

Smew in San Joaquin County – a first for the Central Valley

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Thursday, 20 January 2000, “Smew Day,” will always be etched in my mind. The day started off routinely enough, but ended with a good deal of excitement for me, and temporary disappointment for a couple of outstanding San Joaquin County birders.

Events were set in motion that afternoon while I was working in my office. My wife, Jean, called to tell me that a friend, Ev deRusha, who lives out on the Old River north of Tracy, San Joaquin Co., had seen a Smew (*Mergellus albellus*) earlier that day. Ev related to Jean that this duck didn't look like any other she had ever seen, nor did it look like the Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) that had visited her place for several days. This bird she declared was a Smew; she was certain of that, because she had identified it by finding its picture in her National Geographic *Guide to Birds of North America*. Ev wanted to know if Jean or I could drive out to have a look.

Jean, a kindergarten teacher, could not leave her charges unattended, so she called to ask me if I could verify Ev's sighting. I felt that this must be a case of misidentification, besides I was busy, and there was a staff meeting in an hour. But, sensing this was a serious matter to Jean, I left with some reluctance.

I arrived at Ev's home at approximately 2:15 p.m. hoping I could get this over quickly and return to work. It was not to be. Not wishing to offend, I hesitantly asked Ev if she was sure the duck she observed was a Smew? “Oh yes, I'm certain of it,” she replied. And pointing to her field guide, which was opened to the page depicting the Smew, she said resolutely, “That's it!”

“Do you know where it is?” I asked. Ev responded, saying, “I noticed it swimming toward the Tracy Boulevard Bridge an hour or so ago.” I was really having doubts now. I asked permission to climb and walk the levee toward the bridge. The levee is lined with valley oak and Oregon ash, and there are only a few places where one can get a good look at the river. I had not walked more than a sixteenth of a mile or so, when I noticed a white duck with rapid wing beats was flying low over the river in a westerly direction toward Ev's home. I hurried back, but couldn't locate this white duck from Ev's front porch, so I thought I'd drive to Oak Island and have a look. There is a boat dock located at Oak Island, and it would afford a relatively unobstructed view of the river. As it turned out, I drove only 75 or 100 feet west, from where I had parked in front of Ev's home. A concrete boat ramp is located at this spot. This vantage point offered a fairly good view, so I grabbed my binoculars, put them up to my eyes and, right in front of me, perhaps no more that 45-55 feet away, was this beautiful male Smew, in breeding plumage, looking in my direction. I watched him for approximately 20-25 seconds. Indeed it was a Smew. Then the bird made a quarter turn, headed west. He began swimming slowly in that direction.

It was at this point that I must have startled the bird. As I turned to locate my scope, the Smew leapt from the water and flew west. "Oh my," I said to myself, "who's going to believe this?" At this point I was beginning to doubt myself, then I remembered that another person besides me had seen this Smew. Regaining my composure and reassuring myself that I wasn't in some kind of dream state, I calmly tried to recollect as much as I could.

I knew I needed to alert other birders quickly. I telephoned Waldo Holt who said he'd be down as soon as possible. Waldo indicated that he would try to contact David Yee. In the meantime, I went back to work to close shop, return home to change my clothes, and then head on out to Old River to meet Waldo. While waiting for Waldo to arrive, I jotted down some fairly extensive notes on the Smew's characteristics:

Description —The bird was largely white, with a black spot that covered the area between the base of the bill and the eye. The bill was short, dark and fairly narrow. The larger portion of the cheek was white; the chin and neck were also white. The head appeared rather large for a duck of this size, which I estimated to be about 15 to 17, inches in length—about teal size. At the top of the head there appeared to be a black crown slightly wider than the white crest that appeared to run from the top of the head down the back of the neck to the nape. Also, I could see two distinct black lines one of which ran approximately at a 45-degree angle from just below the base of the neck across the white breast. The other thin line extended vertically from the shoulder of the folded wing to the belly or the imaginary line that separates the belly from the breast. The primary tips of the folded wings were black. When the Smew took to flight, I didn't notice it trying to accelerate its take off by trying to walk on the water, as do some geese and coots. As this bird was gaining altitude, I could clearly see a dark, almost black, streak running down the middle of its back or mantle. Its wings were dark or black with white on the trailing edges of the secondaries (speculum). There was an elongated white patch in the area of the median coverts. I did not get a good look at the tail, nor did I see the bird's feet.

Waldo showed up within an hour and David arrived a little later. We searched until almost dark, but we had no success in relocating the Smew. On Saturday, 22 January, Waldo and a friend of his unsuccessfully searched Old River by boat. On Sunday, 23 January, the Smew was refound by Steve Hampton and Jean Broadhvest and seen that day by David Yee and Waldo Holt. The bird was subsequently seen by many other birders through 16 February, though often after considerable searching.

According to Roberson (1980) reports of Smews on the West Coast of North America totaled at least 55 birds from Alaska and 3 from British Columbia prior to 1979. Smews are considered scarce in captivity (Ryan 1976) and Roberson (1980) suggested all West Coast Smews should be considered true vagrants.

Since 1980, The Washington Bird Records Committee has accepted three reports of Smew: an adult male in Willard, Skamania Co., 28 December 1989; an

adult male in Stevenson, Skamania Co., 26 January–13 February 1991; and one at McKenna, Pierce Co., 14-20 March 1993 (Dennis Paulson pers. comm.). Interestingly, the male seen in Washington in 1991 also was seen on the Oregon side of the Columbia River in Hood River County, from 27 January to 1 April, and as the first accepted record for Oregon (C. Miller pers. comm.; Evanich 1991). The Oregon Bird Records Committee accepted a record of what it felt to be the same bird (last seen with a broken bill), returning for a second winter, at Government Cove, Hood River Co., 1-16 February 1992 (C. Miller pers. comm.).

The only accepted sighting in California is of a male that wintered in Foster City, San Mateo Co., for three consecutive years: 19 December 1981-18 February 1982; 1 December 1982-13 February 1983; and 19 December 1983-22 January 1984 (Binford 1985, Roberson 1986). Pending acceptance by the California Bird Records Committee, the record reported here would be the second for the state.

I'd like to thank Ev duRusha for being such a keen observer. It was because of her observation and curiosity that many birders were able to see and enjoy this Smew. I also wish to thank the following: Craig Miller, Dennis Paulson, and Tim Manolis for help in researching previous records on the West Coast; Waldo Holt, David Yee, Steve Hampton, and Jean Broadhvest for help in relocating the Smew; Dr. John Blades and Rich Peterson for reporting the last confirmed sighting of the bird; and Don Roberson for reviewing a draft of the manuscript.

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