Identification review – Lesser Scaup

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During the Easter holidays in 1987, I set off on a trip to southwest England that ultimately provided several birds which I had not seen in Britain before. En route, I stopped off in the Midlands to see the bird top of my list of those to see on the trip: a first-winter male Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis* at Chasewater, Staffordshire, the first record for Britain (Holian & Fortey 1992). How times have changed! There have been numerous subsequent records of Lesser Scaup, with no fewer than 67 different individuals being accepted by BBRC up to the end of 2003 (Rogers *et al.* 2004). Some have remained for several weeks, or even months, enabling most keen birders to gain first-hand experience of this species, some doing so on an annual basis. All the early British records were of (relatively easily identified) males, but even then there was speculation that females must also be occurring yet were being overlooked. The first confirmed record of a female in Britain was fully nine years after the Chasewater bird, at Drift Reservoir, Cornwall, in November 1996 (Flumm 1996), but in recent years there have been multiple arrivals of both males and females. As birders gain increasing field experience of Lesser Scaup, in a variety of plumages, and study the plethora of published photographs, so the chances of finding and being the first to identify an individual of this species have also increased. There is, however, a world of difference between knowing the identity of a bird in a captioned photograph, or one seen on a twitch, and having the confidence to name your own 'find' with certainty before putting the news out. This short article emphasises the key points which establish the identification of Lesser Scaup, and is structured around a selection of photographs and sketches of birds seen in Britain over the past six years.

Identification

In general, male Lesser Scaup is most likely to be confused with male Greater Scaup *A. marila*, although the possibility of confusion with certain *Aythya* hybrids is a trap for the unwary. Females and young birds more closely resemble Tufted Ducks *A. fuligula* in corresponding plumages, although the issue of hybrids is even more difficult than with males. Nonetheless, although our ability to identify hybrid *Aythya* females remains in its infancy, progress is being made.

Bill shape and colour

Lesser Scaup has a bill structure intermediate between that of Tufted Duck and Greater Scaup. Although broader and deeper than on Tufted Duck, the bill is narrower than on Greater Scaup. The shape of the culmen of Lesser Scaup is distinctly concave, while that of Greater is straighter, and this is a useful verification feature when used alongside the other characters discussed below. Adult male Lesser Scaup shows less black at the tip of the bill than either Greater Scaup or Tufted Duck in corresponding plumages, this often being restricted to just a thin central stripe on the nail (plate 34); in Greater Scaup the entire nail is black, while in Tufted Duck the black expands onto the sides of the bill-tip, forming a small triangle. Unfortunately, bill-tip pattern is less useful as an identification character in young birds and females. Young birds in autumn show a lead-grey bill with the black usually restricted to the nail but, owing to the lack of contrast, this feature is difficult to see; in addition, some individuals show black extending laterally just beyond the nail. In females, the bill colour is often mid grey, rather than the pale blue-grey of males, but some females show a paler subterminal area which makes the pattern of the black nail more obvious.

Shape, size and jizz

It is important to appreciate that Lesser Scaup is no larger than Tufted Duck, and some individuals can even appear slightly smaller. Conversely, the overall size difference between Lesser and Greater Scaups is usually quite obvious; for

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34. Male Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*, Redesmere, Cheshire, April 2001. In this classic image of a male, the black on the bill nail is clearly restricted to a narrow central stripe, and does not extend over the entire nail.

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35 & 36. Male Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis* (left, both photos) and male Greater Scaups *A. marila*, Drift Reservoir, Cornwall, March 2000. These photographs nicely compare several of the key differences between the two scaups, including the rather angular head with purple sheen, the heavily vermiculated mantle, the slightly cocked tail and smaller size of Lesser.

example, see plates 35 & 36, which show male Lesser and Greater Scaups side by side. These photographs also highlight the different head shape of the two scaups: the head of Lesser being roughly square-shaped and angular, with a high forehead and a small peak at the back of the crown, while that of Greater Scaup almost always appears distinctly large and bulbous, with a smooth curve extending from the forecrown to the nape. Furthermore, the slightly concave culmen of Lesser Scaup tends to accentuate the angular appearance of the head. While the apparent head shape of Lesser Scaup may change according to posture and behaviour, sometimes becoming less peaked or angular, the bill invariably lacks the deeper-base and broader shape typical of Greater Scaup, with its straighter culmen. As with all *Aythya* ducks, the fact that head shape may vary means that it is important to assess this under a range of conditions, and from various angles, to be sure that it has been gauged accurately.

