



Black Scoter Studies in Alaska

Black scoters (*Melanitta nigra*) are sea ducks and are the smallest of the three scoter species (the others are surf scoter and white-winged scoter). Males are mostly black with a yellow knob at the base of their bill. Females have dark brown body feathers with a pale gray face and throat.

They are referred to in the Yup'ik community as either *Tungunqeggliq* (black duck) or *Kukumyaraq* (duck that whistles). The Inupiaq word for black scoter is *Tuunjaagruk*.

Black scoters are highly valued among subsistence users due to their high meat and fat content. About 7,000 are harvested each year in western Alaska; on the Yukon Delta, it is the second most common duck species taken after pintails. Their harvest, as a proportion of the total population size, is higher than for any other duck.

Biology

Nearly half of the Alaska population breeds on the Yukon Delta, and most of the rest breed east of the Bristol Bay or Kotzebue Sound areas or on the Alaska Peninsula. Biologists believe that black scoters are not sexually mature or able to nest until they are 2-3 years old.

Black scoters nest late, often not until late June or early July. They nest in dense thickets of knee-high or taller dwarf birch and willow along lakes and ponds in coastal and upland tundra.



Marnie Shepherd/USGS

Black scoter nest concealed in underbrush

They eat aquatic insects, and in winter dive for mussels and clams in shallow coastal waters of the Aleutian Islands, Alaska Peninsula, and Kodiak Island.



Tim Bowman/USFWS

Male black scoter



Tim Bowman/USFWS

Female black scoter

Migration

Black scoters migrate along coastal routes and then up rivers on their way to breeding areas. They leave western Alaska breeding areas in late summer or fall and migrate to ice-free waters where they spend the winter.

In winter, black scoters are found as far south as California and west into the Aleutian Islands. It is not known whether any Alaska-breeding black scoters spend the winter in Russia.

The routes these birds take and the time they spend between breeding and wintering areas is virtually unknown. During spring migration, important staging areas include areas near Nelson Lagoon, Kvichak Bay, Jack Smith Bay, and coastal waters from Kinak Bay to Kuskokwim Bay.

Concern about Black Scoters

Currently, there are believed to be about 200,000 black scoters in Alaska.

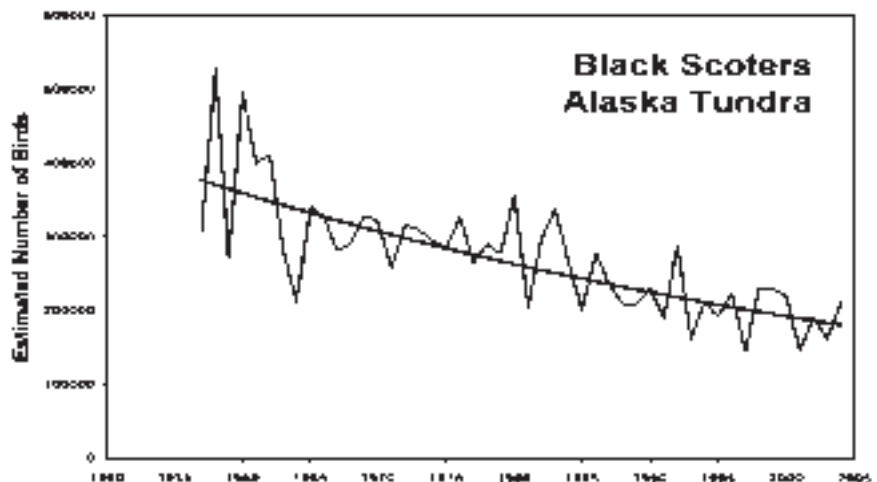
Their population in western Alaska has declined by about 50% since aerial surveys were begun in the 1950's. No one knows why, and it is cause for concern.

Subsistence hunters have told biologists that during the mid-1980's groups of 100 or more were seen migrating up the Kuskokwim River in the spring. In recent years 10-20 is more typical.

Planned Studies

Because we know so little about black scoters, it is hard to determine why they are declining. Studies are planned beginning in 2004 to look at migration patterns. Biologists need to know where they migrate to for the winter; where birds from a certain wintering area breed in summer; and how long they stay at each area.

Starting in 2004, biologists will capture live birds in nets and implant transmitters that will send signals to a satellite, which then sends signals to a





Tim Bowman/USFWS

A group of courting black scoters. During spring, groups often contain two or more males for every female, but the female chooses only one mate.

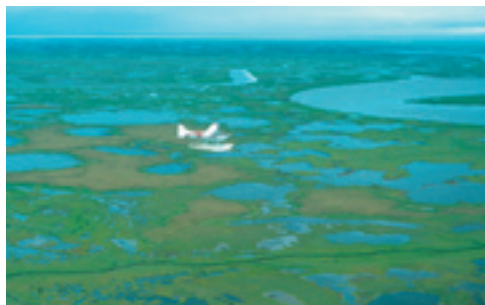
computer which can be accessed by the internet. The transmitters will last at least one year.



Tim Bowman/USFWS

A biologist untangling a black scoter captured in a mist net

A new aerial survey focused specifically on black scoters is planned to begin in 2004 in all of the important breeding areas in western Alaska.



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Aerial survey over Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta

The survey is conducted by airplane and will last a few days during June in

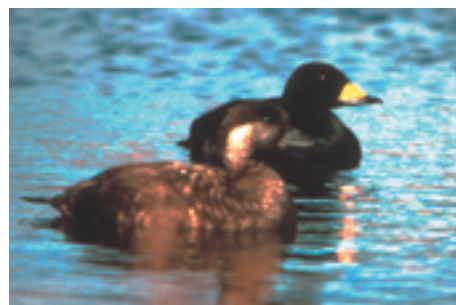
each breeding area. The purpose of the survey is to make accurate counts of black scoters so that we can better monitor their numbers and document their distribution.

These new studies involve many partners, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, National Park Service, and Canadian Wildlife Service.

How can you help?

Please share your knowledge about black scoters with refuge biologists or Refuge Information Technicians. Do you know places where large numbers of black scoters migrate or rest? Would you be willing to save one wing from each bird you shoot and give those wings to biologists so they can get age and sex information? If so, contact one of the people listed at the right.

If you find a black scoter with a leg band, please call the phone number on the band (1-800-327-BAND) to report it and you will get a certificate with information about where and when the bird was banded.



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For more information, contact one of the following representatives at a National Wildlife Refuge office near you:

Fred Broerman
Yukon Delta NWR
P.O. Box 346
Bethel, AK 99559
(907) 543-3151

Rob MacDonald
Togiak NWR
P.O. Box 270
Dillingham, AK 99576
(907) 842-1063

Tina Moran
Selawik NWR
P.O. Box 270, 160 2nd Avenue
Kotzebue, AK 99752
(907) 442-3799

Kristine Sowl
Izembek NWR
P.O. Box 127
Cold Bay, AK 99571
(907) 532-2445

Denny Zwiefelhofer
Kodiak NWR
1390 Buskin River Road
Kodiak, AK 99615
(907) 487-2600

Orville Lind
Alaska Peninsula NWR
P.O. Box 277
King Salmon, AK 99613
(907) 246-3339

OR

Tim Bowman
Migratory Bird Management
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1011 East Tudor Road
Anchorage, AK 99503
(907) 786-3569

You can also learn more about black scoters and other sea ducks by visiting the Sea Duck Joint Venture web site: <http://seaduckjv.org>

