

The King Eider in Finnmark and Russia



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

The King Eider is the most colourful and spectacular of the species in the eider group (Common Eider, King Eider and Steller's Eider). In winter the King Eider is common along the coast of Finnmark and south to the Lofoten peninsula. The species also remains in summer in small numbers in these areas. The King Eider does not normally breed in Norway, but a few records of nesting have been recorded south to the Trondheimsfjord. The wintering birds in eastern Finnmark have come from Russian areas east of the White Sea and probably from Svalbard, where they nest by pools of fresh water on the tundra.

The King Eider (*Somateria spectabilis*) is the second largest of the birds in the eider group. It is slightly smaller than the Common Eider, and has a rather more compact body form. The King Eider is a sociable species that often gathers in large flocks, often together with Common Eiders. In eastern Finnmark one often finds Steller's Eiders in the same flocks. In winter the King Eider usually remains further out from the coast and in somewhat deeper water than the two other eider species. These flocks consist almost always only of Kings Eiders.

The King Eider nests eastwards along the Russian coast from Cape Kanin and Novaya Zemlya, with the main population on the tundra east of the White Sea.

There is also a breeding population on Svalbard which is estimated at between 500 and 2000 pairs.

The winter population in Europe is estimated at between 100,000 and 130,000 birds, of which about 30,000 winter along the Murmansk coast and between 70,000 and 100,000 along the coast of North Norway. In Finnmark the number exceeds 30,000 including the Varanger fjord.

The adult males are black and white with a pink breast. The head is blue-grey with a pale green patch under the eye. On the back some black feathers stick up and form two noticeable "sails". The females are entirely brown in common with the other eider females, and completely lack the males' knob. They are distinguished



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from the females of the Common Eider by a steeper forehead and shorter bill. The plumage also has a warmer reddish-brown colour.

The King Eider often nests by lakes and small tarns and freshwater pools, often some way from the coast. Nevertheless it does not nest as far into the tundra as the Steller's Eider. The nest is placed hidden in the previous year's dead grass, but can also lie openly between tussocks in the terrain. The clutch consists of from four to six eggs, and they are incubated for 22 to 24 days by the female alone. The males leave the nesting site shortly after the egg-laying and move to the moulting area. Several females sometimes gather around one female with a brood of young, so-called "aunts".

Distribution in Finnmark

In the winter period the King Eider winters along the whole of the coast of Finnmark, and flocks can be found along the outer coast as far south as Vesterålen. Southwards from Finnmark the numbers gradually decrease, so that the flocks as far south as Troms, Vesterålen and Lofoten are usually smaller compared to those in Finnmark. The flocks of King Eiders both in Finnmark and Troms often lie further out from the coast and in deeper water than those of the Common Eider and Steller's Eider.

Diet and ecology

The diet of the King Eider is mainly similar to that of the Common Eider, but is often rather more varied. The proportion of the different types of prey differs, however, from that which is known for the Common Eider. One assumes that this difference is due to the fact that the King Eider dives deeper than the Common Eider. The most important food items are sea urchins and various kinds of molluscs. On the breeding grounds the King Eiders mainly eat larvae of various insect species, as well as some crustaceans.

