

DETAILS OF UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTING

SPECIES: Black scoter (female)

OBSERVER: Jim Fuller, 6 Longview Knoll, RR#6, Iowa City, 52240

DATE(S): March 31, 1991 6:35 AM to 6:50 AM

LOCATION: Pool #19 of Mississippi River, Lee County

BACKGROUND: Tom Kent had reported two female black scoters at this location to the Iowa Birdline late in the day March 30. Jim Scheib and I arrived at the Riverfront Park at Montrose about 6:15 AM, and were soon treated to the gambling boat, Casino Belle, passing by with her calliope going full blast on her way to Dubuque. There were thousands of ducks, almost entirely scaup, canvasback, and ruddy duck. After 10 or 15 minutes, I located a duck which was all dark, except for a very sharply defined and surprisingly white face. I studied the bird for several minutes until a commercial fisherman's boat came very close. When it had passed, the only duck that hadn't flown was the bird I had been watching, and it stayed around for several more minutes until it flew upstream to rejoin the large mass of ducks. Upon arrival, the sun was hidden behind clouds, so the fact that it was early morning and I was looking northeast didn't seem to matter much. Optical equipment used was a KOWA TSN4 (20-60 X) zoom lens. The distance was approximately 150-200 yards.

DETAILS: As mentioned, this bird was all dark, except for a very prominent white area on the head and neck. The back of the neck was also dark, and the sharply defined white area occupied the sides and front of the neck. The size was compared mostly to ruddy ducks in the area, and this bird was noticeably larger. Other features that differed from the ruddies, was the bill, which appeared to be considerably smaller in comparison to the head size, and the tail, which was never raised like that of the ruddies was. I hate to admit that when the bird flew I didn't look for the translucent flight feathers even though I had the bird in the scope when it flew directly away from me.

SIMILAR SPECIES: The only bird that this bird should be confused with would be ruddy duck, and they were in close proximity so that good comparisons could be made. The white area on ruddy duck's head does not extend onto the neck, they are smaller in size, have a relatively larger bill, and a stiff raised tail, all features which differ from this bird.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE: I saw a female black scoter October, 1989 at Coralville Reservoir, and one at very close range at DeSoto NWR November, 1985.