



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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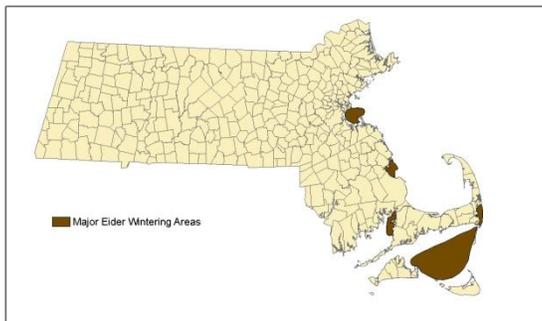
Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: Common Eiders are among the largest of all ducks. The drake is black and white with a white back and head and black underneath. Drakes also have black on the top of head. Females are barred brown overall. Both sexes have notably wide and extended bill processes. Eiders are chunky-looking birds. The males range from 22 to 26 inches in length and weigh 3.9 to 4.6 pounds. Adult females range from 21 to 24 inches in length and weigh 2.6 to 3.8 pounds.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: Common Eiders are northern nesters. The American race breeds from central Labrador to southern Maine, though breeding colonies have also become established in Massachusetts. A 1993 colonial waterbird survey revealed eiders nesting on four islands in Boston Harbor, one off Cape Ann, and in the Elizabeth Islands chain. The American race winters from the island of Newfoundland to Massachusetts, primarily north and east of the Cape Cod Canal, but greater numbers are now wintering in Buzzards Bay. Common Eiders are among the most abundant of wintering waterfowl, but numbers can fluctuate greatly from year to year. Recent Midwinter Waterfowl Survey counts have found 20,000 to 120,000 birds in Massachusetts. Breeding surveys have indicated that Common Eiders breeding in Maine have increased significantly in number and expanded their range farther south.



HABITAT DESCRIPTION: American Common Eiders nest on small and large offshore islets and islands along the northern Atlantic coast and the St. Lawrence River estuary. As island nesters, they often nest in dense colonies. Nest sites may be under shrubs, driftwood, or in grasses and weeds. Eiders winter along coastal waters in bays, large estuaries, and on the open ocean. Eiders feed almost entirely on animal matter, mainly mussels. Blue mussels are especially important in the diet of the American race. Eiders typically feed in waters 6 to 25 feet deep, but can dive to twice that depth.

THREATS: Eiders have low reproductive potential, with females not nesting until 2 or 3 years old and then laying only a clutch of four eggs. This creates a potential for over-harvest of this game species. Uncontrolled harvesting on both breeding and wintering habitat for blue mussel and finfish, as well as aquaculture, sea urchin, and rockweed harvest, threaten the species, as does summer residential development on offshore nesting islands. Nest predation by increased populations of large gulls may limit productivity. Frequent outbreaks of epizootic diseases in nesting colonies can decimate local populations. Oil spills may pose a risk, as well as contamination of benthic food supplies. In Massachusetts, a wind farm is proposed for Nantucket Sound, just outside of major eider wintering areas.

The New England states and some Atlantic Canada provinces have already taken measures to restrict the harvest of eiders by reducing bag limits. In Massachusetts, restrictions have been most pronounced, with the bag being reduced from 7 to 4, no more than one of which may be female. Declining numbers of waterfowl hunters further reduce harvest pressure on eiders. Limiting access to some islands in Boston Harbor during the nesting season would be desirable. Meanwhile, the USFWS should be encouraged to resume special sea duck surveys initiated in 1991 but

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

1 Rabbit Hill Rd., Westborough, MA; tel: 508-389-6300; fax: 508-389-7890; www.mass.gov/dfw

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suspended in 2003, and the eider should be included in colonial waterbird nesting surveys in Massachusetts.

REFERENCES:

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