

Photography of King Eider and Steller's Eider from a hide



Information sheet for the project «Bird tourism in central and eastern Finnmark», a project part of «The natural heritage as a value creator (M)»

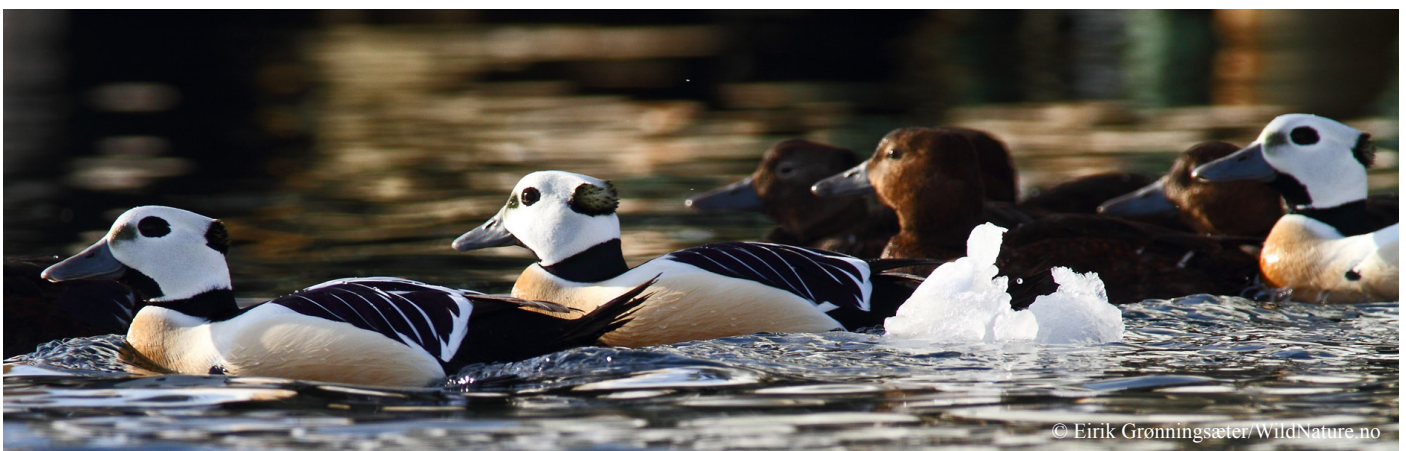
Two of Scandinavia's most sought after and colourful species, the King Eider and Steller's Eider, overwinter along parts of the Norwegian coast. These species are usually relatively shy, and one therefore needs time and patience to come to photographic distance of these. Alternatively one can visit places where this is organized and so come to ready-made facilities where one can take all the photos one wishes in a short time. This fact sheet describes how best to prepare such a hide in order to create the best facilities for photography and good comfort for the photographers.

The King Eider and Steller's Eider are diving ducks, and both are essentially arctic duck species. The males especially, of both species, are very colourful, and therefore attractive for bird watchers and photographers who visit Scandinavia. Neither of these species nests regularly in Norway, but both arrive at parts of the Norwegian coast around November and remain for the winter. The King Eider begins to move away from the Norwegian coast as early as the beginning of April, but most of the Steller's Eiders wait until May before leaving. Some few birds of both species also stay the summer, but in small or insignificant numbers.

Whereas the King Eider can be found relatively commonly northwards from the coast of Trøndelag,

the Steller's Eider is more limited to the coast of eastern Finnmark, especially in the Varangerfjord. More or less the whole of the European population of the Steller's Eider gathers in Varanger in winter, which makes this area a unique and easily accessible place to observe the species. The Steller's Eiders that stay the winter along the Finnmark coast breed in Russia as far east as Taimyr. The King Eiders that overwinter in eastern Finnmark probably have a distribution corresponding to that of the Steller's Eiders, while the King Eiders that overwinter further west and south along the Norwegian coast can have other breeding areas, including Svalbard.

As northern Norway has the polar night, the main season for photographing the King Eiders will be from



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Steller's Eiders (males and females)

mid-January (in the southernmost part of its wintering area) until April. In Varanger it is not advisable to begin the season before 1st February due to the short period of daytime and reduced daylight.

