

Occurrence of the Smew in British Columbia, with comments on other North American records

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THE SMEW (*Mergellus albellus*) is a small Old World merganser which occurs in North America mainly in the Aleutian Islands and nearby areas of Alaska. The first Alaskan record was in 1960, and the species has been seen there every year since 1969 (see Byrd *et al.*, 1974). There have also been seven reported occurrences of the Smew elsewhere in North America. Of these, two each were in Ontario and Rhode Island, and the other three — the main subject of this account — were in south coastal British Columbia between 1970 and 1975.

On November 14, 1970, an adult male Smew was found by Ed Moody on Lost Lagoon, a freshwater pond in Stanley Park, Vancouver, British Columbia (see description of area by Kautesk 1977). It was seen again by a total of 16 observers on November 18 and 23, 1970, but not on the intervening dates (Campbell *et al.*, 1972). The Smew evidently used Lost Lagoon only as a nocturnal roosting-place, arriving in late afternoon with flocks of Common (*Bucephala clangula*) and Barrow's Goldeneyes (*B. islandica*), and departing at dawn. The bird's daytime haunts were never discovered. Attempts to photograph the Smew were unsuccessful, but a detailed field description obtained by Campbell on November 18 is now on file at the British Columbia Provincial Museum, Victoria.

A female-plumaged Smew was discovered

on February 28, 1974 by Weber at the George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, about 12 miles south of downtown Vancouver in the Fraser River delta. Many observers saw the bird there until March 21, 1974, and photographs were taken by Ervio Sian and Neil K. Dawe. Copies of these have been deposited in the Photoduplicate File of British Columbia vertebrates (PDF No. 345), housed at the Provincial Museum in Victoria (see Campbell and Stirling 1971).

On January 14, 1975, an adult male Smew was found at the Reifel Sanctuary by Brian Davies and Colin Trefry. This bird was seen by both authors and by numerous other observers until March 30, 1975 at the sanctuary, where it associated with both wild and pinioned waterfowl in the refuge display ponds. A photograph (Fig. 1) was obtained on January 20, 1975 by Ervio Sian, a copy of which is also at the Provincial Museum (PDF No. 395). We suspect that the 1974 Smew was an immature male, and that the same bird returned in 1975 after acquiring its adult plumage.

IN ALASKA, nearly 30 records of the Smew have been listed by Byrd *et al.* (1974) and in the Alaska regional reports of *American Birds*. Localities of occurrence include the Aleutian Islands (Adak, Amchitka, Attu, and Shemya), the Pribilof Islands (St. Paul) and Kodiak



Smew, Reifel Sanctuary, Vancouver, B.C., January 20, 1975. Photo/ Ervio Sian.

Island (one bird present from March 7 to April 25, 1976 — see *AB* 30:755 and 30:877, 1976). Except for one bird at Adak from July 3 to 31, 1975, the Smew is known in Alaska as a migrant and winter visitant (extreme dates, Sept 29 to June 18). As of this writing (August 1978), there have been no reports of Smews between Kodiak and the Vancouver area, more than 1300 miles to the southeast, nor any reports in the Pacific Coast states south of Vancouver.

Several species of Asiatic waterfowl have recently been found to winter regularly in southwestern British Columbia. These include the Eurasian Green-winged Teal, *Anas crecca nimia*, and European Wigeon, *Anas penelope* (Campbell *et al.*, 1974, Tatum 1973) and the Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula* (Campbell and Weber 1976). The Smew, as well as these other species, probably reaches the area as occasional stray individuals which accompany flocks of other waterfowl migrating down the Pacific coast. More intensive observations in future may in fact reveal the Smew to winter regularly (annually) in the Pacific Northwest.

THE FOUR EASTERN North American records are as follows: one female-plumaged bird on the Niagara River, Ontario, from February 26 to March 6, 1960 (Godfrey 1966, p. 84); one (sex unreported) on December 9 and 10, 1973 at Normandale, Ontario (*AB* 28:633, 1974); one adult male at Middletown and Newport, Rhode Island, January 3 to April 2, 1976 (*AB* 30:691, 1976); and one adult male near Westerly, Rhode Island, January 16 to 29, 1978 (*AB* 32:322, 1978). The 1976 and 1978 Rhode Island records very likely involve the same individual, as can also be said of the 1974 and 1975 Vancouver sightings. The origin of the Ontario and Rhode Island birds is problematical, but they seem more likely to have been vagrants from western Europe than from eastern Siberia and Alaska.

In evaluating the occurrence of Eurasian waterfowl species in North America, serious consideration must be given to the possibility of birds escaped from captivity. The Smew, however, is quite rare in captivity (Ryan 1976), and we consider it very unlikely that any of the records cited above refer to escaped individuals.

Besides the Smew's rarity in captivity, several other facts argue for a wild origin for most or all of these birds. These facts are: (1) all non-Alaskan records fall during the period November 14 to April 2 (escapes would be equally likely at any season); (2) all North American records are from the Pacific and Atlantic coasts or from the Great Lakes region, where one would expect vagrant Eurasian waterfowl to occur; (3) the Smew is a highly migratory species which breeds across the boreal forest region of northern Eurasia, from which birds could easily wander to the east or west coasts of North America; and (4) the occurrence of a bird at the same or a nearby locality in successive winters in British Columbia and Rhode Island strongly suggests the migratory movements of a wild bird.

THE ABOVE CONSIDERATIONS notwithstanding, James *et al.* (1976), in their annotated checklist of Ontario birds, included the Smew in a list of "probable escapees". On the other hand, Godfrey (1966) considered the 1960 bird to be a genuine European vagrant, a view with which we agree. We concede that one can almost never be *certain* that a particular Smew is a wild bird and not an escapee; however, we feel that the slight possibility of an escapee can be effectively ignored. In an earlier paper (Campbell and Weber 1976), we reached the same conclusion for North American records of the Tufted Duck, although this species may be somewhat less rare in captivity than the Smew. The same cannot be said for certain other Eurasian waterfowl occasionally reported in North America, such as the Bar-headed Goose (*Anser indicus*) and Red-breasted Goose (*Branta ruficollis*); records of these species probably involve escaped captives, as both are common in waterfowl collections (see Ryan 1976 and McCaskie *et al.*, 1970). Our point is that the probability of a wild *vs.* escaped bird varies according to the species of

waterfowl, but there are at least a few species (the Garganey, *Anas querquedula*, is another example) which are so rare in captivity that the odds are highly in favor of a wild origin.

We hope this brief review will help to clarify the status of the Smew in North America, and also the entire question of the origin of Eurasian waterfowl species reported on this continent. We thank Jerome A. Jackson for helpful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript

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