

Species Fact Sheets

Order: Anseriformes
Scientific Name: Somateria mollissima

Family: Anatidae
Common Name: Common Eider

AZA Management: Green Yellow Red None



NATURAL HISTORY:

Geographic Range: Europe Asia North America Neotropical
 Africa Australia Other [Click here to enter text.](#)

Habitat: Forest Desert Grassland Coastal
 Riverine Montane Other [Click here to enter text.](#)

Circadian Cycle: Diurnal Crepuscular Nocturnal Other [Click here to enter text.](#)

Cold Tolerance: To 70° F To 60° F To 50° F To 40° F
 To 30° F To 20° F Other [Very cold tolerant, can be maintained outdoors as long as they have access to moving water to keep their feet from freezing](#)

Heat Tolerance: To 30° F To 50° F To 70° F To 90° F
 To 110° F Other [Not very heat tolerant; can be maintained outdoors, but will not thrive in warm climates](#)

Diet: Frugivore Carnivore Piscivore Insectivore
 Nectivore Omnivore Folivore Other (Add Below)

Captive Dietary Needs:
 Captives can be maintained on commercial duck feed, supplemented with small fish

Life Expectancy in the Wild: Males: 20 Years Females: 20 Years

Life Expectancy in Captivity: Males: 20 Years Females: 20 Years

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BREEDING INFORMATION:

Age at Sexual Maturity: Males: 3 Years Females: 2 Years

Courtship Displays: Males display with exaggerated movements of their heads, cooing loudly. They may also rear out of the water and beat their wings.

Nest Site Description: Scrape on ground, usually near water. Nest is lined with vegetation, as well as down from the female. Eiders often nest colonially, sometimes in association with terns and other birds.

Clutch Size, Egg Description: Average 3-5 olive or green eggs, usually without markings.

Incubation Period: 23-30 Days

Fledgling Period: Leave nest almost immediately, first flight at 2 months.

Parental Care: Primarily cared for by females.

Chick Development: Chicks are covered with down at the time of hatching, and are able to leave the nest shortly after hatching. Ducklings from several clutches may band together to form a crèche watched over by several females, but find food on their own. First flight is taken at 65-75 days.

CAPTIVE HABITAT INFORMATION:

Social Structure in the Wild: Large Flocks (Females form crèches to protect young from predators); Male Bachelor Flocks

Social Structure in Captivity: Pairs, Small Flocks

Minimum Group Size: Pair

Maximum Group Size: Flock

Compatible in Mixed Species Exhibits: Yes **Comments:** Can be maintained with other waterfowl species, as well as puffins and other shorebirds

Optimal Habitat Size: 100 Square Feet per Pair

Management Challenges: Eiders are intolerant of excessive heat; southern facilities will be more successful housing their birds indoors; they are especially susceptible to aspergillosis. Captives have a tendency to eat inedible objects, which can lead to punctured intestines or hardware disease. The salt glands and gizzard in this species are both very developed. Some authorities believe that if not given the opportunity to utilize them, birds may sicken. However, most captive eiders are maintained on freshwater, and seem to breed and thrive under freshwater conditions.

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ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

The largest duck in the North Hemisphere, the common eider measures 50-70 centimeters in length with a weight of 1180-3040 grams. A large, stocky species with a short neck and a distinctive, wedge-shaped head tapering into a large bill, size varies greatly among the six subspecies. The Pacific subspecies (*S. m. v-nigra*) is the largest while the Faroe (*S. m. faeroeensis*) is the smallest. Males are slightly larger than females.

As with size, coloration varies by subspecies. In all subspecies, both sexes have a membranous extension of the bill that forms a front shield, extending almost to the eyes. Females are brown with some black barring, whereas males are white with black undersides and a black cap. The nape of the male's neck is green, with a green stripe running between the eyes. The bill may be gray-green (in most subspecies) or orange (in the Pacific subspecies). Males from the Pacific subspecies have a black "V" on the chin, though such a chevron is sometimes seen in the males of other subspecies. In both sexes, the feet and legs are grey. Immature females resemble adult females, but duller and darker. Immature males are likewise brown-black, but usually with some white on the neck or head; males may take up to three years to acquire their breeding plumage. The call is a hoarse, grating sound; the species also makes a cooing whistle.

Found along the Arctic coast, common eiders breed along coastal islands, or in bodies of water close to the ocean. Winters are spent offshore, near marine shoals. While the southern populations are more sedentary, northern populations will migrate long distances, traveling as far south as Virginia. They feed predominately on aquatic invertebrates, such as mollusks, crustaceans, and sea urchins, capturing their prey by diving to the sea floor. The tip of the beak has a nail-like feature which can be used to pry open shellfish. They will also feed on aquatic plants and insects. Feeding may take place during day or night, often at low tide.

Common eiders are monogamous, and while they do not mate for life, their pair bonds can become very strong. The male courts the female by calling to her, as well as by partially lifting himself from the water and beating his wings at her. Nesting takes place in the early summer, when the birds return to their breeding grounds. Females pluck down from their own chests to line their nests, which they alone will sit upon; males often leave to join all male flocks at this time. In the absence of males, many females will herd their ducklings into a crèche for mutual protection from predators, such as gulls and foxes.

The soft down of eiders, used for insulation, was considered very valuable throughout much of history, and the species was persecuted heavily, declining nearly to extinction by the late 1800s. The colonial nature of eiders made them especially vulnerable to hunters. In some parts of the species range, wild eiders are encouraged to nest near human settlements so that the down can be collected for later sale. Protection has enabled the species to recover to a more stable population level, though arctic populations are now in decline. At least one colony – that of the Farne Islands in England - has been protected since the 7th century. Threats include oil spills and other pollutants; the species may be vulnerable to climate change. Common eiders are listed as Near Threatened by the IUCN as of 2015.

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COMPLETED BY:

Name: Ian Shelley (Salisbury Zoo)

Date: 3/6/2015