

Scoters and Their Occurrence in Ohio

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Scoters are seabirds which are infrequently encountered along Lake Erie and less so inland. It is felt that any scoter encountered in Ohio deserves a thorough look. Males can be identified at greater distances due to distinct head and wing differences. Due to visibility of white in the wing, identification of the white-winged scoter is attainable in flight even at a seemingly great distance. Because the adult males are not likely to be confused, female and immature plumages will be emphasized. An attempt will also be made to present a picture as to the season in which each species is to be expected.

At Rest: Males are fairly rare and in fall migration nearly every bird is in immature or female plumage. Males should present the fewest problems of identification; the exception being the possible confusion of a first summer white-winged scoter with that of an adult black scoter. Immature white-wingeds will appear all black at a distance and effort should be taken to locate wing patches and note the bill size. Seasoned observers have been observed calling a female black scoter a ruddy duck on more than one occasion. Black scoters are the smallest of the scoters but not even close to the size of a ruddy duck. The prominent white cheek patch of a resting ruddy duck contrasts sharply with the black crown areas. The crown in turn contrasts with grey nape and upper parts of the winter plumaged ruddy duck. Although some female black scoters have distinct white cheek patches they are not as white as a ruddy duck. The cheek of the black scoter contrasts with the crown but the crown is uniform in color with the rest of the upperparts. The cheek of the black scoter female easily separates it from surf and white-winged scoters. At rest, surf and white-winged scoters are very similar in shape. Unless the white wing patch is visible or the two are side by side the difference in size is of little consequence. The head shapes are fairly similar with the white-winged having a more abrupt forehead. It seems like the bill of the surf scoter protrudes from the top of the head but at a distance this is of little use. Identifications based on intensity of facial spots is touchy at best. The surf is more likely to have distinct spotting but several white-wingeds have been observed to have very noticeable spots in front of and behind the eye. This is particularly true for immature white-wingeds. The character found most useful (after my observations) is the cap of a surf scoter. The black crown contrasts very sharply with the brownish areas of the face. This has been noticed in breeding plumage females as well. These areas do not contrast in the white-winged scoter, although they may seem obscure to the novice; a veteran observer will understand their meaning.

In Flight: Once again the adult male plumage is striking and identification is usually not the problem. The only immature scoter that can be relatively easy to identify at a distance, in flight, is

the white-winged. The cheek patch of the black scoter is visible at a good distance and a few observers can identify them correctly on this feature. However, the contrasting cap to face feature of the surf scoter can cause misidentification. Identifying these two in flight is difficult especially at great distances. Field guides mention the two-toned effect of the dark wing linings to the silvery flight feathers of the black scoter as a means of identification. This is useful in adult males but since the majority of Ohio scoters are immatures this will probably be of minimal help. It is hard to imagine that all lines of scoters flying by one's favorite Lake Erie observation point can be correctly identified to species. Unless they are observed at a relatively close distance it is felt they should be reported as scoter species. This may cause some observers to scoff but even the best of them misidentify scoters at not so great distances. Reporting should be one hundred percent accurate, not fifty-fifty.

Occurrence: Probably the only definite conclusion one might make of scoter occurrence in Ohio is that the white-winged is the most likely to be encountered. Autumn migration provides the state with the most reports. Of these, the south shore of Lake Erie provides the lion's share. Although rare, it is possible to see all three species of scoter in a single outing along Lake Erie. It would be exceedingly rare to observe all three species at an inland location. Scoters start to arrive with the other divers in October and can linger into December and rarely January except for the white-winged. Numbers can vary from year to year with flocks of 40+ black scoters flying single file just above Lake Erie not surprisingly. Surf scoters are usually found in smaller groups. Recent reports indicate that they are more widespread than black scoters but historically this has not always been true. White-winged scoters are encountered at about the same time as the other scoters and not likely to be found in flocks of ten or more. There are days, usually in mid-November, when one may encounter any of the three species in good numbers along Lake Erie. This is a matter of being in the right place at the right time. In winter white-wingeds are the most likely to remain in the open water areas. Notes should be taken on possible black and surf scoters regardless of where they are encountered at this season. It is not implied that they need a great deal of documentation, but demand a thorough observation. In spring one will find scoters to be late migrants. White-wingeds still constitute the majority of scoter reports in this period. White-wingeds are encountered earlier in spring (due possibly to the numbers that winter on Lake Ontario) but can be expected into May. Scoters are rare inland at any season but may occur inland as well as along Lake Erie at this time. All indications point to the fact that black and surf scoters migrate in April through early May. In summer scoters are casual at best. All reports at this time should be documented thoroughly.