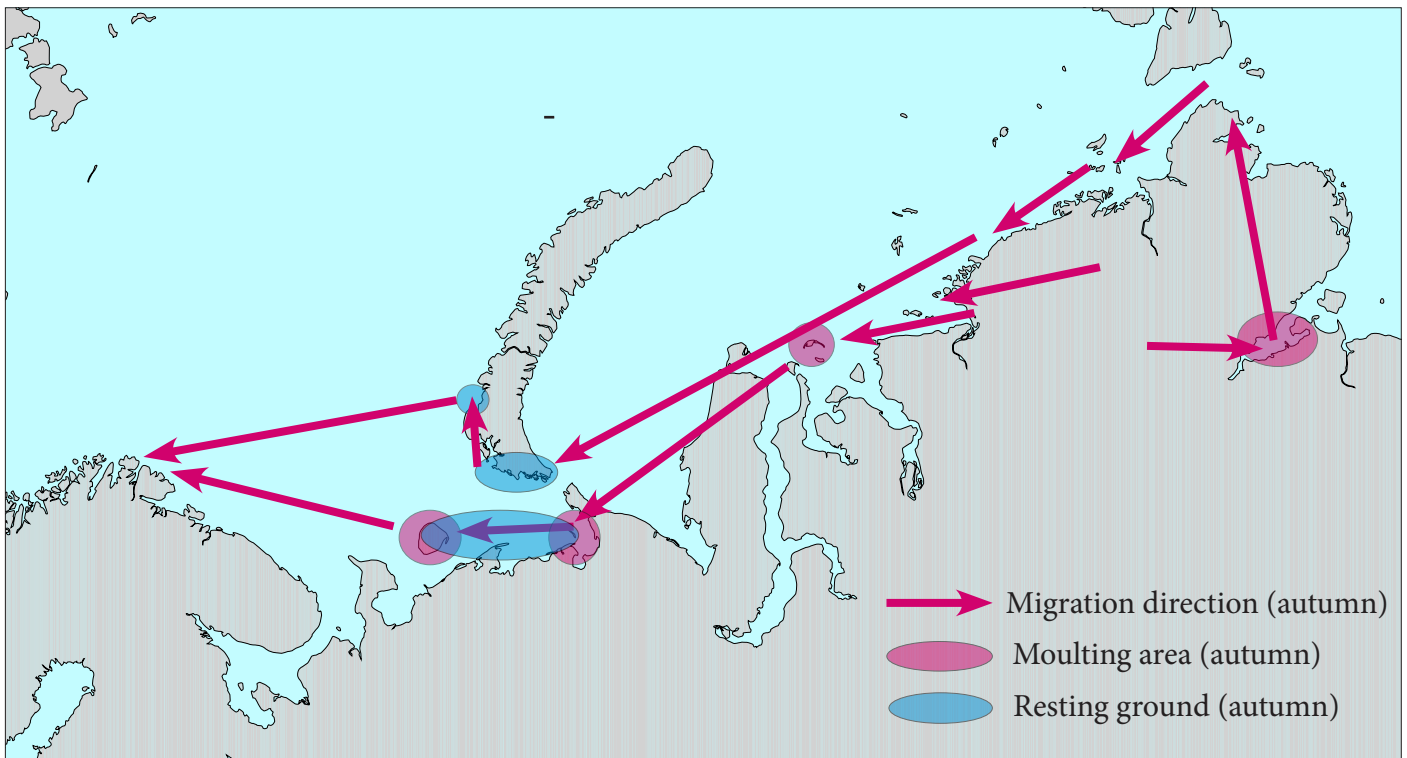
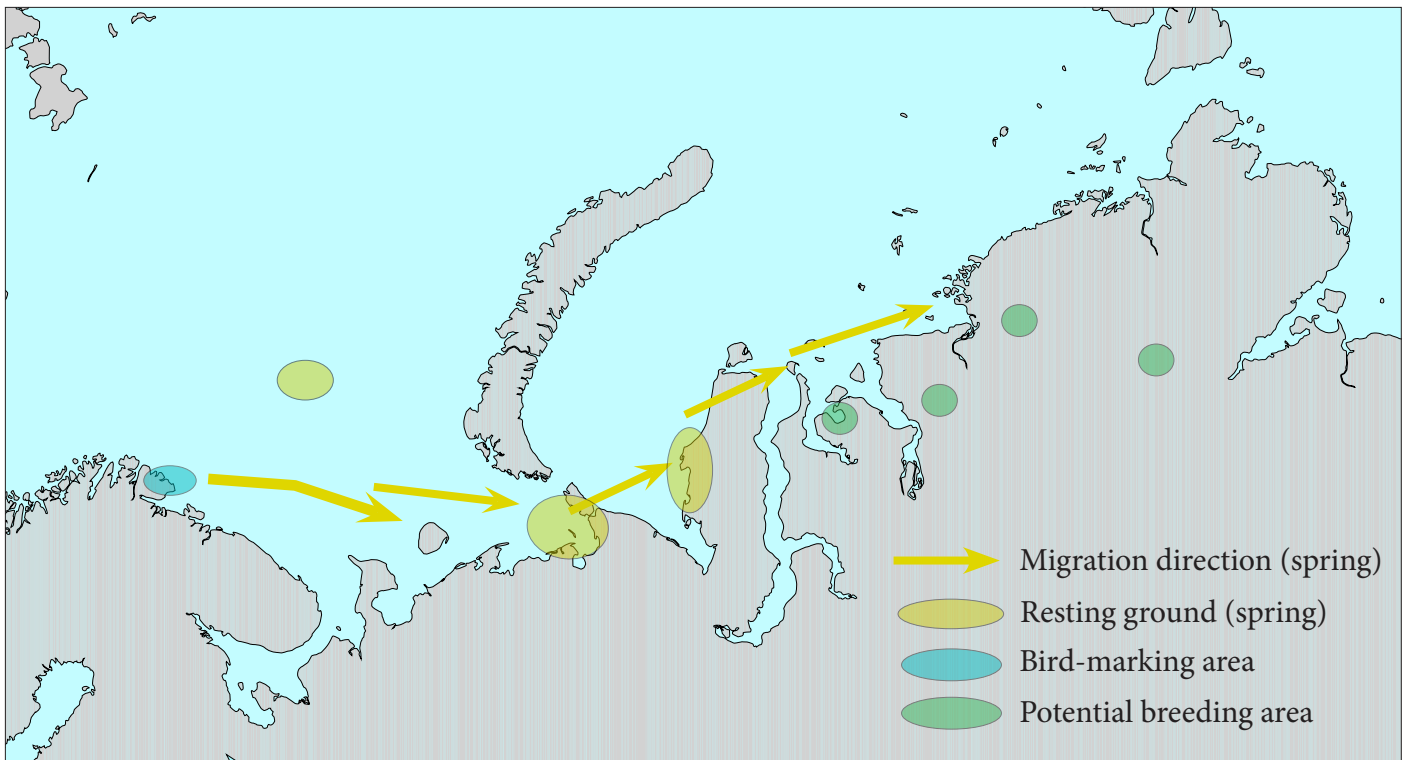
Movements and wanderings

