

Notes

Distinguishing characters of American/East Asian race of Common Scoter

The Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* has an Holarctic distribution, and has been divided into two races on the basis of differences in bill pattern and bill shape. The nominate race breeds in North Europe and North Asia east to the Olenek River. In Asia east from the Yana River, and in North America, it is replaced by the race *americana* (currently known in North America as 'Black Scoter'), on males of which both the shape and the pattern of the bill are distinctively different from those of the nominate race. The two races apparently replace each other abruptly at Lower Lena, and no certain intergradation is known (*BWP* vol. 1). The American Ornithologists' Union is at present reviewing the taxonomic position of *americana*, with a view to conferring full specific status.

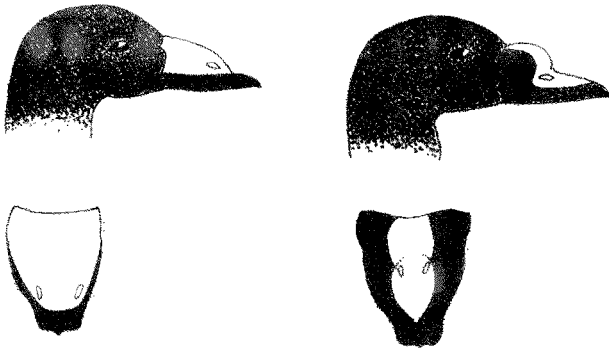


Fig. 1. Common Scoters *Melanitta nigra* of races *americana* (left) and *nigra* (right). Note (1) that plan views of bill patterns are diagrammatic and (2) that the nominate bird depicted is an extreme example (to demonstrate the pitfall) and not a typical individual (*Alan Dean*)

There have been at least six claims of the race *americana* in Britain since 1979, of which four have so far been accepted (*Brit. Birds* 75: 495; 81: 549-550). While adjudicating these claims, it became clear to the Rarities Committee that there was still some confusion as to what constituted the diagnostic characters of the race *americana*. Several claims were based almost exclusively on observation of an unusually large area of orange-yellow on the bill, with little attention given to the precise distribution of this colour or to the general shape of the bill; as the extent of orange-yellow on the bill of the nominate race varies quite considerably, however, it is important to determine bill characters accurately. The following analysis results primarily from an examination of skins at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, carried out by members of the Rarities

Committee at their annual identification meeting in 1987. In plumage, the two races appear indistinguishable; confirmation of *americana* will depend upon clear observation of the following characters (see also fig. 1):

1. An extremely swollen, but evenly arched base to the bill, not a fairly protuberant knob as on nominate (an analogy in bill profile could be made with a scaled-down Surf Scoter *M. perspicillata* or even a White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*). The nostrils are positioned towards the distal end of this swelling, and thus nearer the bill tip than on individuals of the nominate race, though this would rarely be discernible in the field.
2. The orange-yellow area meets the forehead and loral feathering in a continuous ('straight') line, producing a broad, flat-topped expanse of colour when viewed head-on. It is important to realise that, exceptionally, the yellow of the bill of the nominate race may extend quite prominently over the basal knob and reach the forehead, producing a larger-than-usual area of yellow (this is apparently particularly characteristic of second-calendar-year individuals, on which the basal knob is also less well developed); this extension, however, is usually in the form of a streak or lobe, producing a triangular or pear-shaped outline (with the apex towards the forehead) to the yellow when viewed head-on. Occasionally, this lobe extends quite broadly across the top of the knob, but never extends down the sides. Note, however, that nominate can have extensive yellow/orange on the basal knob which, seen head-on, appears more flat-topped (like *americana*) rather than pointed (see note below): it is vital to check the bill in profile.
3. In profile, the lower border of the orange-yellow area is approximately parallel with the lower edge of the bill, but there is an obvious black band along the lower edge which may constitute up to 25% of the total depth of the bill: this band is continuous with the black of the bill-tip, which, in side-on views, projects at an angle from the swollen orange-yellow base. On nominate, the knob (and hence the bill discontinuity) is at the proximal end of the yellow patch, and there is little or no angle at the distal junction between yellow and black (i.e. nearest the bill-tip); the black lower band may constitute 35% or more of the total bill depth.
4. As a consequence of the above characters, the colour of the sides of the basal swelling is always orange-yellow (always black on nominate); confirmation of this, however, requires accurate pinpointing of the feathering at the base of the bill.

