



Velvet, White-winged and Stejneger's Scoters PHOTO GUIDE

Birdwatch

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MARKUS VARESUVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

1 Male (front) and female (back) Velvet Scoter (Utö, Finland, 21 May 2010). A beautiful close-up of a pair of Velvet Scoters. A view like this would be exceptional in Britain or Ireland, as here Velvet Scoters prefer to remain a little more distant offshore than they do in northern Europe, where they breed. Note the extensive clean yellow colour on the bill of the male and the characteristic slightly concave forehead and bill profile, with just a slight swelling above the nostrils. A sliver of the diagnostic white wing-patch is visible on the female but in the male it is concealed by the overlying rear flank feathers. The male's white eye-patch does not extend very far behind the eye.

PROFILE



MARTIN GARNER
is a world-renowned
ornithologist and bird
ID expert who has
written numerous
books and papers.

There was a time when any scoter with a white wing-bar was simply a 'Velvet'. Not any more, as what was once regarded as a single Holarctic species has been divided in two: North American birds have been split as White-winged Scoter, with an equally distinctive Asian subspecies, Stejneger's Scoter, which itself may be separated at species level. Both White-winged and Stejneger's Scoters have now been found among scoter flocks in British and Irish waters, highlighting the rewards for the vigilant observer. Main text by *Martin Garner*.



BASIC PRINCIPLES

“Look at the shape on that. It’s nothing like the same!”

I was talking to Anthony McGeehan and David Quinn and responding to views of a female White-winged Scoter off Vancouver Island, Canada. It was (perhaps to some) a boring brown duck surrounded by Pacific Rim wonders such as Ancient Murrelet, Harlequin Duck, Rhinoceros Auklet and Pacific Diver.

It was late November 1997 and I had spent some time carefully watching a female-type Velvet Scoter in Belfast Lough just the week before. Noting all its characteristics and behaviours, I was watching it as if I were seeing the species for the first time.

I like the way small children learn their colours: one at a time. The first colour might be blue. They will point to everything that is blue after that. If a parent then points to something red and asked what colour it is. The child will reply: “It’s not blue.”

The female Velvet Scoter in Belfast Lough was my ‘blue’. On seeing the female White-winged Scoter, considered to be the same species, my response was straightforward: It’s not ‘blue’! This simple, even child-like way of birding has served me pretty well for 40 years.

So began an exploration into all ages and sexes of the three scoters with white feathering on the inner wing. Velvet Scoter *Melanitta fusca* of Northern Europe and Asia, ‘American’ White-winged Scoter *M deglandi* of North America and Stejneger’s Scoter *M (deglandi) stejnegeri* of East Asia. When I first started exploring the subject, all three were viewed as forms of the same species. However, they are identifiable at all ages – distinctly

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different in fact – and one of these days are going to be afforded full specific status, just as they deserve.

Structure, plumage and bill colour

There are three essential elements to the identification of these three forms. Structure of the skull and bill, body plumage in adult males and bill colour in immature and adult males. The head and bill structure of each is distinctive in all ages and sexes.

A good starting point is to become familiar with the structure and shape of, for example, the next Velvet Scoter you encounter. There are subtle differences in head and bill shapes of Velvet Scoters in females, young brown males and more obviously adult male plumages. Once fully appreciated, the structures of the other two species become more apparent.

These differences can be simply characterised as follows:

- Velvet Scoter has a squarish head but with a concave scooped bill shape.
- American White-winged Scoter has a three-tiered/two-stepped profile for the bill and head.
- Stejneger’s Scoter has a flat-topped head with a long ‘Roman nose’ recalling a Common Eider.

Plumage differences are subtle, and while they have been emphasised in the past (brown flanks on American White-winged males and black flanks on male

Stejneger’s Scoter), they can be difficult to see, and the head structure and bill colour of males is usually enough for a clear identification.

Often visible at long range, the males’ bill colours can lead to a very quick identification. Male Velvet Scoters have a long strip of orange-yellow scooping under the nostrils. American White-winged has a more restricted pinkish-red patch with a dab of yellow just underneath a more prominent nostril. The very knobby billed adult male Stejneger’s has pinky-red similar to its American counterpart, but most importantly, a diagnostic yellow lick running along the edge of the upper mandible.