The King Eiders that nest east in Siberia migrate towards the Bering Sea to spend the winter, while birds from the north-western parts of Russia migrate westwards towards the coast of Kola and North Norway. Those that nest on Svalbard, and possibly also in north-east Greenland, also migrate to the coasts of North Norway to winter.

As early as October the first King Eiders arrive at the coasts near Murmansk, while most reach Finnmark and Troms in late November. In the beginning all remain on the outermost parts of the coast, but later some birds move into the fjords. This is especially obvious in Troms, where thousands of birds can move into the extensive fjord systems. Very few birds move to areas



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In spring an unknown proportion of the King Eiders that have wintered along the Norwegian coast return to their breeding grounds in Russia. The migration begins in April, and they migrate first over the Barents Sea to the Pechora Sea where they rest, before moving further eastwards. They then move inland to the breeding areas which can be far from the coast. After the breeding season the birds migrate to the coast where they moult. The areas around Kolguev and further east in the Pechora Sea are probably the most important moulting and resting areas for the King Eiders. Also areas along the south-west side of Novaya Zemlya may be important resting areas before the birds migrate back to the Norwegian coast during December and January. This information is taken from Bustnes et. al. (2010) and is based upon six birds equipped with satellite transmitters.



south of Lofoten, and only sporadically do a few birds move as far south as the North Sea coast.

Spring migration begins in late March and continues in April, and many birds gather in a large resting area in the Pechora Sea before migrating further to nesting grounds eastwards along the coast of Siberia.

The males leave the nesting grounds as soon as egg-laying is finished, and seek out several moulting areas along the Siberian coast. The sea areas east in the Pechora Sea, and the south end of Novaya Zemlya and around Kolguev are probably the species' most important moulting and resting areas before the autumn migration to wintering areas begins late in the autumn.

Threats

On the coast of Troms and Finnmark the King Eiders are exposed to drowning in fishing nets, especially during fishing for cod and lumpsuckers in late winter.

The King Eiders are also exposed to oil contamination. Following the wrecking of the cargo ship "John R" in mid-winter in North Troms in year 2000, many dead and oil-covered King Eiders were found. As the King Eiders often gather in dense flocks, only a small oil leakage can strike many birds.

At fishing docks, fish offal containing fish hooks is thrown out as refuse. The eiders eat this and thereby ingest fish hooks. These can become fixed inside the bill, and result in great suffering which often results in the death of the bird.

Selected sources

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At some of the breeding grounds in Russia, destruction of nests and illegal hunting may have negative effects on the local population.

This fact sheet is prepared by Vidar Bakken and Karl-Birger Strann (ARC)