In addition, the bill of *americana* is shorter: on adult males it averages 43.7 mm (range 42.0-45.5 mm), as against 47.5 mm (range 43.0-51.0 mm) for the nominate race (*BWP* vol. 1).

It must be emphasised that these characters are fully developed only on adult males. No certain distinctions between females of the two races have been documented, although Madge & Burn (1988, *Wildfowl: an identification guide to the ducks, geese and swans of the world*) noted that female *americana* tends to have the base of the bill slightly more swollen and the nail more prominent.

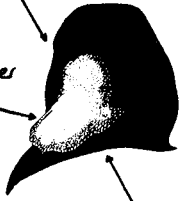
A. R. DEAN and THE RARITIES COMMITTEE
2 Charingworth Road, Solihull, West Midlands B92 8HT

Common Scoter of nominate race with extensive yellow on bill An adult male Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* on Southport Marine Lake, Merseyside, on 18th February 1979 exhibited an unusually large amount of yellow and orange on its bill. Yellow extended from just behind the nail over the central region of the culmen, continuing and becoming a rich orange colour over two-thirds of the basal knob (plates 371 & 372, fig. 1). This pattern, particularly when viewed head-on, gave a general impression of an extensively orange-and-yellow bill with an *apparently* wholly orange basal knob. The normal pattern on the nominate race is of a black bill with a yellow patch over the culmen, the yellow often extending in a thin line over the centre of a black basal knob. Madge & Burn (1988,

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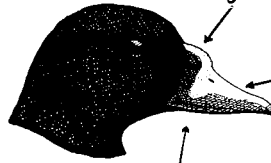


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic drawings of head of adult male Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* (individual shown in plates 371 & 372) (Bill Morton)



371 & 372. Adult male Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* with extensive orange and yellow areas on bill, Merseyside, February 1979 (Cliff Gibson)



Wildfowl: an identification guide to the ducks, geese and swans of the world stated: 'Yellow on bill of Common Scoter [of nominate race] variable in extent, but always has black sides to basal knob.'

This individual was well watched at close range and was thus easily identifiable as belonging to the nominate race by a combination of shape of, and black sides to, basal knob and the position of the nostrils. My experience of the race *americana* in Canada in the normally more distant and difficult conditions of seawatching leads me to believe that the Southport individual could conceivably be misidentified as that race when at sea: in such conditions, the bright orange of its basal knob would appear very similar to the evenly swollen extensive orangy-yellow basal area of the bill of *americana*, and features such as shape of basal knob and position of nostrils would be far less discernible.

With experience and given reasonable views, the bill pattern of *americana* is very different from that of nominate *nigra*. A major pitfall, however, is that a scoter such as the Southport individual, if seen poorly, or by an inexperienced observer, could easily give rise to a *description* that would sound remarkably like that of the race *americana*.

MARTIN S. GARNER

Wilson Carlile College of Evangelism, 27 Vanbrugh Park, Blackheath, London SE3 7AG

Buzzard apparently catching eel On 21st November 1986, while driving across the Somerset Levels, I saw a Buzzard *Buteo buteo* having difficulty in taking off from the ground. Initially, I thought the Buzzard had its feet caught, possibly in baler twine; after several attempts, however, it did laboriously take off.

On examining the grass whence the Buzzard had risen, I found a live eel *Anguilla brevirostris*, approximately 70 cm long. It would seem that the Buzzard had attempted to take the eel, but had found difficulty due to the eel entwining itself around the raptor's claws.

BWP vol. 2 states that Buzzards only rarely take fish, and that these are either dead or incapacitated.