The white tick mark with a ‘tail’ behind the eye is almost always present on American White-winged and Stejneger’s, versus the more restricted small white scoop under the eye on male Velvet.

The usefulness of these characters was born out when I was exploring the subject in the dial-up days of the internet some 10 years ago. I made a couple of ‘keyboard warrior’ discoveries. North America’s first Stejneger’s Scoter (Cape Nome, Alaska, May 2001) was sitting on Brad Bergstrom’s website and the second photographed Stejneger’s Scoter for the Western Palearctic was on an Icelandic website.

The latter bird was present in Iceland in April and May 2003. With several previous records of American White-

winged Scoter there, it was assumed to be the North American form. However, the characteristic head shape and little yellow lick on the bill side even on small images showed it to be the Asian vagrant.

Since then, these characters have been written up, tested and superbly illustrated, first by Ian Lewington and subsequently by Killian Mullarney in the second edition of the *Collins Bird Guide*. This has led to the discovery of the two rare species in Europe.

In the last few years, Stejneger’s Scoter arrived in two consecutive years in Arctic Norway in brown female-type plumage (a young male). An adult male Stejneger’s was found off south-west Ireland and Britain’s first American White-winged Scoter, a first-summer male, was picked out in north-east Scotland. The discovery and identification of the rarer species in immature plumages in the Western Palearctic fully demonstrates the distinctive structure and plumage of all three forms.

So we now know that all three birds can occur in British and Irish waters, and the regular checking of scoter flocks provides the best opportunities for finding them. While winter is a traditional time to focus on seaduck, May and June have had the most occurrences, found in traditional summer moult flocks of Common Scoter. In the meantime, practise the shapes and colours on any of the scoters-with-white-wings that you see. Then keep checking. Look for the one that’s not blue! ■

Editor’s acknowledgements

Special thanks to Killian Mullarney and Ian Lewington for assistance in various ways at short notice.



2



MARKUS VARESULO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

2 Male Velvet Scoter (UtÅ, Finland, 25 May 2010). The bright pink legs are a feature of adult males in all three forms of Velvet/White-winged Scoter, but the extensive yellow colour on the bill is seen only in European birds.

5



TONY DAVISON

5 Male Velvet Scoter (Eyebrook Reservoir, Leicestershire, 15 December 2013). The colour on the bill can appear more orange-yellow at times, with a tinge of pink on the broad nail. Importantly, only in Velvet does the colour extend well to the rear of the nostrils.

3



MIKE DANZENBAKER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

3 Male American White-winged Scoter (Washington, USA, 12 February 2006). The predominant colour on the bill is raspberry-pink, shading to yellowish just below the nostril. This diagnostic feature can often be determined at long range, sometimes even in flying birds.

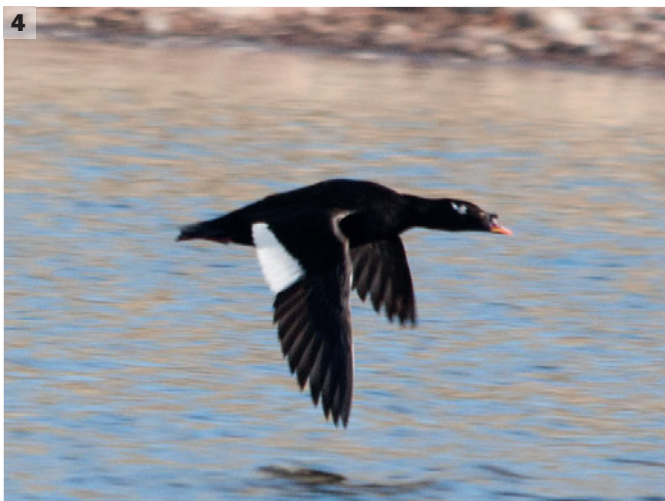
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MIKE DANZENBAKER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

6 Male American White-winged Scoter (California, USA, 9 February 2008). The prominent bump above the nostril creates a very different profile from Velvet Scoter. Note the long, upswept white eye-patch and that the rearmost extent of colour on the bill is directly below the nostril.

