

## THE STELLER'S EIDER

by Robert C. Vernon, Westwood

Imagine! A Steller's Eider in Massachusetts! Perhaps that is not too surprising. Every year seems to have its rarities. There was the Great Gray Owl, the Ross' Gull, the Ivory Gulls, and Eurasian Curlew, and the McCown's Longspur. But my son, James H. Vernon, and I continue to be amazed that we were the ones to "discover" the Steller's Eider. We are only intermediate birders and just happened to be at the right place at the right time.

Jim and I were both on vacation that last week in March. On Tuesday the 29th, we decided to go birding on the South Shore. We drove down to Brant Rock and leisurely worked our way north. This was the first of the record warm sunny days of late March. In spite of a fresh breeze we were comfortable enough to take time to stop and "scope" the sea birds wherever there was a convenient place. At nearly every stop we saw Common Goldeneyes, Red-breasted Mergansers, and Common Eiders. Around 10:30 we arrived at a small parking area by a seawall where Turner Road intersects Jericho Road in Scituate. I looked through the scope for a while, and then Jim took a turn. Within a short time he said, "There's an eider with a beautiful, rusty breast." The bird at the time was preening itself so that Jim could not see its head. I had my copy of Robbins in hand so I opened it to the page of eiders and reported that "the Steller's Eider has a rusty breast." Jim indicated that this bird really did seem different and that I had better take a look. I looked at it and began to call off the field marks while Jim held the book: "Large, black eye, dark promences on the back of the head, a small bill, and a black collar around its neck." Pretty soon it flapped its wings and "stood up" on its tail. I saw that the entire undersides were a beautiful, rusty brown. Finally, I noted that the back was black. Jim said that all those field marks corresponded with the description of the Steller's Eider!

We began to get excited. We both took two or three more turns examining the bird. It was keeping company with Common Goldeneyes, and it was clear that this bird was slightly smaller. The bird gradually moved away from shore and toward the south. We were now thoroughly convinced that we were seeing a drake Steller's Eider. Jim went to the car and wrote down everything he could think of regarding description of the bird, weather conditions, time, place, etc.

I had been calling the "Voice of Audubon" quite regularly, and I had not heard of any Steller's Eider. Therefore, our next thought was to notify the birding community of our find. We were fearful that the bird might leave before anyone else got to see it. The nearby houses seemed deserted, and there were few people about, so we proceeded north keeping a lookout for a telephone booth. During the noon hour we found a filling station with a phone booth, and I called Massachusetts Audubon. Richard Forster was out to lunch, so I left a brief message about the discovery.

We continued northward and stopped at a few more places, but gradually our enthusiasm for birding gave way to a desire to share our excitement with others. Around 3:30 P.M., I again tried to call Richard Forster to make sure he had received word of our find and to describe the field marks to him. He was still unavailable, so I called Ruth Emery. To my surprise she had already heard about it! Apparently Richard Forster had been sufficiently

convinced by our message to call her. We later learned that several people had seen it by that evening. The news had travelled quickly.

We spent the rest of the afternoon looking up information in Pough, Bailey, Griscom, A. C. Bent, and Kortright. We learned that the species is found in Arctic Siberia and in the Bering Sea. It winters in the Aleutians and along the Arctic coast west to northern Europe. It apparently had never before been seen in Massachusetts. (According to Richard Forster the only previous sighting in the lower forty-eight states was in Maine in 1926.) By now we were elated!

That evening Jim called some birding friends in Greenwich, Connecticut, where he lives. A friend on the Audubon staff there didn't believe Jim at first. He thought he was joking. When finally convinced, all the friend could say was "Karrumba!" I called Kimball Elkins in New Hampshire. Just after I had gotten into bed that night, the phone rang. It was a man from Hartford who wanted to learn just where we had seen the eider.

Because of a minor illness my wife had missed the thrill of seeing the Steller's Eider. By Wednesday afternoon she felt well enough to go, so the three of us went back to Jericho Road. With the help of birders on the scene we soon spotted the bird again. It came closer gradually, and we had very good views of it as it put on a great show trying to court some female Goldeneyes. While we were there, we met some of Jim's friends from Connecticut, a couple from Poughkeepsie, New York, and two people from Maine, one from as far away as Lincoln. It is interesting how the news had spread. (I wish that someone would write about how the birding "hotline" works.) We heard about other birders from out of state who had been there that morning.

On Wednesday evening we were interviewed and photographed by the Globe. Later I was interviewed by the New Yorker magazine. But the best of the fringe benefits was having other birders come up to us, shake our hands, and either congratulate or thank us.

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