

Was it a Lesser Scaup?

Dylan

Some time during the afternoon of Wednesday 29th October 2003, I found an unusual, female-type, scaup on the pool in front of the ramp at Grove Ferry. Armed with my very primitive digi-scoping set up, I recorded a series of images, which captured all the features that enabled me to tentatively id the bird as a Lesser Scaup. I was far from 100% confident of this id and placed a request for others to go to see the bird, in order that the true identity could be clinched. However, things took a strange twist when two "high profile" Kent twitchers pontificated on the id; placing news onto the RBA pager system, and allied news services, that it was a juvenile "Greater Scaup" based upon their views obtained early the next morning, thus looking directly into the rising sun! This had the effect of putting off many birders who would, otherwise, have gone to see this potential first for Kent. Luckily not everyone was deterred by this action and several local (& not so local birders did connect) Don Taylor, who watched the bird in the company of Marc Heath, saying that, although unable to confirm my id, it was "a very interesting bird" He finished his comments with the hope that an adult drake would appear in Kent, thus removing any id problems. Little more than 12 months later (20th November 2004 – Jan 2005) his wish was granted when a 1st winter male appeared on Scotney GP. Spending the vast majority of its' time over the border, in East Sussex, it did venture into Kent for the county listers to get their tick! The bird re-appeared at Bough Beech Reservoir on 16th March 2005, at least, where it gave another opportunity to study the finer points of 1st year (male) Lesser Scaup plumage and moult sequences.

Back to 2003! Now, whilst I wasn't 100% sure of my id, I was bloody sure that it wasn't a juv Greater Scaup! A second visit to Grove, later that same morning (30.10.2003) did little to assist me. Although still present, the angle of the sun did nothing to aid scrutiny of the finer details required for clinching the id of what would have been the first "accepted" record of Lesser Scaup in the county. (Marcus Lawson had already suffered a similar experience with a 100%, cast-iron, bird, also a 1st winter female, on Ham Road Pits at Faversham in 1999 – once again the "elite" making a complete pigs ear of their id, thus consigning that bird to the avian trash can. Is there a pattern emerging here? Males are relatively straight forward - immature females being far more testing and thus treated like immature gulls – too difficult &

time consuming for the busy twitcher) Arriving back home, after my 2nd visit, I posted the following on Planetthanet.org.

Thursday 30th October 2003 Grove Ferry 08.55 - 11.00

I am now convinced that the bird is not a Lesser Scaup, but I am un-convinced that it is a Juv Greater Scaup. Who knows?

Why had I been convinced that the id was mistaken? Well, I had no previous experience of the species (except for Marcus's bird) thus was naive enough to assume that "The Great & The Good" knew what they were talking about - What a mistake! The only feature that I'd failed to see was the small, dark, nail on the tip of the bill, a vital id feature?

Why have I waited over four years to review this particular conundrum? Read on.

Wednesday 27th February 2008

Chris Hindle had located a female Scaup on a small farm reservoir on the Reculver Marshes. Hoping to get some pics, I went across and spent a considerable time watching and photographing this individual. What struck me most about this "Greater" Scaup was it's size in comparison to the accompanying Gadwall, Tufties and Mallard - it was very big! This was a complete contrast to my initial impression of the Grove bird, four and a bit years, previously. One of my main reasons for claiming Lesser Scaup was the diminutive size, obvious even when compared with Black-headed Gull! Other id features such as head shape, isolated loreal spots on either side of the bill, jizz and wing pattern all came after I had been initially attracted by just how small it was. When I got back home I set about re-examining the series of images that I had posted back in 2003. What I found is presented in the following pics and text.

Sadly, these pics are not of the best quality, yet they clearly show the scale of this individual - my first impression being of a small duck. Note the posture of this bird, particularly the way it carries its' head, the narrow neck and the appearance of the bill - quite long and fine.



29.10.2003 - As can be seen, even allowing for the distortion of camera angles and perspective, the bird appears very small in comparison with the accompanying Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) whether in front, or behind, it



27.02.2008 – The size of the female Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) was easier to gauge due to the distance at which it was watched. Clearly it is a bulky bird and much larger than the accompanying Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*) what is also worth noting is the relative proportions of the bill. Appearing stout and very deep at the base.