4



SERGEY YELISEEV

4 Male Stejneger's Scoter (Chuya Steppe, Republic of Altai, Russia, 6 May 2011). Bill colour detail that is difficult to register on a bird in flight can often be captured in photographs. Note the 'long-faced' look created by the combination of very prominent knobby bill and the streak of white extending well behind the eye.

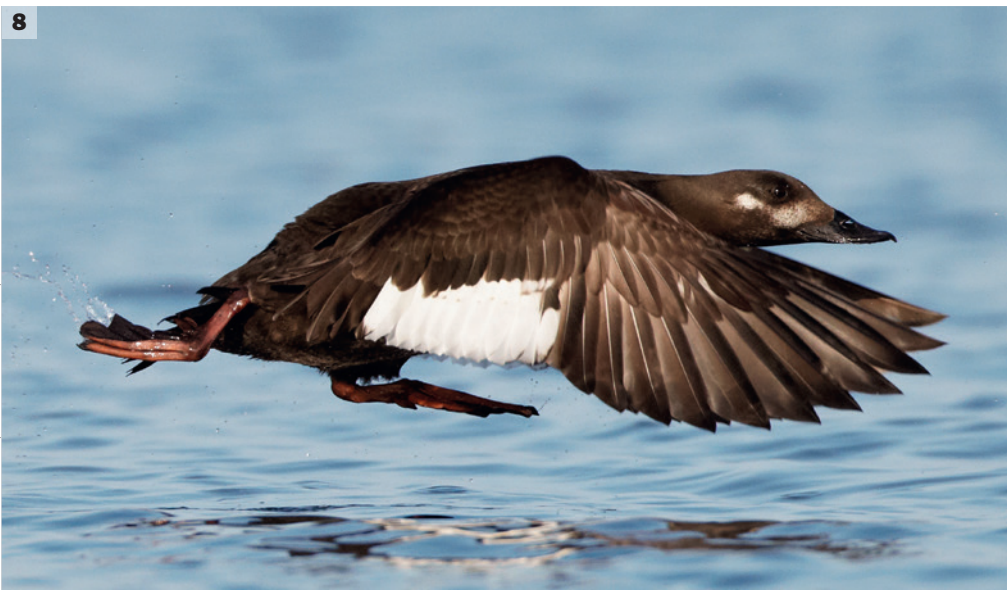
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NIAL MOORES

7 Male Stejneger's Scoter (Baekryeong, South Korea, 24 November 2013). Similar to American White-winged, Stejneger's has an even more Common Eider-like profile – with little or no indent between forehead and bill – and a diagnostic stripe of yellow on the lower edge of the bill.

MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)



8 Female Velvet Scoter (UtÅ, Finland, 25 May 2010). The conspicuous white wing-panel is similar in all three species and is made up of broad white tips to the greater coverts as well as the entire length of the secondary feathers. You may need to look at this perfect shot with half-closed eyes to get the impression of Velvet Scoter's very subtly concave profile of the forehead and bill, despite the slightly convex swelling over the nostril.

EARL REININK



9 Juvenile (top) and probable adult female (bottom) American White-winged Scoter (Ontario, Canada, 23 November 2011). Not the ideal view for assessing subtle forehead and bill profiles, but other details in the photo are interesting; the finely mottled underparts of the upper bird, apparently becoming lighter towards the chest, suggest it is a juvenile and the narrow pale tips to the greater coverts support this. The lower bird's darker head and underbody and broader white tips to the greater coverts indicate an adult, in which case obviously a female.

SERGEY YELISEEV



10 Male (left) and female (right) Stejneger's Scoter (Chuya Steppe, Republic of Altai, Russia, 6 May 2011). Even in this heavily cropped image, all of the key identification features of Stejneger's can be readily determined – at least in the male! The long, upswept white streak behind the eye, the very prominent knob on the bill with forward-projecting 'overhang' and the yellowish stripe along the edge of the bill. If she were on her own, however, the female would be a real challenge on this view.

11 Second-calendar-year male Velvet Scoter (Utö, Finland, 25 May 2010). In ducks, the juvenile feathers below the 'waterline' are often among the last to be moulted and over time become much faded, sometimes even whitish in first-summer scoters. This bird has not yet acquired the slightly swollen bill-base of an adult male, but the yellow bill-sides are similar to an adult, just a shade duller. The white eye-patch has yet to develop.



MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

12 Juvenile American White-winged Scoter (Massachusetts, USA, 8 October 2006). The diffuse pale belly on the middle bird is indicative of a juvenile, as are the prominent, clear-cut light ear-covert spots and the subtle contrast between the darker cap and lighter hindneck in all three birds. The curiously Surf Scoter-like head markings combined with the lack of juvenile Velvet Scoter's slightly concave forehead and bill profile should raise alarm bells on this side of the Atlantic; let's hope they stop!



JULIAN HOUGH

13 Adult male Stejneger's Scoter (centre, Rossbeigh, Co Kerry, 11 March 2011). Would you look at the head on that! This stonking adult male Stejneger's Scoter was a huge surprise in 2011, especially in view of the fact that Ireland still awaits its first record of Black Scoter, a species that has been recorded many times in north-west Europe (but interestingly, not yet in Iceland, either). For a lot of birders who travelled to see the bird, the views were much better than they'd ever managed to get of an adult male Velvet Scoter, so it made a big and lasting impression – a wonderful bird!



PAUL AND ANDREA KELLY (WWW.IRISHBIRDMAGES.COM)



MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)



14 Female Velvet Scoter (Utš, Finland, 24 May 2009). The nicely proportioned head and bill and smoothly concave profile are typical of female Velvet Scoter. The extent and shape of the feathering on the sides of the bill provides a reliable means of distinguishing female Velvet from the two 'White-winged' taxa; in Velvet, the anterior edge of the feathering between the gape and the culmen runs in an almost straight diagonal, or a gently curved arc, passing a few millimetres behind the nostril

GLENN BARTLEY (WWW.BIRDIRMAGENCY.COM)



15 Juvenile male American White-winged Scoter (Parksville, Canada, 2 November 2007). The Surf Scoter-like heavy-billed, long-faced appearance is characteristic of American White-winged Scoter. At close range it may be possible to determine that the feathering on the side of the bill in both White-winged and Stejneger's Scoters projects a little further forward than in Velvet (see photo 14), terminating in a broad point below and slightly behind the nostril. The lighter pinkish areas developing on the bill indicate this is a juvenile male.

STUART PRICE



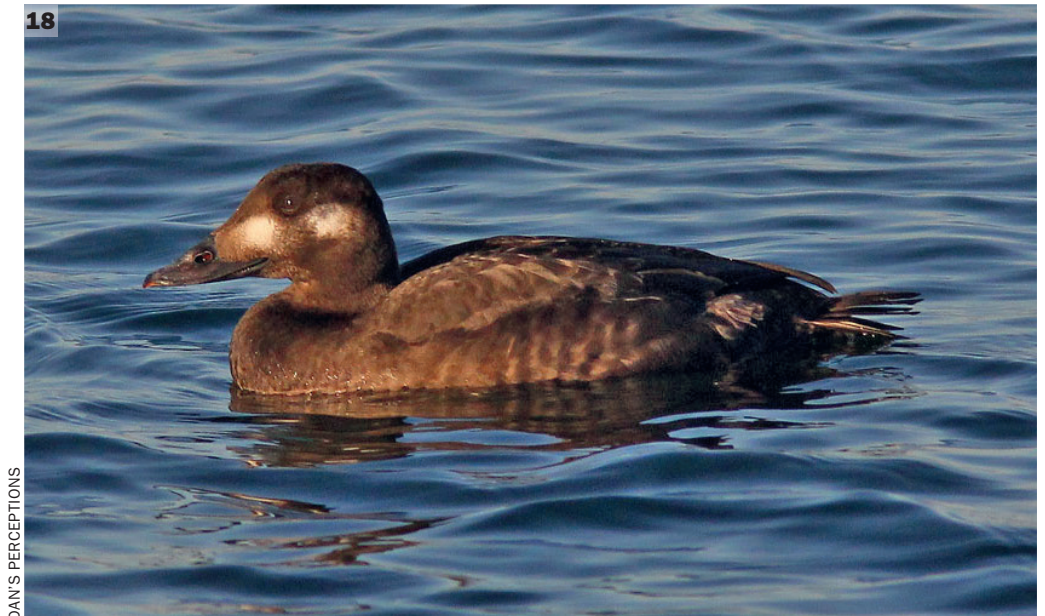
16 Female Stejneger's Scoter (Hokkaido, Japan, 21 December 2012). Female Stejneger's Scoter has the most Common Eider-like profile of all, but curiously, it sometimes doesn't look as impressively big billed as American White-winged. This illusion is possibly due to the lack of definition between the forehead and the bill, with the feather-covered bulky bill-base being perceived as part of the head. The extensive feathering on the side of the bill can just be made out in this photo.

