

WINTERING GOLDENEYE

WINTERING BARROW'S GOLDENEYE by Rosemary Curley

Unlike its close relative, the Common Goldeneye, the Barrow's Goldeneye has a curious breeding distribution, with isolated populations on Canada's west and east coasts. In eastern Canada especially, the Barrow's Goldeneye is a rare fowl, with a breeding range restricted primarily to northern Labrador. Perhaps its isolated breeding territory has contributed to the paucity of knowledge about this attractive bird.

Luckily we don't have to go to Labrador to see a Barrow's Goldeneye; when winter closes in they can be seen in open waters around causeways and estuaries, along with other wintering waterfowl such as Black Duck, Common Merganser, and of course, Common Goldeneye. The Maritime provinces lie at the southern edge of the wintering range of Barrow's Goldeneye, with most birds wintering along the St. Lawrence estuary and the north shore of the Gulf.

In an effort to gain more information on numbers of wintering Barrow's, Al Smith and Stuart Tingley of the Canadian Wildlife Service in Sackville organized a Maritime count during the week of February 8-14. Here on the Island, Natural History Society members and Fish and Wildlife Division staff censused the open water areas and came up with a grand total of 102 birds. (See Table.) Participants also counted Common Goldeneye, and except at Murray River where viewing was distant, reliable counts of Commons were also documented. The total numbers of both species seen, 1552, agrees well with an aerial census taken January 21, 1981 when 1643 goldeneye (not separated by species) were recorded by Randy Dibblee of the P.E.I. Fish and Wildlife Division.

Elsewhere in the Maritimes, Al Smith reports that fewer than 20 Barrow's were seen in Nova Scotia, while approximately 60 were found in New Brunswick. Perhaps the relatively high numbers in P.E.I. can be attributed to the attractive wintering areas created by fast flowing water around causeways. What makes one causeway area more attractive than another is something that remains a puzzle. Common Goldeneye seem to find most open estuary areas attractive, but Barrow's on P.E.I. were limited to only six locations. At West River Causeway where the most Barrow's were seen, the heaviest concentration of Barrow's was in deep water on the east side of the causeway. At the same time and with a rising tide, the majority of Common Goldeneye was located on the west side, actively feeding on still exposed mussel beds.

It is hoped that long term surveys of Barrow's Goldeneye on wintering grounds will provide more knowledge on the numbers and habits of this chunky winter resident. Many thanks to all who participated in this first survey.

WINTERING BARROW'S GOLDENEYE SITES 1981



1. Mill River (1)
2. Foxley Bay (23)
3. Grand River (2)
4. Bayview (2)
5. Oyster Bed Bridge (5)
6. West River Causeway (69)