How to photograph sea ducks

A boat has traditionally been used to photograph sea ducks, but this has proved to be less than ideal for several reasons. The birds are surprisingly wary of boats, and photographing from a boat usually only gives photos of frightened birds rising from the water. This is especially unfortunate if one only has a few birds to work with, or if the birds are gathered in a small area, so that one disturbs the same birds time after time. Not only does one then intrude on the birds' important resting and foraging areas, but one takes the chance that the birds in the end will leave the area, so that one has therefore ruined one's own reason for visiting as a tourist.

It is therefore vital to spend time studying the birds' behaviour, to look for places that the birds often visit one or several times daily, and where disturbance is

at a minimum. Such places may be a small outflow of a stream which gives the birds access to fresh water where they can preen, or they may be places where the birds regularly find food. Harbours where fish are landed and where waste water is released from the fish processing have proved to be very popular.

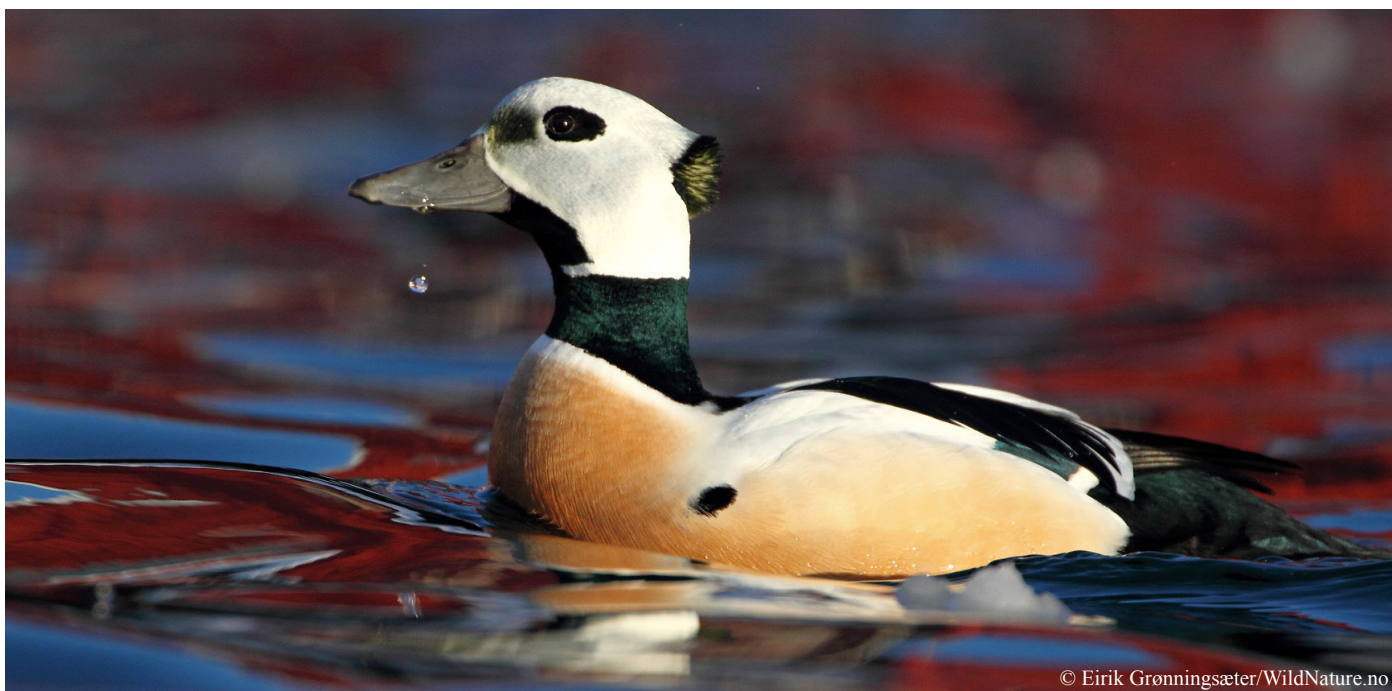
How to come near to the sea ducks

In most places the birds are relatively shy with regard to humans. In fish harbours they are less wary than in areas where there is less human contact. Some kind of hide for photographing can therefore be the solution. Without a hide one will be lucky to get a bird within reasonable photographic distance when it chances to swim or fly past, but the amount of time available to take a photo is then often very limited. In addition, such photos often have a tendency to give the impression of a wary bird stretching its neck, or showing other signs of being frightened and nervous. One seldom gets interesting photos of the birds' behaviour when they are nervous, and such photos are not often interesting enough to be worth publishing.



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The King Eider is not only colourful, but also among the most sought-after species among bird watchers and photographers who visit Scandinavia.



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The handsome Steller's Eider is a characteristic species at Varanger, and almost the whole European population winters in this area. The Steller's Eider is greatly sought-after by photographers and bird watchers.

When one has succeeded in finding out where the birds stay, it is important to think carefully as to where one should place the hide, taking into account the background, the light, weather and wind. The light will change later in the season, and one should consider having several hides or being able to move them. By using portable hides it is possible to offer photographers more variation in motives as regards the light in front or behind. Concerning the background, it is important that this, as far as possible, is of an even colour, without sharp contrasts and many lines that interfere with the overall scene. It is preferable to have a background as natural as possible rather than buildings or other man-made objects. For backlight photos a dark background will be best as this considerably emphasizes the droplets of water. The same applies to scenes prepared with the intention of taking photos in snowy weather. Ideally the background should be such that one can take both close-up photos with a telephoto objective, as well as wide-angle photos without also getting unsightly buildings or other interfering elements in the photo. Wide-angle photos are especially challenging in this respect.

