



*Threatened and Endangered Species*

# Steller's Eider

*(Polysticta stelleri)*

## Status

The Alaska breeding population of Steller's eider is listed as threatened (Federal Register; June 11, 1997). Critical habitat was designated in 2001.

## Description

Steller's eiders are the smallest of the four eider species, averaging about 800 grams (1.8 pounds) in weight. In the winter, spring, and early summer, adult males are in breeding plumage with a black back, white shoulders, chestnut breast and belly, a white head with a greenish tuft, and small black eye patches. During the late summer and fall, males molt into entirely mottled dark brown plumage. Females and juveniles are mottled dark brown year-round. Adults of both sexes have a blue patch with a white border on the upper wing, similar to mallards.

## Range and Population Level

Three breeding populations of Steller's eiders are recognized, two in Arctic Russia and one in Alaska. The Russian Atlantic population breeds in western Russia and winters in the north Atlantic Ocean, while the Russian Pacific population breeds in eastern Russia and winters in the southern Bering Sea. Neither Russian breeding population is listed as endangered or threatened; only Steller's eiders that nest in Alaska are considered threatened under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA). Population sizes are only imprecisely known. The Russian Atlantic population is believed to contain 30,000 to 50,000 individuals, and the Russian Pacific population likely numbers 50,000 to 100,000. The threatened Alaska-breeding population is thought to number only about 500 individuals.

The Alaska-breeding population historically nested in western and northern Alaska. In western Alaska,



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*Adult male Steller's eiders are distinguishable by their breeding plumage (above). During the late summer and fall, males are entirely mottled brown, similar to the year-round coloring of females and juveniles.*

they were once locally common in portions of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (YKD) and also nested on Saint Lawrence Island, the Seward Peninsula, the Alaska Peninsula, and Aleutian Islands. Today, however, Steller's eiders are extremely rare nesters on the YKD and have not been found breeding elsewhere in western Alaska for several decades. The species' current breeding range in Alaska is primarily confined to the Arctic Coastal Plain, with a notable concentration near Barrow. Here, at the core of their North American range, they appear to be periodic nesters; a small number of pairs only successfully produce broods every few years.

Adults undergo a flightless molt in autumn; most molt in a few lagoons on the north side of the Alaska Peninsula and along the western Alaska coast. While some remain in these

molting areas throughout winter, others disperse to coastal waters of the eastern Aleutian Islands, southern Alaska Peninsula, Kodiak Archipelago, and southern Cook Inlet where they mix with the much more numerous Russian Pacific population.

## Habitat and Habits

Steller's eiders are diving ducks that spend most of the year in shallow, near-shore marine waters. They feed by diving and dabbling for mollusks and crustaceans in shallow water. In summer, they nest in tundra adjacent to small ponds or within drained lake basins and wetlands.

## Reasons for Current Status

The Alaska-breeding population was listed due to a contraction in its range. Today, the causes of the range contraction and population

decline are still unknown but several potential threats have been identified. Lead poisoning, caused by ingesting spent lead shot, may have affected Steller's eiders on the YKD. Predation on the breeding grounds may be increasing in areas where populations of ravens, gulls and foxes are enhanced by human activities. Steller's eiders are still harvested despite regulations that prohibit hunting in Alaska.

Impaired water quality may also threaten the health of Steller's eiders; marine pollutants from point and non-point sources are believed to directly and indirectly cause harm to Steller's eiders. Exposure to contaminants such as petroleum oils and wastewater discharges can have short and long-term effects, especially when incorporated into the food chain. Steller's eiders are also known to collide with towers and wires, especially during periods of low visibility.