Plates 35 & 36 show that the body shape of Lesser Scaup is somewhat different from that of Greater Scaup or Tufted Duck, although the differences are subtle and difficult to describe! The highest point of the mantle of Lesser Scaup lies closer to the head than in the other two species, which produces a fairly angular cleft at the base of the neck where the nape and mantle meet, and a longer, more gradual taper from the

mantle peak to the tail (which also appears longer than that of either Greater Scaup or Tufted Duck). In Tufted Duck, the peak lies further back, so the outline profile from the base of the neck to the high point of the mantle and then to the tail is smoother and more symmetrical. In this respect, Greater Scaup is more similar to Lesser Scaup, but has a broader body and a less flattened back. Tail posture may be useful, although again this is variable: Lesser Scaup sometimes holds the tail slightly above the horizontal whereas Greater Scaup rarely raises its tail in this manner.

Wing pattern

The pattern of the upper-wing-bar of Lesser Scaup is crucial and can be used to distinguish both sexes from Greater Scaup, Tufted Duck and almost the entire spectrum of similar-looking hybrids in all plumages. The birds photographed wing-flapping in plates 37 & 38 illustrate this character perfectly and show that the white portion of the wing-bar is restricted to the secondaries, the bar becoming brownish on the primaries. Although the colour of the pale bar on the primaries may vary from brown to grey, there is almost always an obvious and clear-cut contrast between the white of the outer secondaries and the darker colour of the innermost primaries. Not all Lesser Scaups show such an obvious contrast as the two birds illustrated here, however, and Kaufmann (1990) estimated that up to 5% show the white secondary bar 'bleeding' onto the inner primaries to some degree (mostly in adult males). Almost invariably, patience is essential for the wing-bar pattern to be seen well, and it is difficult to judge accurately as the wings are flapped quickly. At some angles, poor or brief views can easily be misleading, so not only is it important to establish the extent of white in the wing-bar, but also to confirm this on more than one occasion, ideally with the spread wing more or less perpendicular to the observer.

Although this pattern was originally thought to be a diagnostic feature at all ages and in all plumages, a recent male hybrid *Aythya* in Buckinghamshire and Berkshire showed a wing-bar pattern typical of Lesser Scaup (Chris Heard pers. comm.), while other hybrids may show

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37 & 38. Male Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*, Drift Reservoir, Cornwall, March 2000 (37) and female Lesser Scaup, Cleethorpes Country Park, Lincolnshire, April 1999 (38). The level of contrast between the white bar across the secondaries and the duller bar across the primaries is a key feature of Lesser Scaup of both sexes. Greater Scaup *A. marila* and Tufted Duck *A. fuligula*, plus virtually all potentially confusing hybrid combinations, show either a white wing-bar that extends across both the secondaries and the primaries or a gradual change from white secondaries to grey primaries.

wing-bar contrast between the secondaries and primaries but not the clean-cut division of a typical Lesser Scaup. In these situations, other potential indicators of hybrid parentage must be checked carefully.

A recent addition to the armoury of those seeking to find their own Lesser Scaup relates to the pattern of the underwing (Garner 2002). This is a particularly useful feature when a suspected Lesser Scaup flaps its wings when facing you, something which they seem to do more often than when facing away! Female and immature Lesser Scaups show a white wing-lining, formed by white lesser and median underwing-coverts and axillaries, which contrasts with the grey feathering of the greater underwing-coverts, marginal underwing-coverts and the underside to the primaries and secondaries (Garner suggested that the underwing pattern of adult males is less distinct). The effect of this is to produce a contrasting pattern to the underwing, with the white 'lining' highlighted against a darker surround. Significantly, the pattern of the wing-bar is not visible across the underside of the primaries and secondaries. The underwing of both male and female Tufted Duck and Greater Scaup is typically fairly uniform off-white, lacking contrast between the underwing-coverts and the flight feathers; furthermore, the pattern of the wing-bar is usually visible as a diffuse image across the flight feathers. The underwing pattern must be used in association with the other characters discussed here, and is perhaps most easily studied on photographs, but it might well prove to be a valuable supporting feature when piecing together the evidence to identify a suspected Lesser Scaup.