ROGER U. LAMBERT

Applethwaite, The Street, Ubley, Avon BS18 6PJ

Kestrel feeding at bird-table In late December 1983, a first-winter male Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* was seen in a farmhouse garden. He was struggling to remove remnants of a turkey carcass from below the roof of a covered bird-table. Later, the roof of the bird-table was removed to allow the Kestrel more freedom of movement; and he appeared almost daily until the following May, having been joined in March by a female. They returned to feed at the bird-table when food was offered the following autumn. The Kestrels were fed throughout 1985, and were seen to feed their young with dead day-old chicks from the bird-table.

Although Kestrels are known to kill and eat live birds visiting bird-tables, I have not found references to their taking such carrion, particularly over a protracted time period.

DAVID J. GARNER

73 Needingworth Road, St Ives, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE17 4JY

Hobbies using 'artificial' nests In 1985, a pair of Hobbies *Falco subbuteo* occupied an old nest of Carrion Crows *Corvus corone* in a 2-ha block of kept mature pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* and wild cherry *Prunus avium*, surrounded by young mixed coniferous woodland. A single, infertile egg was laid, and the breeding attempt was not successful.



373. Hobbies *Falco subbuteo* in artificially sited nest, Gwent, July 1986 (Steve Roberts)

The nest (the only one in the area) disintegrated over the winter, so we provided alternative accommodation in the form of two old crows' nests (one still lined with wool), which we rebuilt. In March 1986, the nests were secured in two adjacent oaks at heights of around 13 m. Hobbies were heard near the nests on 19th June, and an inspection on 27th revealed two eggs in the older nest, the lined one having been occupied by a grey squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*. The two young fledged in mid August.

The use of artificial nests by Hobbies is not referred to in *BWP* vol. 2, but Fiuczynski & Nethersole-Thompson (*Brit. Birds* 73: 275-295) stated that observers in Germany 'have had good results from artificial nests (flat baskets placed near the tops of tall trees).'

STEVE ROBERTS and JERRY LEWIS
Ty-canol, Church Lane, Llanfair Kilgeddin, Abergavenny, Gwent

Peregrine eating prey on the wing At 08.00 GMT on 13th October 1985, at Rame Head, Cornwall, Roger Smaldon and I watched an adult male Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* stooping at migrants, and eventually taking a Skylark *Alauda arvensis*. The tiercel then spiralled upwards with the lark grasped firmly in both feet and first plucked it with his bill and then consumed it, in a manner recalling a Hobby *F. subbuteo*. I have found no mention of this behaviour in the literature, but Dr L. Hurrell (verbally) recalled witnessing a similar incident over Plymouth, Devon, some years ago.

VIC TUCKER

Peregris, 4 Clovelly View, Turnchapel, Plymouth, Devon

Sociable Plover foot-pattering for earthworms On 24th March 1985, at Dartford, Kent, I was watching a Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria* which appeared to favour a short-cropped grassy tract on which to search for food. On at least two occasions during two hours' observation, the plover stopped, put one leg forward and foot-pattered for a few seconds, before bending forward to draw up an earthworm. *BWP* vol. 3 does not record this behaviour for this species, nor are earthworms mentioned in the diet of the Sociable Plover.

DAVID J. JACKSON

61 Grove Vale Avenue, Great Barr, Birmingham B43 6DE

Although *BWP* does not mention this behaviour, all members of the family Charadriidae do in fact foot-patter. EDS

Communal midday roosting by Long-tailed Tits in hot weather During 15th-25th June 1989, when midday temperatures ranged around 22°C-26°C in Blunham, Bedfordshire, a family party of about 15 Long-tailed Tits *Aegithalos caudatus* roosted for several hours around noon each day in a dense, exceedingly spiny, 4-m high, cultivated barberry *Berberis*, which formed an arch over a garden path. They remained silent within the bush until someone walked beneath the roost-site, whereupon they erupted with noisy squeaks and chattering, but remained within the bush, which formed an ideal protection from any predator.

Midday roosting and habitual use of the same site both seem worth recording.

