

COMMON EIDER ON GREAT GULL ISLAND: A NEW NESTING LOCALITY FOR NEW YORK STATE

With the on-going effects of climate change and generally warming temperatures it is expected that a number of southern nesting avian species will extend their ranges northward. McGowan and Zuckerberg (*The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*, K. McGowan and K. Corwin, eds., Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2008, pp. 41-42) reviewed some of the difficulties in statistically proving this trend and reviewed data documenting the trend in New York State. Given these expectations, it may be surprising to find a previously northern nesting species extending its nesting range southward. However, over the last twenty years the Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*) has been moving south as a nesting species.

Historically, the Common Eider was an uncommon winter visitor to New York waters, mainly on eastern Long Island, but increasing in numbers in the latter half of the Twentieth Century (Bull, J. 1974. *Birds of New York State*, Doubleday, New York, pp 143-144). Since the mid-1990s winter numbers of the species around Montauk have further increased into the thousands, sometimes surpassing 10,000 individuals (Spahn, R. 1998. Common Eider, pp. 166-167 in *Bull's Birds of New York State*, E. Levine, ed., Cornell University Press, Ithaca). With the growth in wintering numbers has come the occurrence of increasing numbers of summering individuals leading to the first confirmed breeding of the species in New York on Fishers Island in August 2000 (summarized by McGowan, 2008, pp. 120-121 in *The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*). The breeding population on Fishers Island has continued to expand in recent years (Lindsay and Mitra, 2008, *The Kingbird* 58(4):399; Lindsay and Mitra, 2014, *The Kingbird* 64(4):370). McGowan (2008) suggests that it is possible the extension of the species' breeding range south to Rhode Island (1999) and then further south to Fishers Island may have been a result of the introduction of the species from Maine to the Elizabeth Islands off the coast of Massachusetts in the 1970s.

Great Gull Island, a field station of the American Museum of Natural History, lies about 7.5 miles (12 km) to the southeast of Fishers Island in the mouth of Long Island Sound. Researchers studying the large tern colony there are present on the island every summer from late April to early September. Since 2007 DiCostanzo and others have noted small numbers of Common Eiders around the island every summer. Numbers have generally ranged from two to twenty with nearly all individuals being females and immature males. With the increasing number of summering birds and the species nesting on nearby Fishers Island it seemed inevitable that Common Eiders might try to nest on Great Gull Island. On 1 July 2015 DiCostanzo noted a disturbance among the nesting terns north of the main headquarters building on Great Gull Island. The terns appeared to be diving at something atop a low ridge. The disturbance gradually moved downhill and west. DiCostanzo and Dick Young investigated, trying to find the source of the disturbance, but could find nothing in the deep vegetation. They gave up after the terns dispersed. When the terns repeated their disturbed behavior Helen Hays asked Kramer to go to the main tower on the island to see if the additional elevation would help in spotting the source of the disturbance. Kramer spotted a female Common Eider leading six ducklings out of the vegetation and down towards the water.

Over the next two weeks DiCostanzo watched for any sign of the ducklings around the shoreline of the island, but did not spot them. Adult eiders were seen around the island throughout the rest of the summer. It is likely the strong currents present around the island scattered the young eiders after they reached the water. There is no sheltered water on the north side of the island where the female appeared to be leading the young. Unfortunately, there is precedent for this result on the rare occasions that waterfowl have nested on Great Gull Island.

In the summer of 1981 a pair of Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) nested on the island and all but one of the ducklings disappeared as soon as they reached the water. (The remaining young had become separated from the rest of the brood and was left behind. It was hand-raised by students on the island and eventually released.) The only somewhat sheltered stretch of water around Great Gull Island lies off the south side of the island. Perhaps if any future nesting attempts by Common Eiders occurred close enough so that the female chose that spot to take its young to the sea, they might have a better chance of success. Even though this was an apparently unsuccessful nesting attempt it represents an extension of the known breeding range for the Common Eider in New York State and appears to be the southernmost nesting of the species in North America, albeit only by a few miles.

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