When one takes photos of ground-living or swimming birds it is also important to be as near the ground or water surface as possible. In this way a person looking at the photo will get an entirely different feeling of nearness to the motive than if the photo is taken from

a «looking down» perspective – for example if one stands upright when one takes photos of a swimming duck. With a low-down camera position one also gains further distance to the background, which also makes it easier to get a diffuse and blurred background, thereby better emphasizing the birds. For the quality of the photos there is thus a great difference between the photo being taken 10 cm above the ground/water or 50 cm above the level of the ground/water. The lower the better. Ducks usually prefer to swim, and by using a land-based hide one takes the chance that the distance to the birds will be too great and less ideal for photographing.

Floating hide

In order to fulfil all the requirements already mentioned (distance, camera perspective and portability), floating hides for photographing have proved to be the ideal solution. If the photo-hide is a simple construction, one can easily place it wherever one wishes.

Design

In a photo-hide one will often want to remain there for a long time. There will probably be limited possibilities for moving around. One must therefore think about comfort, and not necessarily about building a very small hide. If the birds accept a small hide, they will also accept a large one. The most important factor is

that the human profiles are hidden, so that the birds do not associate the hide with any danger. It can therefore be smart to think about providing a little extra space. Photographers often travel two or more together, so a photo-hide should have room for at least two persons. It is also important to remember that there should be room for a small rucksack or photo bag. Even though building materials are expensive, it is important to bear in mind that the total enjoyment after a long day in the photo-hide is far greater if one has enough space and comfort, instead of leaving with the impression that the stay has felt like being packed like sardines. In winter the temperature can also be low, and having a little extra space to move arms and legs makes it easier to keep warm.

If one spends a whole day in a photo-hide, it is unavoidable that someone must go to the toilet. It is not always the case that one is in the company of people one knows, so it is important to remember that there should be a separate closet with a toilet, not least because not all may be of the same sex.

As already mentioned, for photographing ducks it is important that one has a position as low as possible, and a photo-hide should therefore either be partly submerged so that eye-level is just above the surface, or there should be enough space to lie flat. The latter is probably the simplest, so that the hide, without the closet, should have a length of at least 2.5 metres (there must also be a little space for the camera). The width should also be at least one metre per person, and the height at least 1.5 metres, or such that one can easily sit upright. It is also an advantage if the roof

is designed so that the ridge extends outwards at least 30 cm, so that the front glass in the telephoto lens is protected from snow and rain. The roof should be slightly sloping with the lowest point away from the camera hatches. This is to avoid having water running from the roof on the same side as where photographing takes place.