Head on views of the Greater Scaup started the ball rolling. I remembered that I had been struck by the very narrow crown profile of the 2003 bird; describing it, at the time, "as similar to a Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*)" Being able to put these two pics side by side allows a direct comparison. Although the differences are quite subtle, it can be seen that the Greater Scaup has a broader crown, being much wider than the bill, in contrast to the 2003 individual. A bit of quick research in Collins "Bird Guide" – ISBN 0-00-711332-3. On page 59 there is a simple line drawing, next to the illustrations, that depicts these subtle differences. Obviously copyright laws prevent me from using these particular diagrams, so I urge you to take a look. Before you rush off to find your copy of Collins, what do you make of the bill patterns of these two? As my research continued I visited the KOS photo gallery to study the excellent series of images posted by Mike Buckland, Marcus Lawson and Eoin Jennings. Whilst this bird is a male, several features are clearly visible that add support to the Grove Ferry sighting. Head shape, when viewed head on – compare the crown to the width of the base of the bill, proportion and structure of the bill, wing pattern and the head-up posture that is obviously different to Greater Scaup. Also check out the relative size in comparison with the accompanying Tufted Ducks (*Aythya fuligula*)



Two more views of the Grove Ferry bird. Of particular interest is the sloping forehead, i.e. the angle at which the head joins the bill and the upright carriage. Other blatantly obvious features are the restricted loreal patches and the dull amber/yellow eye colour, suggestive of an immature bird. Now that I have revisited this puzzle, I am also struck by the general paleness of the flanks and the presence of pale feathers on the mantle. Overlooked the first time round due to quickly losing interest in the face of overwhelming personal criticism, how I wish I'd stuck to my original convictions. The renewed examination of my pics has been aided by the use of imaging technology that I did not have in 2003. The A.C.D. See 6.0 program enabling me to manipulate the light levels, thus allowing better appreciation of some of these features. Whilst I accept that using the photoshop technology has changed the appearance of these images, what it hasn't done is changed the shape, size or structure of the bird in question.



Two images of Greater Scaup, the adult female from Reculver (27.02.2008) and the male from the ramp at Grove Ferry (02.08.2005). Both birds clearly demonstrating the domed profile of this species with the forehead joining the base of the bill at quite a different angle to the 2003 bird. While you're looking at these pics check out the appearance of the nail on their bills. A vital id feature of Lesser Scaup? Now look closely at the image, on the left, below!



These final two images are why I am now convinced that my original id was/is correct. The sum of the parts, as can be seen in this collection of images, providing all the evidence required to support my belief. Surely if this was any type of a hybrid not all of the requisite id features would be present on the one bird? Just one other request, take another look at the final pic in the March 16th 2005 sequence on the KOS gallery. Is the nail on the bill tip able to be described as fine? No one has ever questioned the authenticity of this bird – a 1st winter male Lesser Scaup and, as such, on the lists of all those who get enjoyment from such things. (N.B. I seem to recall that the size of nail was a major factor in the dismissal of the Ham Road Pits bird of 1999. Oh yeah, looking at the wrong bird didn't help!)

So, was there a 1st winter female Lesser Scaup at Grove Ferry on 29th/30th October 2003? I certainly know what I think. Whatever, it's no longer of any particular importance! This sequence of events and the resultant personal insults being just another reason for my disillusionment with all things to do with "mainstream birding". By opting out of the system I no longer submit records or descriptions to any formal organisations, as they have absolutely no role to play in my hobby. I don't require a committee, local or national, to tell me what I've seen.

Quite what motivated those two to post their "juvenile Greater Scaup" report remains a mystery. Did they genuinely believe that it was a Greater Scaup? Clearly they hadn't studied the bird, in any detail, or that diagnosis could not have been reached. Were they attempting to pour scorn on the fledgling website, Planetthanet.org? Was it aimed at discrediting my birding prowess? I'll never know. With so many active birders, there are bound to be differences of opinion/ability amongst them. Yet another benefit of living in a democracy, everyone has the right of an opinion and the right to be wrong! Both Planetthanet & myself are still functioning and enjoying the freedom that our independent status allows.

References

Collins Bird Guide by Mullarney, Svensson, Zetterstrom & Grant – ISBN 0 – 00 – 711332 – 3

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The Handbook of Bird Identification by Beaman & Madge
ISBN 0 – 7136 – 3960 – 1 (Helm)

Ducks by Scott Weidensaul ISBN 0 – 517 – 03174 – 4 (Portland House)

Eastern Birds by Roger Tory Petterson ISBN 0 – 395 – 91176 – 1 (Houghton Mifflin)

Kent Ornithological Society website – “scarce bird” photo galleries 2004 & 2005

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Dylan Wrathall – March 2008

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