

Documentation

Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*)

On Wednesday, December 2, 1998, I discovered an immature Surf Scoter at Winterfeld Park along the north side of Rock Valley in Sioux County.

My normal procedure is to drive down the ramp towards the dock, along the southwest side of the lake. There were some Mallards and a few Coots in the area. I immediately noted a brownish diving duck with a distinctly sloping front -- initially reminding me of a small Eider -- about 30 yards beyond the dock. The bird seemed unconcerned about my presence, and, in fact, continued to come even closer. It was a sunny day, and, as I was facing north, I had a very clear view of the bird.

The bird was a bit smaller than a Mallard, about the size of a Gadwall. The crown and the back of the neck were very dark, contrasting with the lighter colored head. Most distinctive were the two white oval spots on the side of the head, one more or less between the bill and the eye, and the other behind the eye. Occasionally the bird would lift itself out of the water, standing up as it were, and revealing its light underparts.

I observed the bird for about 20 minutes, as it offered clear views between dives. It then decided to swim eastwards a considerable distance along the shore. I followed with the car, parked along the side of the road where I would have an unobstructed view, and observed some more, this time with a scope. Some Mallards were nearby. I decided to spook the bird, to make sure it was not a White-winged Scoter (the contrasting crown and paler face actually had pretty well ruled it out). So I walked to the water's edge, creating some consternation among the Mallards. The ducks, including the Scoter, flapped their wings and paddled a distance of only 20 feet or so, before settling down again. The scoter revealed no white in its wings.

I rule out any possible confusions, as follows:

- White-winged Scoter has white in the wing and lacks sharp contrast between crown and face
- Black Scoter has rounded forehead and lacks pale head patches
- Ruddy Duck is smaller, has differently shaped bill and dark line across cheek
- Female Scaups have white in the wing, differently shaped white patch at base of bill, and little contrast between crown and face.

I am well acquainted with all three species of Scoter, due to my frequent trips to the west coast, especially B.C. and the San Francisco Bay area.

Documentation written on December 2, 1998.

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