As one is mainly in a lying position, the hide should have floor padding for warmth. Mattresses can also be considered, but the disadvantage with these is that they quickly become damp and rotten. They can also smell, so that use of the hide becomes less appealing. A mattress also increases the camera perspective unnecessarily due to the increased height above the water. The possibility of installing a simple fan heater, coupled for example to a car battery, may also be considered in order to have a little warmth in the hide.

The slits where one sticks out the objectives should be 50 cm long and 30 cm high. Then one has large enough slits giving good flexibility of movement, even for the largest teleobjectives. The slits should be placed as near the floor as possible in order not to increase the height over the water (camera perspective). It must be possible to close the slits when there is no-one in the hide to avoid it being filled with snow or water during bad weather. It can also be smart to have camouflage netting, or double shade netting, that one simply hangs from the top of the slit and over the teleobjective during photographing. One can see through both camouflage netting and shade netting and one can therefore follow what is happening on the outside of the hide. At the same time the angle of vision from the birds towards the slits will be such that the camouflage netting will prevent the birds from seeing human profiles. It is difficult to get a view of what is happening on the outside, and to be prepared for photographic possibilities, if all one sees on the outside is through the camera. If one does not have a camouflage net that one can see through, then plexiglass windows should be installed. One-way glass is best, but this is rather expensive and difficult to obtain.

Pontoons function well to keep the hide floating, but the problem is how low the hide can be without risking waves breaking into it. The hide is built on a platform, and the pontoons are bored firmly into the platform from the underside. The pontoons are fixed along the longest sides of the platform to gain maximum stability. A cheaper, but less stable alternative to pontoons, is to use floats.



A floating photo-hide in Båtsfjord with slits both above and below. The lower slits enable one to come low above the water, and take much more «intimate» photos.

When the site for the hide has been decided, it is easily fixed in place by means of an anchor in two corners diagonally opposite each other. By only having one anchor on the one side the raft will move around dependent on the wind and current, and to rotate more or less the whole time must be avoided. In order to keep the hide stable, it is important to place it where it has best possible shelter from wind and weather. One must also bear in mind that the anchors and chain must not be so heavy that they cannot be lifted on board in a small boat if one wishes to move the hide. Remember to screw a couple of hooks into the hide so that one can easily fix a tow-rope – for example by means of snap-hook.

Placement

The placing of the hide is of course important. First and foremost, the hide must be placed at a site that the birds regularly visit. Then one must also consider wind and weather. Even though the anchoring stays fixed, it is unpleasant and difficult to photograph if the hide rocks up and down too much because of waves. Place the hide so that one has a favourable background. In addition, one must place and mark the hide so that it causes no danger or hindrance to possible boat traffic. If it is placed inside a harbour, then this should be clarified with the local harbour authorities.

Mobile photo-hide

A mobile photo-hide can basically be built in just the same way as the floating, but it must be possible to move it without it being towed. An electric outboard motor has proved to be ideal for bird photography as it is almost soundless.

One can also build a hide that is easier to move, and in Båtsfjord the use of an empty fish container made of hard plastic has been tested. On the two long sides, one fixes, by means of screws, two pontoons from floating piers almost up on the edge of the container. These enable it to float better, and they stabilise it. Along the top one makes a double wooden frame which one covers with curtain fabric of heavy, but moveable material. It is important that the curtain is not made of too light material, as it must be robust in windy conditions. It is also important that the curtains are divided into several sections, so that there are many possibilities to open and stick out the teleobjectives. The weight of the fish container, together with the weight of the photographer, causes the fish container to sink somewhat in the water, so that one gains a low camera position. In such a hide it is not recommended to be more than one person due to the stability. One person can possibly sit still and steer, while the other takes photos. Such a hide is suitable for coming near to birds that do not stay in the one place.

*This fact sheet is prepared by Eirik Grønningsæter/
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