ALASKA RECORDS OF THE ASIAN WHITE-WINGED SCOTER

JON L. DUNN, 24 Idaho St., Bishop, California 93514; cerwa@earthlink.net
DANIEL D. GIBSON, P.O. Box 155, Ester, Alaska 99725
MARSHALL J. ILIFF, 282 Perham St., West Roxbury, Massachusetts 02132
GARY H. ROSENBERG, P. O. Box 91856, Tucson, Arizona 85752
KEVIN J. ZIMMER, 1665 Garcia Road, Atascadero, California 93422

ABSTRACT: The three widely recognized taxa of "white-winged" scoters *Melanitta—fusca, deglandi,* and *stejnegeri*—are discussed variously in the literature as one, two, or three species. Adult males of the east Asian *stejnegeri* are distinguished from the American *deglandi* primarily by their black rather than brown flanks, yellow rather than black lamellae in the bill, and usually more hooked knob on the bill. Since 2002, there have been four well-supported records of *stejnegeri* in Alaska, two at St. Lawrence Island and two near Nome. Although we saw up to four adult males of *stejnegeri* at St. Lawrence Island in 2009, *deglandi* appears to predominate there. More study is needed for the status of *stejnegeri* as species or subspecies to be settled.

In the absence of consensus on the systematic relationships among the "white-winged" scoters, the Velvet Scoter and the White-winged Scoter have long been discussed as either (1) a single circumboreal species *Melanitta fusca* (American Ornithologists' Union [AOU] 1983, AOU 1998, OSJ 2000, Banks et al. 2007) comprising three subspecies (*fusca*, *deglandi*, and *stejnegeri*—Phillips 1926, Delacour 1959, Vaurie 1965, Palmer 1976, Cramp and Simmons 1977, Madge and Burn 1988, Sibley and Monroe 1990, del Hoyo et al. 1992, Brown and Fredrickson 1997, Dickinson 2003) or (2) as two species, *M. fusca* and *M. deglandi* (AOU 1886, 1895, 1910, 1931, 1957), the latter polytypic with two subspecies (*deglandi* and *stejnegeri*—Collinson et al. 2006; see also Dement'ev and Gladkov 1952, Stepanyan 1990, Koblik et al. 2006). On the basis of supposed differences in the bill, Brooks (1915) described a fourth taxon, *dixoni*, from arctic Alaska (see Appendix), but "an examination of a good series from both coasts and the interior [of North America] leads to the conclusion that the differences in the length and shape of bill on which the name…is based are merely individual and not geographical variations" (Hellmayr and Conover 1948:393). Subsequently, *dixoni* has been generally maintained as a junior synonym of *deglandi*. We follow here the AOU (1998) in discussing the "white-winged" scoters as a single polytypic species, *Melanitta fusca.*

Of the three well-differentiated taxa, *fusca* is the bird of western Eurasia, nesting from Fennoscandia to central Siberia and south to west-central Russia; *deglandi* is the North American bird, nesting from western Alaska to Labrador and Newfoundland; and *stejnegeri* is the bird of eastern Eurasia, nesting "from the Achinsk Steppe and the upper Chulym River basin west of the upper Yenisei, north to the upper parts of the basins of the Podkamennaya and Nizhnyaya Tunguskas and Khatanga rivers, and about the northern limits of the taiga farther east, to Anadyrland, Koryakland, and Kamchatka…northern Amurland (Stanovoi Range), valley of the lower Amur, Sakhalin, and Kuriles" (Vaurie 1965:133). Both *fusca* and *deglandi* have

been recorded extralimitally in Greenland (AOU 1957, Boertmann 1994), which lies between their respective nesting ranges, and extralimital occurrences of *stejnegeri* have been documented in many countries of western Eurasia, with records (all of adult males) from Finland (Lindroos 1997), Poland, Denmark, France (specimen), and Ireland (Farrar and Jones 2011), Spain (Gantlett 2012), and Iceland (Garner et al. 2004).

The absence of authoritative agreement on the species/subspecies status of *fusca*, *deglandi*, and *stejnegeri* has sometimes resulted in confusing reference to "white-winged" scoters in Alaska. Certainly Nelson sowed confusion long ago when in successive publications he discussed Alaska birds as "*Melanetta fusca* Velvet Scoter" (Nelson 1883:102) and as "*Oidemia deglandi* White-winged Scoter" (Nelson 1887:81). In the latter he appended, "the notes under *Melanetta fusca*…[Nelson 1883] really belong under *deglandi*." And, almost a century later, Portenko's (1972:181–182) discussion of the birds of the northeastern Russian Far East—under the heading *Melanitta fusca stejnegeri*—made reference to "white-winged" scoters in nearby Alaska, citing Nelson (1883, 1887) and Fay and Cade (1959). But none of those Alaska citations specified *stejnegeri*. The St. Lawrence Island specimen cited by Portenko was in fact a bird that Fay and Cade (1959:109) had identified and published as *deglandi* (University of Alaska Museum 30431 [life mount], adult ♂ in heavily worn plumage, collected 2 July 1929 by O. W. Geist). We have examined the specimen and confirmed the identification.

