



# Steller's Eiders on the Brink

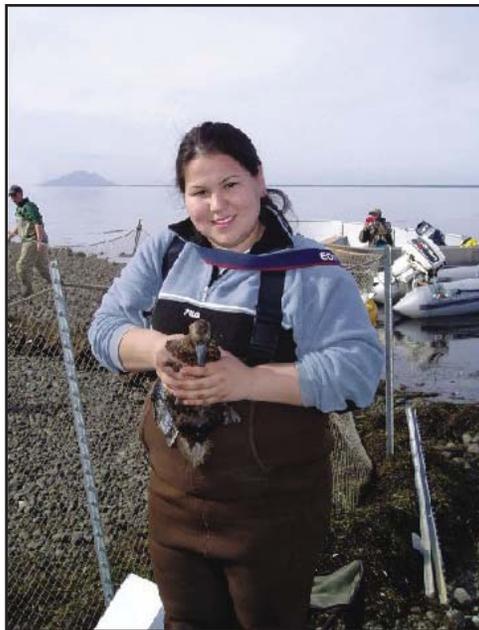
## Rare Duck Faces Threats on Arctic Breeding Grounds

Fairbanks Fish & Wildlife Field Office

### North American Breeding Decline Prompts Listing

In 1997, the Alaska-breeding population of the Steller's eider was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act due to steep declines on the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge and the North Slope. Breeding populations in Russia also declined, causing the World Conservation Union (IUCN) to list the entire species as vulnerable. Today, what we know about the Alaska-breeding population suggests that the risk of extirpation in the short term is very high. The Steller's Eider Recovery Plan identifies recovery actions addressing information needs; threats to Steller's eiders, such as shooting, lead poisoning, and predation; and re-establishment of a breeding population on the Yukon Delta.

### The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners have an active recovery program based on the Recovery Plan.



In the "Eider Journey" education program, Barrow students assist with eider surveys, research, and conservation efforts.



A Steller's eider hen guards her brood near Barrow on Alaska's North Slope.

■ Partner-supported education programs on the North Slope, Yukon Delta and on other refuges encourage the use of non-toxic shot, and send the message that shooting Steller's eiders is illegal and harmful to the population. On the North Slope, an outreach team of biologists, outreach specialists and law enforcement agents from the Service, State of Alaska and North Slope Borough visits villages to present a unified message and to encourage dialogue with local residents.

■ Control of arctic foxes, a major egg predator, near Barrow on the North Slope in 2005-2008 appears to have significantly improved nest success.

In 2003, the Eider Research Program at the Alaska SeaLife Center acquired the only captive research flocks of Steller's and spectacled eiders, providing vital information on disease, diet, causes of egg infertility, and techniques to enhance egg survival. The Center often hosts recovery team meetings, and two members of the Recovery Team are scientists at the Center, ensuring that research is closely aligned with recovery priorities.

### Partners

- ABR Inc.
  - Alaska Department of Fish & Game
  - Alaska SeaLife Center
  - Audubon Alaska
  - Barrow schools and local land owners
  - BP Alaska
  - Conoco Phillips
  - Delta Waterfowl
  - National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
  - North Slope Borough
  - U.S. Bureau of Land Management
  - U.S.D.A. APHIS Wildlife Services
  - U.S. Geological Survey Alaska Science Center
- USFWS Programs:**
- Contaminants, Endangered Species, Law Enforcement, Migratory Bird Management, National Wildlife Refuges



This male Steller's eider will visit the nesting grounds near Barrow for a short time in early summer. He will spend the rest of each year in marine waters off the coast of Alaska and Russia.



*In partnership With the Service, The Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward, Alaska reared 24 Steller's eiders taken from the wild as eggs at Barrow in 2005 and 2006*

### **Re-Establishment on the Yukon Delta Would Require a Captive Breeding Flock**

The development of a captive breeding flock is the first step toward possible re-introduction. The Eider Recovery Team determined that such a flock should be created from the listed Alaska-breeding population. The best way to create a captive breeding flock of known Alaska origin would be to salvage or opportunistically collect eggs from nests at Barrow and hatch them in captivity.

The Eider Recovery Team realized that if the already tenuous Barrow population declined further, it might take many years to create such a flock. In 2005, the team recommended immediate creation of a flock of known Alaska origin, and concurrently initiated a captive breeding/re-introduction feasibility analysis.

In 2005-2006, the Alaska SeaLife Center and US Fish & Wildlife Service collected eggs from nests at Barrow which were used to develop a captive flock. This flock is now reaching maturity, and progress in developing captive-breeding techniques has been rapid.

**The Alaska SeaLife Center serves a key role in efforts to evaluate feasibility, prepare a plan, develop techniques to support possible re-introduction, and maintain a captive flock of Steller's eiders of Alaska origin.**

To determine if reintroduction should be used in Steller's eider recovery, the Alaska SeaLife Center is leading development of a re-introduction feasibility analysis, a multifaceted process to assess methodologies, risk factors, success indicators, and long term projections of re-introduction to support recovery.

The Alaska SeaLife Center is uniquely qualified for this effort. The staff's experience with existing research flocks, state-of-the-art sea duck facilities, expertise in animal health and husbandry, and the Center's location in Alaska all increase the chances for success. The eider research staff's expertise on captive propagation, eider biology, limiting factors, and disease risk factors provides critical information for re-introduction feasibility analysis.

This feasibility analysis will be used by the Eider Recovery team and Fish & Wildlife Service to determine if, when, where, and how to use reintroduction as a recovery tool for Steller's eiders.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
1 800/344 WILD

For more information, contact:  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Endangered Species Branch Chief  
101 12th. Ave., Room 110, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701  
907/456/0441

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