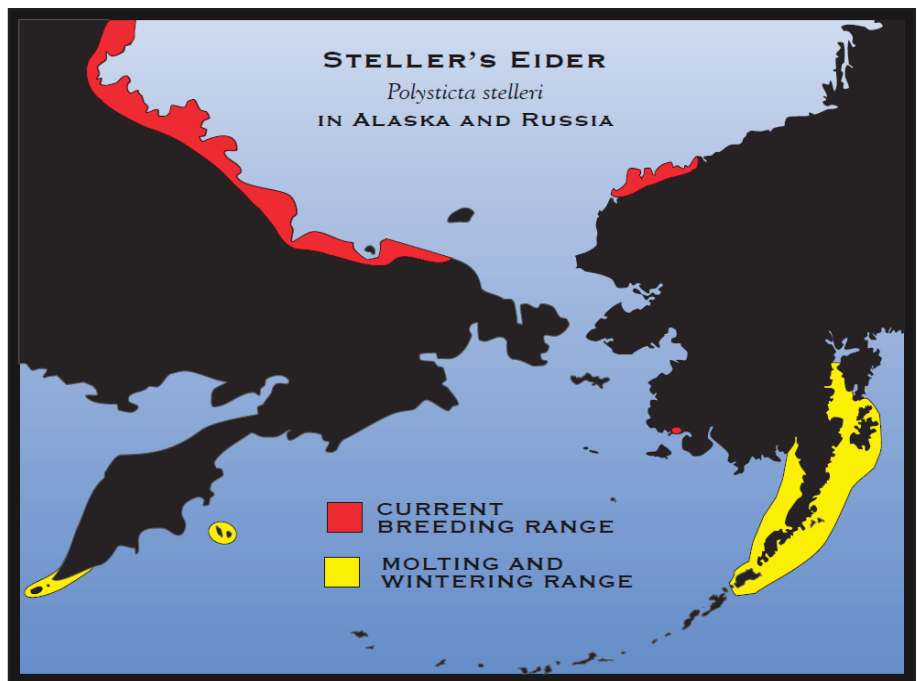
### Management and Protection

Subsistence and sport hunting of Steller's eiders is prohibited under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. In Russia, hunting of Steller's eiders has been closed since 1981, but subsistence harvest occurs in Siberia at an unknown level. Sport hunting of Steller's eiders in Alaska has been closed since 1991 but some illegal sport and subsistence harvest still occurs. Non-toxic shot must be used for all waterfowl hunting. Use of lead shot for waterfowl hunting has been prohibited throughout the United States since 1991. In 2006 and 2007, the State of Alaska Board of Game passed regulations prohibiting the use of lead shot for upland game bird hunting on the Arctic Coastal Plain and all bird and small game hunting on the YKD.

All federal agencies must consult with the Service on any project they authorize, fund, or carry out that may affect Steller's eiders or other listed species, or affect certain areas important to these birds that have been designated as critical habitat (16 USC 1531). To protect Steller's eiders and their breeding, molting, and wintering habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (the Service) recommends the guidelines below for projects and activities within the range of Steller's eiders.

For projects within the breeding range of Steller's eiders:

- Assess whether Steller's eiders are likely to use the project area for nesting or brood-rearing. For projects conducted during the breeding season, a nesting survey for Steller's eiders should be conducted in the year of construction, prior to initiation of construction.
- Determine if Steller's eider nests are in the project area. If present, the following



*Distribution of Steller's eiders in Alaska and Russia. Detailed maps of Steller's eider nesting, molting and wintering areas available upon request at the contact below.*

activities require special permits within 200 meters (656 feet) of nest sites:

- (1) Vehicle and foot traffic from May 20 through August 1, except on existing roads;
  - (2) Construction of permanent facilities, placement of fill, or alteration of habitat;
  - (3) Introduction of high noise levels from May 20 through August 1.
- Eiders are present on breeding grounds from mid-May through mid-September, but activities any time of year may affect them through habitat modification.

To reduce the probability of collisions:

- Avoid using steady-state red lights on structures. Generally minimize lighting, but when it is necessary, directly light downward rather than allowing it to radiate up and outward.
- Use bird flight diverters on power lines and guy wires.
- Plan to locate overhead structures such as powerlines and wind turbines at least ½ mile inland from the coast.

To reduce the probability of disturbance at sea:

- Avoid boating through flocks of Steller's eiders.
- Avoid traversing Steller's eider molting areas during late summer months.

To protect water quality:

- Maintain vessels in good working order, look for leaky fuel lines and faulty seals, and make repairs immediately.
- Develop a plan for preventing and responding to spills.
- Dispose of waste oil appropriately.
- Avoid fueling on the water and use fuel collars during fueling.
- Use an in-line bilge water filter for removing contamination from bilge water.

*For more information on Steller's eider, contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.*

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