ALASKA RECORDS OF *MELANITTA FUSCA STEJNEGERI*

Occurrence of *Melanitta fusca stejnegeri* in Alaska was not reported until the beginning of the 21st century, when a male was observed 1–3 June 2002 on salt water at Northwest Cape, St. Lawrence Island, by a Wings tour group (Dunn, S. N. G. Howell, Rosenberg, and others)—not 2–4 June as reported by Garner et al. (2004). At that locality the White-winged Scoter is a regular spring migrant in small numbers (pairs often seen flying northwest past the point), but seldom is a bird seen on the water and close enough to shore for detailed study. Flank color is an important feature distinguishing North American *deglandi* (brown flanks) from Asian *stejnegeri* (black flanks), so Dunn concentrated effort so all participants in the tour might see that feature well during the three days the bird was present, and indeed all observers agreed the bird exhibited the black flanks of *stejnegeri*. Photographs by Rosenberg record this and other features (see below) that substantiate the record (Figure 1).

Garner et al. (2004) also published an earlier photo (B. Bergstrom) of an adult male *stejnegeri* taken 30 May 2001 at Cape Nome, and the identification was accepted by the Alaska Checklist Committee (Gibson et al. 2008). A third record involved a male photographed 17 June 2005 on Safety Sound, near Solomon, east of Nome, by a Victor Emanuel Nature Tour group led by Iliff and B. R. Zimmer. Iliff took multiple digiscoped photos that support the identification as *stejnegeri*. From 1 to 5 June 2009 Dunn and others saw a flock of up to 15 White-winged Scoters that included adult males of both *stejnegeri* and of *deglandi* at a cove some 6 km south of Gambell. Of *stejnegeri*, we noted one adult male on 1 and 3 June, four adult males

Figure 1. Adult male *Melanitta fusca stejnegeri* at Northwest Cape, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, 1–3 June 2002.

Photo by Gary H. Rosenberg

Figure 2. Adult male *Melanitta fusca deglandi* at Foster City, California, January 2005.

Photo by Peter LaTourrette

on 4 June, and at least two on 5 June. On the last date, Zimmer was able to get identifiable photos of both taxa. There were females present as well, which we did not identify to subspecies. Lewington (*in* Garner et al. 2004) illustrated differences in females of the three subspecies in bill shape and in feathering out the sides of the bill, but these differences are subtle and require very close views to be discerned with confidence. Even in adult males,

reasonably close and prolonged views on the water are necessary for the differences in bill color and flank color to be noted accurately. With this in mind, we regard some additional reports as tentative identifications (e.g., adult male fly-by, 10 June 2005, N. Am. Birds 59:640). For comparison, see Figure 2, a photo of an adult male *deglandi*.

The difficulty of seeing these birds close enough for identification at this level is a problem in the Aleutian Islands as well, where White-winged Scoters are also usually seen in flight over the sea at great distance, allowing identification to species only. Though *stejnegeri* was described from winter specimens from the Commander Islands, just 333 km west-northwest of Attu, it has not been reported from the Aleutians (Gibson and Byrd 2007).

Although the four records above are at this time the only substantiated records of *stejnegeri* in Alaska, after multiple adult males were recorded at Gambell in 2009 it appeared that this taxon might prove to be of regular occurrence at this location, perhaps even as numerous as *deglandi*. At Gambell, the White-winged Scoter is an uncommon or fairly common spring migrant in late May and early June, with daily totals sometimes over 30 birds. But prior to 2009 the majority of birds seen were in flight at a distance (often pairs flying north) or were at great distance on the sea. Occasionally adult males at close range were identifiable as *deglandi* (e.g., one on the water, 3 June 2005, Dunn). In late May and early June 2010, 2011, and 2012, we again found small numbers of White-winged Scoters off the same cove south of Gambell, often in the company of hundreds of King Eiders (*Somateria spectabilis*). Of the perhaps several dozen adult males close enough for identification, we saw only *deglandi*, probably the more numerous of the two subspecies. If most of these scoters at Northwest Cape are indeed *deglandi*, then that taxon quite likely occurs as well on the Chukotski Peninsula, less than 80 km away (and where not recorded by Portenko 1972).

