

### **White-winged Scoter *Melanitta fusca***

The White-winged Scoter was once a common winter visitor to San Diego County, especially to San Diego Bay. Its almost complete disappearance since the 1970s, in lack of reports of a catastrophic decline in the species as a whole, suggests that the winter range has shifted north, few individuals bothering to migrate this far south.

**Winter:** From 1997 to 2002 we noted the White-winged Scoter only 13 times in San Diego County. Only three sightings were of more than a single individual: eight at La Jolla (P7) 21 January 1999 (L. and M. Polinsky), three in the west basin of Batiquitos Lagoon (J6) 6 February 1998 (C. C. Gorman), and 20 at San Onofre (C1) 27 February 1999 (L. Ellis). At least the last, and possibly all three records, were of spring migrants rather than wintering birds. Surprisingly, only four of the birds were within

San Diego Bay, the traditional site for the species. More intensive surveys of the bay in the 1990s also yielded few White-winged Scoters. In spite of weekly or monthly surveys of north and central San Diego Bay 1993–95, Mock et al. (1994) and Preston and Mock (1995) found only a single individual in the north bay 4 April 1995. On the basis of weekly surveys of the central and south bay 1993–94, Manning (1995) recorded a cumulative total of 13 in the south bay, which could have included repeated sightings of the same individual(s).

**Migration:** The White-winged Scoter's migration schedule is similar to that of the Surf Scoter, with fall arrival beginning in late October (18 October 1969, three on San Diego Bay, J. L. Dunn; 28 October 2000, one on the south bay, E. Wallace) and spring departure completed in early April. Since 1970, two summer stragglers have been recorded on San Diego Bay, one near the Naval Amphibious Base (T9) 30 June 1988 (Macdonald et al. 1990) and one near the D Street fill (T10) 9 June 1999 (R. T. Patton).

In spite of being a regular if rare migrant at the Salton Sea (Patten et al. 2003), the White-winged Scoter does not use the migration corridor across San Diego County as does the Surf Scoter. There is only a single inland record, of one at Lake Henshaw (G17) 2 April 1982 (R. Higson, AB 36: 893, 1982).

**Conservation:** The White-winged Scoter was apparently always irregular in abundance in San Diego County, but over the long term its history has been one of sharp decline. Stephens (1919a) called the White-winged Scoter a "common winter resident," and Sefton (1939) reported about 500 on San Diego Bay 11 November 1938, saying this was the largest concentration he had seen. Decline had apparently begun by the 1950s, as Sams and Stott (1959) called the species "regular but moderately sparse." From the inception of regular San Diego Christmas bird counts in 1953, the White-winged Scoter was recorded annually through 1971. From 1955 through 1971 totals



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

ranged from 5 to 200, except for 2000 on 3 January 1960. The last winter with any substantial influx was 1979–80, when the San Diego Christmas bird count yielded 170. Since 1981 the count has not exceeded four, and from 1987 through 2002, the species was recorded on only 6 of 16 counts. The White-winged Scoter has not appeared on an Oceanside Christmas bird count since 1987 or on a Rancho Santa Fe count since 1988.

Though local factors like water pollution, disturbance by boats, and contamination of the mollusks on which they feed could all have affected the White-winged Scoter on San Diego Bay, unknown larger-scale factors are probably more important. The numbers of scoters (all species combined) breeding in Alaska declined through the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but not to the degree the White-winged Scoter has declined in San Diego. The southern edge of the White-winged's breeding range on the northern Great Plains has retracted northward (Brown and Frederickson 1997), and some of the birds originating in this region migrate to California (Houston and Brown 1983). Climatic warming could result in the scoter's failing to migrate as far south as formerly.