

Castlemaine Harbour AA - Annex VI

Notes on Common Scoter at Dingle Bay

The Common Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*) flocks wintering in Dingle Bay, between Inch and Rossbeigh, are among the largest in Ireland, with a peak count of 10,110 made there on 22nd November 1996 – the highest count ever recorded in Ireland. The use of the term 'wintering' must however be taken in a very broad sense, in that Scoter are often present well into May, and as numbers dwindle in late May as their northward spring migration gets under way, there is only a brief period in late May and early June when no or few birds are present. Numbers of birds quickly build again in late June, and some of the highest counts in the area have been made in mid- and late summer. For example, 1,000, west of Inch on 23rd July 1999, 2,550 birds on 27th June 2009, 1,800 on 25th August 2009, and 5,600 present there on 10th September 2007. These high numbers have been occurring at this site for a considerable period, and Ruttledge (1980) notes 5,000 seen there on 24th July 1955, and Colhoun (2001) notes, "Up to 8,000 were seen off Inch on 4th September 1963." (see also the *Dingle Peninsula Bird Reports*, referenced below)

Counts made in winter have been infrequent and are often hampered by poor viewing conditions, but 400 to 1,200 would be typically seen off Inch, if reasonable weather conditions permit, with similar numbers usually encountered on the Glenbeigh side (pers. obs.). However, one of the greatest problems in estimating numbers of birds using the bay is the huge area and the enormous viewing distances involved, despite there being excellent elevated viewpoints on both the north (Inch) and south (Glenbeigh) sides of the area. It would seem that many counts must greatly underestimate the numbers of birds present, in particular, those birds feeding or roosting far offshore. For example, the counts of 5,600 made in September 2007 were made in absolutely calm conditions, with sunny weather and no wind or swell. Many of the birds were at the very limits of observation, some 2-4km distant, and it was notable that when I returned to the area some days later, with a modest wind and swell, I could only estimate about 1,200 birds. Calm conditions on 27th June 2009 permitted a count of 2,500 to be made, with most birds located about 2-3 km offshore, close to Anascaul. These would be seen only with great difficulty in anything other than calm conditions.

Most flocks typically comprise 100 or less individuals, and I have never noted large gatherings (of more than 200 birds) at this site, though the 1000+ birds wintering at, e.g, Brandon Bay and at Waterville do occasionally gather in a single, large flock. At Dingle Bay, rather they form small flocks, loosely scattered about the bay in the areas shown in the accompanying map. Individuals and small groups often take flight and join other small groups, and flocks are constantly roaming about the general area, rarely staying long in one place. The main area avoided by the scoter is the central, deep water channel in the bay, the entrance/exit to Castlemaine Harbour, though birds frequent the areas to each side of the channel (Figure 1).

From the counts mentioned above, it is apparent that birds can feed several kilometres offshore. General concentrations of birds do not seem to be directly related to weather conditions, wind direction, etc, and may be dictated more by feeding or water conditions. Birds are often, but not always, closer to shore, and thus more easily observed, at high tide.

Estimating the age/sex of birds is possible with reasonable views, especially on the Glenbeigh side where birds often venture closer to shore, and light conditions are

often better than at Inch. Although to my knowledge no formal attempt has been made in this regard, it is notable that most of the birds seen in July and August have been males, possibly as high as 90% (pers. obs.). Females form a much higher proportion of the population in winter. However, with the limitations imposed by the viewing conditions at this site, aging and sexing is not possible for many distant birds.

References

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Answers to follow-up queries: -

1. Do numbers remain at midwinter levels until late May, or is there a decline in numbers through the spring?

I would say numbers are fairly constant throughout winter (though this is impossible to be certain about), and numbers start dwindling by late March, gradually lessening until late April/early May with stragglers into late May, few, sometimes none by early June - so gradual decline from ca. late March.

2. Do you get the impression that there has been an overall decline in numbers using the site over the years?

If I had to say, I'd say numbers have remained stable. I think large counts, or rather the perfect weather opportunities for large counts, are being missed. I wouldn't be at all surprised if 5000+ counts were found to be regular. However, I'd temper that by saying, from my experience at Brandon and Waterville, that numbers did seem to vary over the years there, rising and falling over maybe 3-5 years.

3. What is the minimum spatial separation between discrete flocks of scoter?

Hard question to answer, in any precise terms, as the dynamics of flocks are often very fluid. One flock swims over to and merges with another. Individuals or small groups, sometimes the entire flock, take flight and join other groups, or split and form several other smaller flocks. Other flocks string out over time and gradually separate. Yet other flocks are just loose gatherings with individuals spread far and wide... It's a pretty dynamic situation.

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Figure 1 - Map showing main area of Common Scoter activity at Castlemaine Harbour.