17 Juvenile Velvet Scoter (Clitheroe, Lancashire, 26 December 2009). Occasionally, Velvet Scoters (usually juveniles) appear very close to shore on the sea or on lakes and are remarkably confiding. Such birds present an ideal opportunity to familiarise oneself with the more subtle identification criteria discussed in this article. Apart from being interesting in itself, the first-hand knowledge gained from such observation will prove invaluable if you ever come across a bird that looks like a White-winged or a Stejneger's!



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

18 Juvenile American White-winged Scoter (Burlington, Canada, 12 December 2011). As is so often the case, the American counterparts of European species can be so much easier to study at close range, as this photograph demonstrates! The straight, more Common Eider-like head profile of this individual is similar to Stejneger's and is a reminder that some of the subtle differences discussed in this article do not necessarily remain constant, changing slightly according to the bird's mood and activity. A further useful detail, clearly visible in this image, is that the feathering on American White-winged extends further forward on the culmen than it does in Stejneger's.



DAN'S PERCEPTIONS

19 Juvenile Stejneger's Scoter (Ulleung, South Korea, 21 November 2013). This instructive image of a juvenile Stejneger's conveys the characteristic 'Roman-nosed' profile perfectly. A further small detail that helps distinguish female-type Stejneger's from American White-winged is the extent of feathering onto the culmen (the 'ridge' at the top of the bill). In American White-winged it projects a little further forward, usually to a point directly above the rear edge of the nostril; it stops further back in Stejneger's.



NIAL MOORES



MARTIN SMART

20 Juvenile female Surf Scoter (Vancouver Island, Canada, January 2008). This image serves to remind us of how superficially similar American White-winged is to Surf Scoter in female-type plumages. Confusion is not likely, however, as Surf lacks white wing-patches and is a significantly smaller bird overall.



JOHN BREITSCH

21 Juvenile male Surf Scoter (Denver, Colorado, USA, 19 October 2013). The straight, Common Eider-like profile in this image is similar to Stejneger's Scoter, but the lack of white in the wing or extensive feathering onto the base of the bill leaves absolutely no room for confusion!

Adult male scoters

Adult female scoters



American White-winged



American White-winged



Stejneger's



Stejneger's



Velvet



Velvet



American White-winged



Stejneger's



Velvet



First-summer male Stejneger's

Where to watch scoters

THE recent occurrence of Stejneger's Scoter at Rossbeigh, Co Kerry, in March 2011, quickly followed by American White-winged Scoter off Blackdog, Aberdeenshire, in June 2011 excitingly underline the potential of discovering one of the two mega species virtually anywhere at any time.

Interestingly, both were found not during migration but in moult gatherings of Common Scoter. These larger flocks of scoter can be found at many sites round our coasts, but are often way offshore. However, traditional concentrations can be scoped in Carmarthen and Cardigan Bays off the Welsh coast, in the Moray Firth, Scotland, and at several places along the north Norfolk coast.

Keep an eye on BirdGuides (www.birdguides.com) for recent reports, and remember to scrupulously scrutinise passing black lines of scoters, not just for the white wing-flash of a Velvet, but for the bill profiles that could indicate an extreme vagrant. ■

READS



Frontiers in Birding by Martin Garner and Friends

This exceptional book covers many subjects at the cutting edge of bird identification. The meat of the book is Martin Garner's chapters on thorny identification problems, which include taking a much more detailed look at this tricky seabird complex. Purchase for just £9.99; SRP £19.99.

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IAN LEWINGTON