

KING EIDER IN BUTE

By Patrick Crichton

There have been, recently, some spectacular range expansions by birds. The *collared dove* is one which has expanded across Europe from Turkey since the last war. Another bird, which interests me more, is the *fulmar* (*Fulmarus Glacialis*) whose first range extension was reported as long ago as 1753, but whose recent extensions of breeding areas have included Norway in 1924, Northern France in 1960 and West Germany in 1972. In 1977 the fulmar was observed breeding south of St. Johns, Newfoundland, which has about the same latitude as Paris. No explanation of the apparent conditions for the fulmar's range extension satisfies all the known facts.

The relevance of my remarks about the fulmar becomes apparent when I question the conclusions we may draw from the appearance of drake *King Eider* (*Somateria Spectabilis*) in the Clyde, and more particularly, in Bute. The recent sightings have included the Garroch Head (1979, Ian Hopkins), Woodhall, Greenock, Lochranza and Fintray Bay, Great Cumbrae (Angus Hogg, Scottish Bird Reports). However, to the Society, the most exciting event was the appearance of a drake for 14 days from May 31st, 1980 on the coast between Ascog Bay and Kerrycroy.

The *King Eider* and the *Longtailed Duck* (*Clangula Hyemalis*) are the two most northerly nesting ducks and even their winter distributions are normally concentrated in fairly high altitudes. (Palmer, British Birds, March 1977). For the most part *King Eider* nest in arctic tundra, close to shallow melting pools where the surfacing of the ice lens disturbs the bottom and frees the food supply. However, the *King Eider* is less firmly linked to coastline and is more tolerant of abrupt changes of habitat, diet and pattern of life than the more familiar *Eider* (*Somateria Mollissima*) (Birds of the Western Palearctic — S. Cramp et Al. 1977). It is the duck which searches out a nest site, accompanied by her consort, which may explain why drakes have been seen on the Clyde, the duck having gone north to look for nesting sites in more

familiar territory, quite apart from the fact that she is far less easily distinguished from her sister Eider.

Our own King Eider has shown some well-known behavioural patterns, but in rather unusual circumstances. He was, on most occasions, the consort of two Eider ducks and ten ducklings. The ducks showed all the field characters of Eider. It would have been virtually impossible to have detected any colouring characteristics among the ducklings which might indicate hybridisation, and their delightful swimming and diving patterns would qualify them for either species.

Throughout the period of observation there were families of Eider in the vicinity, none of which were accompanied by a drake, and all of which had "aunties", ducks which have lost their brood. Curiously, however, it was the two apparent families accompanied by the King Eider which displayed the creche characteristics, that is they roosted together and swam and dived together, although noticeably members of two broods, one being several days older than the other. At the same time, there were in the vicinity three small parties of Eider drakes who, for the most part, kept apart from the families, either sitting on the rocks or rafting close to the shore line. However, on three occasions two Eider drakes came close to our families; they sheered off on the first two occasions without any overt display on either side. On the third occasion, however, on June 10th, there was a pantomime of display both by the King Eider drake and his two ducks. The drake indulged in silent chin lifting, and also swam towards the Eider ducks with neck extended and chin close to the water. When an Eider drake approached the ducks on shore the ducks indulged in bill pointing with stretched lowered neck, until he withdrew.

What is interesting is that the authorities describe normal behaviour, by drakes of both species, showing aggressive behaviour during the nesting period, and during the first part of incubation, when the drakes might expect still to accompany their ducks. But the described pattern is for the drakes to leave the ducks after the first part of incubation and congregate together. In Iceland there is sufficient evidence of trio bonds, consisting of one duck and two drakes,

one of each species, and hybridisation has been well recorded (Palmer). We also know, from the established authorities, that because the King Eider normally breeds in the extreme north, his normal breeding time is late, frequently in the second half of June.

Can we draw any conclusions from these minutiae of evidence? Can we hope for breeding in the Clyde? It has been reported, but not yet established, that there is at least one juvenile hybrid drake, and if that is established, then one may infer the possibility of hybrid ducks. If that can be established, one may look forward to nesting sites in places which would be rejected by the Eider Duck, and which might be in zones far south of where one would expect to find a King Eider Duck. But I think we must be extremely cautious in drawing conclusions, and I would myself incline to believe that our King Eider was behaving towards the ducks and the Eider drake rivals as he would normally behave at that time of the year. During our observation he did not attempt to copulate, nor did the ducks indulge in incitement behaviour. I postulate that the fathers of the families had, as one might expect, gone to join the drake parties. What my theory does not explain is that the ducks were evidently prepared to thole the King Eider drake, but not the drakes from the rafts, so I remain with the slender hope that we shall shortly observe Eiders with a few strange field characters, perhaps ducks with slightly yellower feet, or drakes with a curious bump on the beak.