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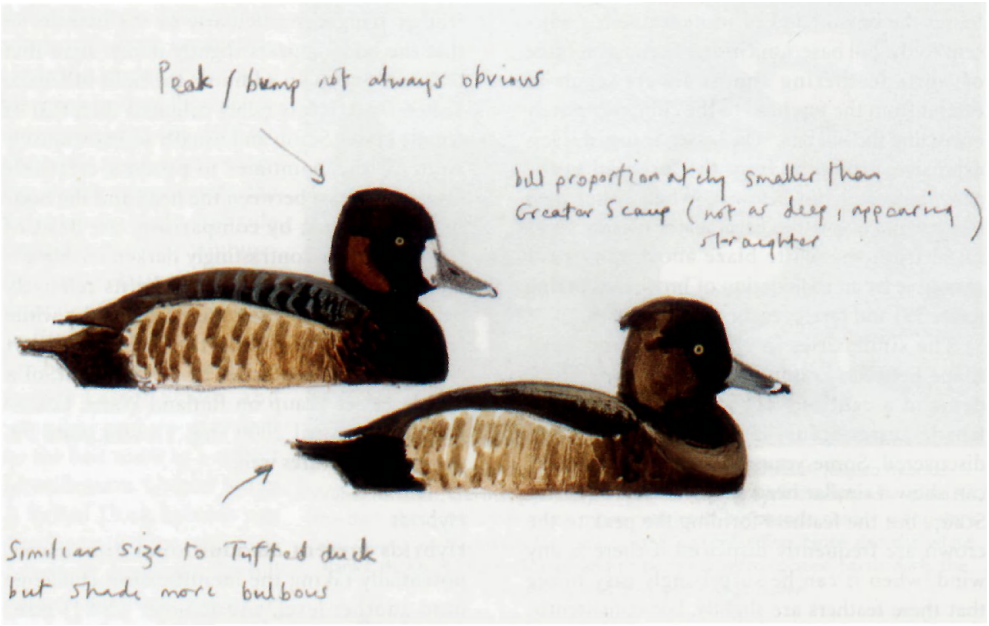
Steve Young/Birdwatch

39 & 40. Female Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*, Cleethorpes Country Park, Lincolnshire, April 1999 (39) and female Greater Scaup *A. marila*, Seaforth, Merseyside, November 1998 (40). Female Lesser Scaup is more difficult to identify than the male, and confusion is more likely to occur with female Tufted Duck *A. fuligula* than female Greater Scaup. This photograph of a female illustrates the angular head that peaks behind the eye, and appears darker and browner than the flanks and mantle, which have pale, greyish feather edges. Consequently, the paler body can contrast with the dark brown head, and this contrast is often visible at long distances. Although Lesser shares the broad band of white feathering around the bill base, below the bill this narrows significantly, and is usually thin or absent below the lower mandible, providing a reliable feature in separation from Greater Scaup, in which the white feathering forms a broad band encircling the entire bill.

Males

Most adult male Lesser Scaups complete the moult into breeding plumage by December or early January, while first-year males reach the same stage approximately one month later. Many first-year males retain some immature feathering, particularly on the rear flanks, as did the 1987 Chasewater bird. In plate 35, the play of light on the birds' heads clearly shows



John Wright

Fig. 1. Female Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis* (left) and female Tufted Duck *A. fuligula*, Rutland Water, Leicestershire, April 2000.

the purple sheen of Lesser compared with the bottle green of Greater. Unfortunately, this is apparent in the field relatively rarely, with bright, sunlit conditions usually required to appreciate this iridescence. Furthermore, in less than perfect viewing conditions, Lesser Scaup sometimes appears to have a green gloss to the head, so care is required not to dismiss a potential Lesser Scaup too hastily. Of much greater use is the overall appearance of Lesser Scaup, which tends to be slightly darker than Greater. On Lesser, the coarse vermiculations of the mantle and scapulars render it quite dark above, and with the flanks being finely vermiculated, particularly the fore-flanks, the overall appearance tends to be marginally duller than Greater Scaup. Towards the rear, the contrast of the upperparts with the flanks increases, where the brown-washed rear scapulars merge with the unmarked brown tertials, and as the pattern in Greater Scaup is similar here, the contrast between mantle and flanks should be assessed near the mantle peak.

Although these features are readily apparent in good photographs, this is not always the case in the field, for example when viewing distant birds. Keith Vinicombe (pers. comm.) recalls a visit to see the male Lesser Scaup at Studland, Dorset, in April 2002. When he arrived and scanned the lake with binoculars he saw two distant scaups with apparently identical mantle coloration. He assumed both to be Greater Scaups until he checked them through his telescope, and was surprised to find that it was a Greater and a Lesser together. Later, when watching the two males diving at quite close range, it proved surprisingly difficult, and often impossible, to separate them during the brief periods when they surfaced, when both the head and body plumage were wet and sleeked down.

Females

Female Lesser Scaup poses a greater range of identification pitfalls than the male, and it is prudent to establish just what female Lesser Scaup really looks like before discussing its separation from similar species. Like the male, females are of similar size to, or slightly smaller than, female Tufted Duck, with an angular head shape that peaks behind the eye. The bill is similar in shape to that of the male, but is darker, and surrounded at the base by a broad blaze of white feathering. Confusion is more likely to occur with a Tufted Duck showing an unusually broad pale band of feathering around the base of the bill than with Greater Scaup. Female Greater Scaup should always be separable using a combination of size, head shape

and bill structure, but it does share with female Lesser the broad band of white feathering adjacent to the bill base. On Greater Scaup, this blaze of white feathering almost always seems to extend from the forehead to the chin, completely encircling the bill base. On Lesser Scaup, it is less extensive, extending from the forehead to the gape, but often not below it. When Lesser does show white below the gape this is usually separated from the white blaze above the upper mandible by an indentation of brown feathering (plate 39) and rarely reaches onto the chin.

