

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

SCOTERS

By Clive E. Goodwin

Scoters. Large, dark waterfowl flying purposefully far out on the lake, always on their way to somewhere else, their blackness relieved only by the flashing white patches in their wings.

Not all scoters have white in their wings, of course, and [particularly in recent years] they're not always passing through. But the image is close enough to reality to strike a chord of recognition; that is indeed how we seem to see scoters much of the time. If indeed we see them at all, because they can be elusive birds. I was going to say 'enigmatic' but then I remembered I'd already accused Red-breasted Mergansers of that in a much earlier article. In fact, scoters probably fit the word even better. When Earl Godfrey published his definitive *The Birds of Canada* in 1986 he could say only that 'breeding data were few' for both Black and Surf Scoters, and it was not until the second atlas in June 2006 that breeding of Black Scoter was finally confirmed for Ontario, by a group of atlassers from a helicopter in the Hudson Bay Lowlands – where it probably breeds in the multitude of small pools right across that vast expanse! And scoters occur in tens of thousands in staging areas and on wintering grounds.

So what of Northumberland? We too have had counts of thousands, mainly in the brief period between May 22 and 25. If your experience with the County is limited to the past decade or so, your reaction could well be one of incredulity; Whimbrel or Brant maybe, but scoters? Yet White-winged Scoter counts in the thousands were, I suspect, normal in this period in the 1970s and '80s. The database only shows periodic high counts: in excess of 1000 in 1971, '75, '78 and '85, but many of the intervening years had hundreds seen on successive days.

In those relatively early days the real problem with counts was that there were not many of them, but we ourselves also had the advantage of leading birding groups at Presqu'île around the third weekend in May at that time. One of the things we were always aware of was the possibility of large scoter movements, but they were often around sunset and far out on the lake, and consequently very easy to miss. The data suggest the flights often were missed: the records come from a scattering of localities along Lake Ontario, implying they could be seen almost by chance all along the lake in this period. And indeed a review of my records for the Province as a whole supports this, with high counts in later May in many years from Toronto to Kingston, with little consistency.

But the real picture for White-winged Scoters [much the commonest of the three] is even more complex, and it only appears when one examines the monthly pattern of movement year by year. Initially I took the last 30 years for this exercise, and found quite dramatic changes. May was always the time of heaviest movement in the earlier years, although if flights occurred here between 1979 and 1982 they were missed, and 1985 yielded the

highest numbers, with 5224 in all. There were few records in winter; in fact, only 17 birds in total were recorded in January and February up to 1992. Fall, the time we now most associate with scoter movement, saw flocks of up to 200 reported occasionally, but numbers most frequently were in double digits at best.

Following the 1985 peak the spring flights seemed much reduced, and by 1989 only 16 White-wingeds were recorded all year! But this was soon to change. In 1988 zebra mussels were discovered in the Great Lakes, and it can hardly be coincidence that by 1991-2 birds were beginning to be seen from October through May, while the May flights themselves showed some recovery in numbers.

Then came 1995. It began with a wholly unprecedented report of 8000 at Presqu'île in January. The May movement recorded 9383 birds, much the highest ever. Birds were seen in every month except June through August. Intriguingly, it was just 10 years since the 1985 flight. So what, I wondered, happened in 1975, which predated my 30-year analysis? It transpired that some 6000 were seen in May '75, much the largest movement on record to that time, so here was a clear pattern of large movements at 10 year intervals, which apparently has never been identified anywhere before!

Subsequent years, however, reveal a quite different pattern of scoter abundance. The trend first identified in 1991-2 has solidified, and birds are now regular between October and May. May numbers have gradually declined and the spring peaks are now in March and April. There have been some years of outstanding numbers: totals of 2549 in April 2000, 5713 in November 2002 [the last year we have with over 1000 seen in one day], and 1103 in October 2005, maybe a thin echo of the huge spring numbers of earlier decades. But the last three years in particular have suggested a gradual decline in scoter numbers. Now these birds are wintering here, and one surmises feeding on zebra mussels, they may be suffering the same problems from contaminants that have been identified in the declines of scaup, also linked to zebra mussels.

What of the other two species of scoter? Because scoters often form mixed flocks, and because they typically stage well off shore, consistent identification to species is often rather problematical. Certainly Surf and Black Scoters are rare birds indeed compared to their White-winged relatives: for example, while we were recording 5224 White-wingeds in May 1985, we had just 97 Surf Scoters, and the corresponding figures for 1995 were 9383 versus 42! Black Scoters are even more rare, with 22 and 14 respectively for those two years.

These were among the higher numbers recorded, and in several years only one or two individuals have been reported for either species. The difficulty in identifying trends in these cases is the paucity of data to work with. Nevertheless, both have shown some patterns that are similar to the White-winged. Surf Scoters used to be commoner in May, particularly between 1980 and 1995, although the numbers seem to have occurred slightly earlier in the month, and a clear 10-year pattern is lacking. Blacks showed the pattern of May movements between 1982 and 1986, and in occasional years

subsequently. Your best chance of finding either one is in October and to a lesser extent November, but again years can pass with no reports in this period.

Neither species has shown much evidence of wintering here after the pattern of their larger relative. There is a fair scattering of December records for both, but this can be attributed to late migrants. Only 1997 reveals small clusters of records in the later winter, and intriguingly, this is true for both Black and Surf. As to whether they show the same declines, the picture is at once both clearer – the disappearance of a pronounced May movement clearly suggests a reduction – and more ambiguous, as the fall numbers appears more stable.

So it appears that all three scoters continue to pose puzzling questions for which no ready answers are available.