

Black Scoter *Melanitta nigra*

The Black is the scarcest of the three scoters in San Diego County, reaching the county as a winter visitor at a rate of about one per year. Like those of the White-winged and Surf Scoters, its numbers have declined, but unlike the others, it was never common. Like the other scoters, it occurs usually on San Diego Bay or on the ocean near shore, especially near piers, where it can feed on mussels.

Winter: Only six Black Scoters were found in San Diego County during the five-year atlas period, 1997–2002. Their distribution appears representative. Only one was on San Diego Bay, near the J Street marina, Chula Vista (U10) 21 February–2 March 2002 (M. B. Mulrooney). Other sites were the Oceanside pier (H5; 16 November 1997, C. Jones), the ocean off Oceanside (26 December 1998, D. W. Povey), the Imperial Beach pier (V10; 8 November 1999, B. Foster, NAB 54:104, 2000), the Tijuana River estuary (V10; 20 December 1997–1 January 1998, W. Mittendorf, FN 52:257, 1998), and Border Field State Park (W10; 18 December 1999, S. Walens).

Migration: Dates for the Black Scoter in San Diego County range from 31 October (1984, AB 39:102, 1985) to 18 April (1928, Helmuth 1939), except for the two credible records of summer stragglers: two on San Diego Bay 21 June–24 July 1962 (AFN 16:507, 1962) and one there June–July 1985 (G. McCaskie, AB 39:962, 1985). The only inland record for the county is of a spring migrant at Lake Henshaw (G17) 18 March 1983 (R. Higson, AB 37:912, 1983).



Photo by Kenneth Z. Kurland

Conservation: Although the Black Scoter was recorded only once in San Diego County before 1950 (Helmuth 1939), it was reported on nine consecutive San Diego Christmas bird counts, 1954–62, with an average of 6.2 and a maximum of 17 on 26 December 1954. Even if some of these birds were misidentified Surf Scoters, the numbers suggest the Black was considerably more frequent in the 1950s and 60s than at the beginning of the 21st century. The decline has been essentially continuous. In the 20 years from 1963 to 1982 the San Diego Christmas bird count averaged 1.15 Black Scoters per year, whereas in the 20 years from 1983 to 2002 it averaged 0.25 per year.