Saint Lawrence Island lies north and east of the known nesting range of *stejnegeri* (above). Subspecies *deglandi* nests on islands in, and in the brush zone about (and even a distance from), freshwater lakes and ponds within and at the edge of the zone of boreal forest (Brown and Fredrickson 1997). Over most of the Seward Peninsula *deglandi* is rare or uncommon in spring and summer, but it is a locally common probable breeder in the Imuruk Basin; it is the latest species of waterfowl arriving in spring on the Seward Peninsula (Kessel 1989).

FIELD IDENTIFICATION

Garner et al. (2004) presented a key to identifying these three taxa, and much of the following is taken from that article. They included a superb color plate of both males and females and a plethora of color photos of both sexes of all three taxa. Another very good color plate (by Allan Brooks) detailing the heads of adult males was published by Phillips (1926). All three taxa are illustrated (by Peter Scott) in Delacour (1959). Finally, Dunn and Alderfer (2006, 2011) included an illustration of adult male *stejnegeri*. Nominate *fusca* is widely illustrated in European field guides (and by Dunn and Alderfer 2011), and *deglandi* is in all North American guides. The least well known of the three taxa, *stejnegeri*, is also the least often illustrated.

Identification of adult males, if seen close enough for the color of the flanks, the markings on the head, the presence and shape of the protuberance on the bill, and especially the color and pattern on the bill to be discerned, is straightforward. Males of all three taxa are largely black; male *deglandi* alone has brownish flanks. In the field, the visibility of this character varies, but under favorable conditions it can be detected at considerable range. When the birds surface briefly during feeding, the flanks can be partly obscured. Adult males of the other two taxa have black flanks (although worn black feathers can sometimes have a brownish cast—Garner et al. 2004). In head and bill pattern nominate *fusca* is the most distinct, with the least amount of white under the eye and the smallest knob, on a largely yellow bill. There is a distinct white mark under the eye and a knob on the bill of *deglandi*. Below the rather oval naris there is a bit of yellow, but other than the blackish lamellae seen along the bill edge, the remainder of the bill is pinkish red. In *stejnegeri* the white mark under the eye is similar to that of *deglandi*, though often broader at the rear and slightly more upswept. The bill knob is well developed, often forming a hooked tip—thus the Russian name, *gorbonosii turpan* (hook-nosed scoter). Below a more circular naris, the bill of *stejnegeri* is pinkish red, except for the distinct yellow lamellae seen along the bill edge. There are slight differences in the bill feathering and in the head shapes of the three taxa, in both sexes and at all ages. The differences are well detailed and illustrated by Garner et al. (2004) but in the field require close study. Garner et al. characterized *stejnegeri* as having the most "Roman-nosed" look to the head and bill profile, recalling the Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*).

SYSTEMATICS

The taxonomy of these three taxa has recently been in flux. *Melanitta fusca* and *M. deglandi* were maintained as separate species by the AOU (1886, 1895, 1910, 1931, 1957) in editions 1–5 of the *Check-list of North American Birds*. More recently, however, the AOU (1983, 1998) relegated *deglandi* to status as a component of *M. fusca* and noted (AOU 1983:92), "some authors regard the two groups as separate species…the latter [*deglandi*] also including the eastern Asiatic form *M. f. stejnegeri*…whose relationships appear to be with *deglandi* but whose status is uncertain."

Many additional authorities (e.g., Phillips 1926, Delacour 1959, Vaurie 1965, Palmer 1976, Madge and Burn 1988, Sibley and Monroe 1990, del Hoyo et al. 1992, Brown and Fredrickson 1997, Dickinson 2003) have also maintained the "white-winged" scoters as a single polytypic species, but others have separated *M. fusca* from *M. deglandi* (e.g., Hellmayr and Conover 1948, Koblik et al. 2006). Madge and Burn (1988) wrote, "as the ranges of the three forms are not known to overlap and as the three seem to differ vocally, they could be treated as three separate species, or perhaps more safely as two, with *stejnegeri* maintained as subspecies of *M. deglandi*. This same relationship was postulated by Sibley and Monroe (1990). In his investigation of the phylogeny of the Mergini by cladistic analysis of 137 morphological characters, Livezy (1995) included *M. fusca* and *M. deglandi* as sister species and *stejnegeri* within the latter—but (to our reading) left

ambiguous whether he meant to include *stejnegeri* as a junior synonym or as a subspecies of *deglandi*.

To consider this issue, as well as the status of the Common and Black scoters, the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) Records Committee, Taxonomic Subcommittee, reviewed the evidence to date and recognized five species of scoters: *M. nigra* (Common Scoter), *M. americana* (Black Scoter), *M. fusca* (Velvet Scoter), *M. deglandi* (White-winged Scoter), and *M. perspicillata* (Surf Scoter) (Collinson et al. 2006). They maintained *stejnegeri* provisionally with *M. deglandi,* but with caveats (see below).

