes, large gulls, and ravens on the breeding grounds may be increasing in areas where populations of these predators are enhanced by the year-round



Distribution of spectacled eiders in Alaska and Russia.

food and shelter provided by human activities. Complex changes in fish and invertebrate populations in the Bering Sea may be affecting food availability for spectacled eiders during the 8 to 10 month non-breeding season. Spectacled eiders may also be affected by other shifts in the Bering Sea ecosystem, by commercial fisheries, and by environmental contaminants at sea.

Management and Protection

To protect spectacled 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 spectacled eiders. Adherence to these guidelines will help avoid the illegal take of spectacled eiders, and reduce the potential for adverse effects to the species. Consultation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is required for all federal actions that may affect this species. Under federal law, all federal agencies must consult with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on any project they authorize, fund, or carry out that may affect this or other listed species.

For projects within the breeding range of spectacled eiders:

- Assess whether spectacled eiders are likely to use the project area for nesting or brood-rearing. They are present on breeding grounds from mid-May through mid-September, but activities any time of the year may affect them through habitat modification. For projects conducted during the breeding season, a Service-approved survey for spectacled eiders should be conducted in the year of construction, prior to initiation of activities. Contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for assistance.

- If spectacled eider nests are in the project area, the following activities require special permits within 200 meters (656 feet) of nest sites: (1) Vehicle and foot traffic from May 2 through August 1, except on existing roads; (2) Construction of permanent facilities, placement of fill, or alteration of habitat; and (3) Introduction of high noise levels from May 20 through August 1, including but not limited to noise from airports, blasting, and compressor stations.

- For guidelines and recommendations for projects in coastal marine waters around the Alaska Peninsula, the Aleutian Islands, Kodiak Island, the western

Alaska coastline, Lower Cooklet, and Nunivak Island, contact the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Fairbanks Field Office.

Hunting of eiders is regulated under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Sport and subsistence hunting of spectacled eiders has been closed since 1991. However, reported subsistence harvest on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta has averaged 272 spectacled eiders per year over ten years. 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.

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.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
1 800/344 WILD
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