

## Spotlight Species Action Plan

*Steller's eider*

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## U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE - SPOTLIGHT SPECIES ACTION PLAN

**Common Name:** Steller's Eider

**Scientific Name:** *Polysticta stelleri*

**Lead Region:** 7

**Lead Field Office:** Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office

### **Species Information:**

Status: Threatened (Alaska-breeding population)

Recovery Priority Number or Listing Priority Number: RPN = 3

Recovery Plan or Candidate Assessment Form: Recovery Plan dated 2002

Most Recent 5-year Review: No formal review.

Other: Recovery Team updates and prioritizes recovery action list on an approximately annual basis. Updates are approved by the Regional Director.

Threats: Threats on breeding grounds include shooting, ingestion of spent lead shot, disturbance and loss of breeding habitat, and predation by mammalian and avian predators. Potential alterations to breeding pond salinity or food availability due to climate change need to be investigated. In marine habitats, potential threats include future movement of bottom trawl commercial fishing into critical habitat, due to climate change, and future offshore oil and gas development in molting, wintering or staging areas.

**Target:** Prevent extinction.

**Measure:** Maintain or increase population numbers on the Alaska breeding grounds. Maintain a stable or increasing trend in the Pacific wintering population, which includes the listed population. The number of birds found shot on the breeding grounds must be reduced.

### **Actions:**

There are two important actions needed to achieve the target. One is to prevent further shooting of the species on the breeding grounds. On March 26, 2009 the North Slope Borough, the Native Village of Barrow, the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to facilitate protection of spectacled and Steller's eiders during the 2009 Migratory Bird Subsistence Harvest on the North Slope. The Ukeagvik Inupiat Corporation was also involved in the drafting of the MOU, but its President was not available at the time the other parties signed. The MOU sets forth specific measures to conserve Steller's eiders and other migratory birds. In signing the MOU, the parties recognized their shared concern for the threats facing the Alaska-breeding population of Steller's eiders, as well as their jointly held desire that the spring/summer migratory bird subsistence hunt continue as it has for thousands of years.

Under the terms of the memorandum, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and a Migratory Bird Task Force composed of representatives from each of the North Slope stakeholder groups will conduct a broad range of outreach activities. These will be designed to increase awareness of the biology and status of Steller's eiders; spread information about traditional hunting practices, hunting regulations, and the consequences of violating them; and help hunters better distinguish between the various species of migratory birds found on the North Slope during the subsistence hunting season. In addition, Service employees, volunteers, and Law Enforcement personnel working in the Barrow area in 2009 will undergo training in the traditions of the spring/summer hunt and other cultural factors. Also, we developed the "U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Conservation Measures for Steller's and Spectacled Eiders during the 2009 Alaska Migratory Bird Subsistence Harvest and 2009 Migratory Game Bird Hunt" (signed April 6, 2009), which specified measures the Service would implement to conserve listed eiders during hunts.

The second important action is to re-introduce Steller's eiders to the Yukon Delta, where they formerly bred, but are now rarely found. This project will require close cooperation with the Alaska SeaLife Center, which has established a captive breeding program in partnership with the Service, and under the guidance of the Recovery Team.

High priority recovery actions to address threats, including specific tasks related to the two actions described above, are listed in our Recovery On-line Activity Reporting system (ROAR), and must continue to be addressed.

*Identify responsible parties for the actions:*

An eider recovery coordinator is responsible for facilitating actions listed in ROAR, including identifying partners and funding sources. The MOU is managed by the Chief of the Endangered Species Branch of the lead office, and other signatories are described above. Many partners are actively involved in recovery of this species, including multiple divisions within the Service, other Federal land management and regulatory agencies, tribes and other Alaska Native organizations, State and local agencies, industry stakeholder groups and management bodies, the Alaska SeaLife Center (a research and educational institution), and conservation organizations. Many of these groups are represented on the Recovery Team. Each recovery action has an identified lead, and a description detailing the purpose, scope and methods required to accomplish it.

*Estimated costs of the actions:* There are currently more than 30 high priority recovery actions on the ROAR list. Costs vary depending on the type of partnership and in-kind support used to leverage projects. In some cases, portions of projects are funded as sources become available, so total cost may be variable. Other recovery actions such as education to prevent shooting or the use of lead shot by hunters are often opportunistic, using existing outreach programs, so their cost is variable and difficult to calculate on an annual basis.

**Role of other agencies:** The role of other agencies is critical to implement many recovery actions. Some Steller's eiders breed on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and State of Alaska lands leased for oil and gas development, and offshore development in eider critical habitat is regulated by the Minerals Management Service. Commercial fishing could eventually occur in critical habitat managed by NOAA Fisheries and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC). All these agencies are partners, and have funded eider recovery projects and/or worked to conserve eiders under their regulatory authority. For example, BLM funds eider education efforts on the North Slope, and the NPMFC has worked with NOAA Fisheries to close commercial fishing in the Northern Bering Sea where critical habitat occurs. The U.S. Geological

Survey conducts research on the Steller's eider, and participates on the Eider Recovery Team. The State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game and North Slope Borough have representatives on the Eider Recovery Team, and are actively involved in eider management.

**Role of other ESA programs:** During section 7 consultations on projects that may affect the Steller's eider, we work with the Federal action agency to minimize potential adverse effects to the species, and incorporate protective measures into proposed projects as appropriate. Section 7 consultations on eiders are conducted by both the Fairbanks and Anchorage Fish and Wildlife Field Offices. The Regional Office issues section 10 recovery permits that authorize research projects conducted by multiple partners. We work with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to develop section 6 projects on endangered, threatened, and candidate species in Alaska, including the Steller's eider. For example, we funded a section 6 project on the population structure and distribution of Steller's eider in Cook Inlet. The goal of section 6 projects is to learn more about the species and the threats facing them, in an effort to improve their status.

**Role of other FWS programs:** The Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge harbors a very small number of breeding Steller's eiders, and will be a vital partner in re-introduction efforts. Izembek National Wildlife Refuge is home to molting and wintering Steller's eiders, and the Refuge conducts banding drives to aid in establishing annual survival estimates for the species. The Division of Migratory Bird Management supports surveys to breeding eiders on the Yukon Delta and on the Arctic Coastal Plain in northern Alaska, and on the marine wintering grounds. The Division of Law Enforcement considers listed eiders to be a top priority, and works closely with the Refuge and partners on the Arctic Coastal Plain to prevent illegal harvest of eiders.

**Additional funding analysis:** We are working to acquire funding for all high priority recovery actions. Additional funding will increase the likelihood we will reach our target. The ongoing breeding population monitoring, predator control and education efforts at Barrow require \$110,000 per year, and are currently funded from grants that might not continue. Similarly, re-introduction is being funded from sources that are not guaranteed to continue, and require \$600,000 annually to maintain the program. Establishing release facilities will require additional funds of at least \$500,000. In addition, further work to understand effects of climate change, and education to prevent lead shot deposition into eider habitat and to prevent shooting would benefit from increased funding. We will continue to measure improvement by monitoring eider breeding population levels, and by measuring trends in the Pacific wintering population, which includes the listed population.