J. T. R. SHARROCK

Fountains, Park Lane, Blunham, Bedford MK44 3NJ

Dr C. M. Perrins and Dr David Snow have both commented that they are unaware of any previous records of midday or summer roosting by Long-tailed Tits. EDS

Magpies eating potatoes Magpies *Pica pica* have long been scavenging root vegetables from around farms, small-holdings and allotment rubbish tips. Recently, however, I came across a case of them digging their own in a well-tended garden at Grayshott, Hampshire. For 30 years, the gardener has grown several rows of potatoes, and, in 1986, he found a Magpie digging them out of the sandy soil (they are often only 7-10 cm from the surface), and lifting them with its bill over a wire-netting fence to a patch of rough ground, where they were eaten. The gardener never leaves

potatoes lying on the soil surface, preferring to dig them as required.

Magpies appear to have learnt this behaviour only in 1986, but several individuals are now involved. Have Magpies been found doing this elsewhere, or is this the start of another 'Blue Tits *Parus caeruleus* and milk-bottle tops' phenomenon?

G. G. BUZZARD

18 Glenmore Parade, Ealing Road, Alperton, Middlesex

Ageing and sexing of Daurian Starling Although the Daurian Starling *Sturnus sturninus* which appeared on Fair Isle, Shetland, in 1985 (*Brit. Birds* 82: 603-612) was a stunning male, the second West Palearctic record, just four months later, in Norway, was of one in juvenile plumage (Bentz 1987). For completeness, therefore, the following gives a brief summary of characters of female and juvenile Daurian Starlings, drawn from examination of an extensive skin collection at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring.

Females are similar in size to or slightly smaller than males. Plumage is variable, but always duller than that of males, frequently greatly so. The underparts are as on males, but not so 'clean-looking' (i.e. with slight buff wash). The dark purple spot at the rear of the head is more extensive on females, tending to extend raggedly over the entire nape and, on some individuals, up onto the centre of the crown or even the forecrown (this feature is individually extremely variable). Thus, there is only a suggestion of a grey collar, which appears 'dirty'. The mantle and back are uniformly dirty grey-brown, with just a suggestion of a purple tone on some individuals. The rump is as on males, but perhaps slightly buff. The wing pattern is as that of males, but the wingbars are less white, more buff, and not so broad. The predominant colour of the flight feathers and tail is brown-black with a very slight greenish-black iridescence: i.e. they lack the strong green iridescence found on males.

Juveniles are a duller version of females, with a suggestion of a purple-grey suffusion to the rear crown and nape, no obvious grey collar, and with a strong dirty brown tone (precise colour: pale burnt umber) to the entire mantle, back and rump. The uppertail-coverts are brown-buff with some mid-brown feathers admixed. The wing patterning consists of a white bar on the inner webs of (mainly) the greater coverts, continuing on the outer webs as three large white spots. Otherwise the rectrices and remiges are a dull, often faded, brown and the coverts burnt umber (i.e. darker than, but same general tone as, mantle). The underparts are a dirty pale grey.

The Norwegian individual was still in juvenile plumage in late September (Bentz 1987). Knowledge of Daurian Starling moult is still incomplete (Winter & Sokolov 1983), but my researches (Riddiford in prep.) indicate that some juveniles moult partially after fledging, suspend moult prior to autumn migration, then complete the moult in winter quarters; others (probably second-brood birds) migrate in juvenile plumage. Juvenile and adult female plumages are similar enough for confusion not to occur over part-moulted juvenile females. In autumn and at least the early part of winter, however, individuals may be encountered which show some purple on the mantle, some iridescent green flight

feathers and rectrices, and abrupt variations in breadth of wingbar: these are part-moulted juvenile males.

I should like to express my gratitude to the staff of the Bird Room at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, whose help and service has been greatly appreciated by myself and many other ornithologists worldwide, if not by their paymasters (*Brit. Birds* 81: 344; 82: 91, 416-417).

NICK RIDDIFORD

Bird Observatory, Fair Isle, Shetland ZE2 9JU

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