

1999 - 28

COLORADO RARE BIRD REPORT

BLACK SCOTER
Melanitta nigra

ACCEPT 7-0
Rec'd 1/20/00 wgs

Location: Big Johnson Reservoir; Fountain; El Paso County; Colorado

Date: November 11 - December 9, 1999

I found this bird on November 11 and it was seen by many, at various times, at least through December 9, though I am not sure of its true last date of observation. I saw it four different times during these dates. Big Johnson is a large plains reservoir that hosted a good variety of diving birds. I observed the bird at noon on 11/11/99 for about 25 minutes at distances of 200-400 yards. I observed it with my Kowa TSN-4 20-60X scope.

Description:

The bird was a female. It was a medium-sized, compact duck, about the same size as adjacent dabbling ducks. It infrequently dove and frequently preened, showing the all dark wing. It was mainly charcoal black except for a dirty white patch on the lower face (cheek) and foreneck. The patch was set off fairly sharply against the blackish cap. The bill was small, vaguely goose-like and all dark. The bill met the dark, steep forehead at a sharp angle. On other dates I noticed that this bird had a strong, overall brownish tone and it may have been an immature female.

Similar Species:

No other diving duck is all blackish-brown with a white cheek and neck patch. White-winged Scoter shows a white wing patch and two white smudges on the face. The Surf Scoter has two white face spots and lacks the white on lower face and neck.

Experience with Species:

I have seen several (~seven) previous Black Scoters and all other scoters in Colorado.

This report is prepared from memory.

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COLORADO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS - SIGHT RECORD FORM

NEW STATE RECORD UNUSUAL RECORD X*Rec 1/5/00 upd*Species: Black Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*)

Date: 28 November 1999 Number seen: one Sex: female Plumage: Basic I

Locality: Big Johnson Reservoir Elevation: about 5850'

Nearest town: Security-Widefield County: El Paso

Time observed: 14:45 - 16:00 MST

Duration of observation: off and on for about 15 minutes during that time

Description: Sue Bonfield and I went to Big Johnson to look for the scoters that had been present for some time (the Black since early November). On my second scan of the water, I finally found the Black. The bird was foraging the entire time we were present and was under water more than it was visible.

It was a fairly large diving duck that was basically dark brownish-black with a paler grayish-brown face. It had an all-black bill without adornments and, for a scoter, was small. The eyes were dark. The crown and back of the neck were blackish and contrasted fairly strongly with the paler face. The paler face was not as pale (there was some darker marbling making the face look darker) nor as sharply demarcated from the crown and neck as on adult females. The paler color of the face extended about to the breast where it somewhat abruptly ended. What I could see of the rest of the underparts was very dark, but slightly paler than the back and wings. The tail was blackish and held along the water's surface. I did not see the legs. The bird was a bit larger than nearby Common Goldeneyes and appeared smaller-headed, but longer-bodied than the goldeneyes. The scoter was smaller than either male or female Mallards that were briefly in the same field of view. The head was round, unlike the long, slanted heads of the other two species of scoter or of the two male Canvasbacks that were on the reservoir at the same time.

Similar species eliminated: Both other scoter species are eliminated by size, bill size, and head shape and pattern (face all the same color - no whiter spots anywhere). Ruddy Duck female eliminated by lack of dark eyeline; all Ruddy Ducks eliminated by size, head shape, and coloration. Other female diving ducks by head pattern and lack of back/side color contrast. Male Gadwall eliminated by plumage pattern and consistent diving. Female Gadwall eliminated by diving behavior and lack of strong brown in the plumage.

Describe the bird's song and call, if given, including method of delivery (i.e. from perch, in flight, duration): No vocalizations heard.

What is your prior experience with this and similarly-appearing species? I have seen 10s of 1000s each of all three scoter species. I have also seen large numbers of all confusable species.

Light conditions: sun behind me and to my left

Optical equipment used: Leica 32x

Distance, and how estimated: estimated closest approach of about 100 meters

Other observers who saw the bird with you: Sue Bonfield

Other observers who saw the bird independently: many

If photographed, type of equipment and film: I did not photograph

List books, illustrations, recordings, other birders, etc. consulted and how this influenced your identification:

a) at time of observation: none b) after observation: none

Reporting observer: Tony Leukering

Signature: 

Address: Colorado Bird Observatory, 13401 Picadilly Road, Brighton, CO 80601

Date report was written: 28 November 1998 from memory