Collinson et al. (2006) considered a wide variety of morphological, behavioral, and acoustic factors. In addition to the morphological differences we have described, their analysis focused on structural differences of the trachea of *fusca* and *deglandi*, first described and illustrated by Miller (1926). Johnsgard (1961) investigated the taxonomic significance of tracheal anatomy in the Anatidae and found it a useful tool though its value differed from group to group. The tracheal differences in these scoters are likely responsible for the described vocal differences between *fusca* and *deglandi*: the courtship call of *fusca* is a higher-pitched double *skryck* rather than the whistled double *whurer* of *deglandi* (Collinson et al. 2002), but there has been some confusion of vocalizations with sounds made by wing movement, and some intensive studies have detected no vocalizations by the male during courtship (Myres 1959, Brown and Fredrickson 1997). That finding agrees with our own field experience, in which we have found *deglandi* on the breeding grounds to be silent. One wonders how important can be differences in vocalizations if the birds are usually silent! Might the modifications of the trachea be vestigial? The silence of the White-winged contrasts strikingly with the noisiness of the Black Scoter (*M. americana*), which vocalizes frequently year round, even in its winter range. The difference in voice was one of the reasons why Collinson et al. (2006) split *M. nigra* into two species, the call of *americana* being longer. The tracheal structure and vocalizations of *stejnegeri* remain unstudied. Although scoters have interbred with other waterfowl, we have not seen any reference to intergradation of characters among any of the "white-winged" scoters. The breeding ranges of *fusca* and *stejnegeri* are slightly separated (just east of the Yenisei River, Siberia); similarly, *nigra* and *americana* are also separated, but their zone of separation lies farther east, around the Lena River, Russian Far East. The Bering Sea and habitat unsuitable for nesting (arctic and subarctic tundra, beyond the taiga) separate *stejnegeri* from *deglandi*.

Collinson et al. (2006) concluded that it is "reasonable to suggest that *deglandi* and *fusca* should be treated as separate species under criterion 4.1 of Helbig et al. (2002), as allopatric taxa that are 'fully diagnosable in each of several discrete or continuously varying characters, related to different functional contexts.' Slightly more problematic is …whether to retain *stejnegeri* as conspecific with *deglandi*: *stejnegeri* is similar to *deglandi* in many respects and is the taxon for which there is the…[least information]. On the basis of what is known—diagnosability on the basis of male bill shape and colour (a potentially reproductively important character), facial feathering (perhaps trivial) and male flank colour (perhaps trivial)—the argument for splitting *deglandi* and *stejnegeri* may appear to be almost as good as that for splitting

nigra and *americana*. Given the lack of published information on *stejnegeri*, however,…further research into vocalizations, and genetics is required; hence we provisionally retain *stejnegeri* as a subspecies of *M. deglandi*."

Thus it might be concluded that *stejnegeri* has suffered from benign neglect. The BOU (Sangster et al. 2005) split *M. americana* from *M. nigra*, and the AOU (Chesser et al. 2010:731) followed suit, "on the basis of courtship calls (Sangster 2009) and color, form, and feathering of the bill in adult males and most adult females (Collinson et al. 2006)."

Garner et al. (2004) discussed the three taxa of "white-winged" scoters as separate species, using the English names Velvet, White-winged, and Stejneger's scoters. Other names used for the last taxon include Asiatic Velvet Scoter (Phillips 1926), Asiatic White-winged Scoter (Delacour 1959, Palmer 1976), *Gorbonosii turpan* (Portenko 1972, Lobkov 1986, Nechaev 1991, Koblik et al. 2006), and *Vostochnosibirskii turpan* (East Siberian Scoter; Dement'ev and Gladkov 1952). The subspecies epithet honors Leonhard Stejneger, the Norwegian-born American natural historian whose discoveries and writings provided seminal information on the ornithology of northeastern Asia; if an English name be needed for this taxon, we think that simply translating the Russian name in wide use respects the name used where the bird occurs: *Gorbonosii turpan* = Hook-nosed Scoter.

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APPENDIX. Original names, authors, literature citations, and type localities of the four "white-winged" scoter taxa, in chronological order.

Anas fusca Linnaeus (Systema Naturae, ed. 10, vol. 1:123, 1758) {coast of Sweden}
= *Melanitta fusca fusca*

Oedemia deglandi Bonaparte (Revue Critique de l'Ornithologie Européenne, p. 108, 1850) {North America}
= *Melanitta fusca deglandi*

O[*idemia*]. *Stejnegeri* Ridgway (Manual of North American Birds, p. 112, 1887) {Bering Island, Commander Islands}
= *Melanitta fusca stejnegeri*

Oidemia deglandi dixoni Brooks (Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology 59:393, 1915) {Humphrey [= Griffin] Point, arctic Alaska}
= *Melanitta fusca deglandi*