

Key Site 42: Quirpon Island to Grey Islands, Newfoundland

Location: 51°11'55"N, 55°40'1"W

Size: 1045 km²

Description: This key site is located off the Great Northern Peninsula along the eastern coast of Newfoundland. The northern end of this key area begins at the southeastern edge of the Strait of Belle Isle around Quirpon Island, extends south encompassing the Fishshot Islands, and continues south to include the Grey Islands. Most of the area is exposed to the open Atlantic Ocean to the east. The Fishshot Islands are a chain of small isolated rocks and low rocky islands located 15 km north of Croque. The Grey Islands (Bell Island and Groais Island) are located approximately 20 km east of Conche. Bell Island (88 km²) is located to the south of the smaller, uninhabited Groais Island (41 km²). Both Bell and Groais islands have areas of forested hills, rocky shores, and coastal bluffs. The ocean in this area is covered with sea ice during winter, though prevailing westerly winds often create open water around the eastern side of the Fishshot Islands and Bell Island.

Precision and Correction of Abundance

Estimates Presented: Abundance estimates presented for this key habitat site have been adjusted to account for incomplete detection, either by applying species-specific visibility correction factors estimated for surveys specific to this area, or from visibility correction factors estimated from other similar areas and surveys (see Bordage et al. 1998).

Biological Value: This key area is predominately important to Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*) but also supports other sea duck species. The Fishshot Islands provide important habitat for wintering eiders (NF008; IBA Canada website). During winter, eiders congregate in areas of open water, which may vary among years, or within a winter depending on the extent of sea ice cover. Eiders forage primarily on benthic invertebrates, including intertidal and subtidal mollusks (especially blue mussels, *Mytilus edulis*), crustaceans, and echinoderms (Goudie et al. 2000). Winter surveys conducted in this area by the Canadian Wildlife Service produced estimates ranging from 1575 Common Eiders in 2015 to 70,970 in 2012. Over six years of



winter survey data (2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, and 2018), an average of 37,515 individuals were estimated in this area (Canadian Wildlife Service Waterfowl Committee 2020). About 90% of the eiders that overwinter in this area are Northern Common Eiders (*Somateria mollissima borealis*), with the remaining being American Common Eiders (*Somateria mollissima dresseri*) and small numbers of King Eiders (*Somateria spectabilis*) (Gilliland and Robertson 2009). This represents about 6% of the continental population of *S. m. borealis* (NAWMP 2012). The Grey Islands host a breeding population of American Common Eiders (*Somateria mollissima dresseri*) and are also important for the northern *borealis* eider subspecies during winter (NF010; IBA Canada 2021). The Grey Islands are a key molting site for Harlequin Ducks (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) (Gilliland et al. 2002). Several thousand wintering eiders congregate in the open water leads around the Grey Islands (NF008; IBA Canada 2021). The islands south of Bell Island support the largest known colony of nesting Common Eiders (at least 1000 pairs) on insular Newfoundland (NF010; IBA

Canada website). The number of eider nests in the Bell Island South Coast area increased from 12 in 1975 to 350 in 1988 and to 1291 in 2001 (Government of Canada 2019).

Sensitivities: Waterfowl are sensitive to human disturbance, mostly small vessel or ship traffic. Common Eiders aggregate in dense flocks in this area and can be susceptible to hunting pressure and oil spills. Unintentional introduction of invasive species in this area could influence food resource availability and quality. The largest breeding colony of Common Eiders in insular Newfoundland was located in Isle aux Canes which is part of the Grey Islands Archipelago. The colony has had periodic visits by polar bears, and Arctic and red fox which results in years of complete nest failure. More recently, bald eagles have taken up year-round residency and not only disrupt breeding, but local hunters have reported that the presence of eagles has resulted in nocturnal feeding of eiders using the archipelago in winter (S. Gilliland pers. comm.).

Potential Conflicts: There is relatively little shipping traffic within the key site, but just to the north of this key site, the Strait of Belle Isle is a busy shipping route linking North America to Europe. The Fischot Islands are known to local hunters as a winter Common Eider congregation area (NF008; IBA Canada website). There is a history of duck hunting on the northern end of Groais Island, although the magnitude of the harvest is unknown (Russell and Fifield 2001). The age, sex, and subspecific composition of Newfoundland's hunted Common Eider population is not well quantified (Gilliland and Robertson 2009).

Status: The Fischot Islands are designated as an Important Bird Area. The area off the southern coast of Bell Island is included in the Southern Grey Island Migratory Bird Sanctuary and is protected from hunting year-round (NF010; IBA Canada 2021). Two federal Migratory Bird Sanctuaries were established in 1991 off the coast of Bell Island: Shepherd Island and Isle aux Canes. Together, these two sanctuaries provide one of the largest breeding site for Common Eider in Newfoundland (Government of Canada 2019). The northern coast of Groais Island is also designated as an IBA and provides both breeding and wintering habitat for eiders. The Canadian Wildlife Service is responsible for managing these IBAs.

Literature Cited

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