The similarities in size, colour and head shape between Lesser Scaup and Tufted Duck demand a cautious approach if a suspected female Lesser Scaup, especially a first-year, is discovered. Some young female Tufted Ducks can show a similar head shape to that of Lesser Scaup, but the feathers forming the peak to the crown are frequently displaced if there is any wind, when it can be surprisingly easy to see that these feathers are slightly, but consistently, longer than the remainder of the crown feathers (in Lesser Scaup they are no longer than any other feathering on the crown). There are also minor differences in coloration of the head, mantle and flanks. In female Lesser Scaup, the flanks and mantle have pale, greyish feather edges and, consequently, the flanks can appear quite pale at a distance, while the mantle is also less dark than that of female Tufted Duck, so the body contrasts with the rich, dark brown head. Female Tufted Ducks tend to have darker feather fringes, particularly to the mantle, so that the body appears slightly darker than that of Lesser Scaup. In addition, the head of female Tufted Duck is less richly coloured than that of female Lesser Scaup and usually seems relatively cold. All this combines to produce relatively limited contrast between the head and the body of Tufted Duck; by comparison, the head of Lesser Scaup is contrastingly darker, enabling a distant bird to be picked out by its relatively pallid body, even when the detail of the white feathering surrounding the bill base is not visible. The field sketches by John Wright, of a female Lesser Scaup on Rutland Water, Leicestershire, in April 2000 (fig. 1), and plate 39, show these features well.

Hybrids

Hybrids present an additional dimension, potentially taking the identification challenge onto another level, and Randler (2001) published a detailed analysis of the problems that hybrids can present. In brief, two of the more frequent parental combinations which can produce hybrid offspring resembling male Lesser Scaup are Tufted Duck × Common Pochard *A. ferina* and Greater Scaup × Tufted Duck. A male Tufted Duck × Common Pochard hybrid has a purple tinge to the head and a peaked crown, but differences from male Lesser Scaup include the ground colour of the mantle

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41. Male Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* x Tufted Duck *A. fuligula* hybrid, Haarlem, Netherlands, February 2003. This individual is straightforward to separate from Lesser Scaup *A. affinis* on account of the broad black tip to the bill and the uniform greyish mantle.

(which tends to be more uniform grey, rather than white with dark vermiculations); a more extensive black tip to the bill which is not confined to the nail (see plate 41); and a white wing-bar which extends onto the primaries. Male hybrids from this parental combination are relatively easy to separate (Christoph Randler *in litt.*) but hybrid females can be remarkably similar to female Lesser Scaup, and wing-bar pattern may well be the best route to a correct identification. Greater Scaup × Tufted Duck hybrids can also be tricky but, although some will show a similar bill pattern and head shape to those of Lesser Scaup, they usually show a noticeably darker mantle (see plate 42) and an entirely white wing-bar. For example, one such hybrid, present at Chew Valley Lake, Avon, was described by John Martin (*in litt.*) as 'Quite similar to Lesser Scaup. The head shape was not bad and it had both green and purple gloss. The bill showed little black at the tip when viewed side-on but in good, head-on views, you could see that this was not confined to the nail, but extended laterally along the edge of the bill. The mantle and scapulars were too finely vermiculated [for Lesser Scaup] and, although the wing-bar appeared somewhat like that of Lesser Scaup, this was usually if it was seen briefly, at long range, or at an unfavourable angle.'

Thorsten Krüger

42. Male Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* x Tufted Duck *A. fuligula* hybrid, Wilhelmshaven, Germany, January 1997. Compared with the hybrid in plate 41, the dark tip to the bill is much more restricted, but mantle colour is too dark and closely vermiculated for male Lesser Scaup *A. affinis*. Note also the white flanks; those of Lesser Scaup tend to be finely vermiculated, particularly the fore-flanks, and thus somewhat duller.

Summary

Given reasonable views, Lesser Scaup can be identified using a combination of size, shape and plumage characteristics. However, although many observers have become increasingly familiar with Lesser Scaup in recent years, this species *can* still be difficult to identify. Hybrids, especially females, are really the main problem, and these look set to remain a source of confusion, for the time being at least. Even for those familiar with the appearance of a range of hybrids from possible parental combinations, care and attention to detail are essential. Ideally, records should include a discussion explaining how a hybrid individual was considered, reviewed and eliminated, as this would greatly assist BBRC in accepting the record. Precise details of the bill pattern, head shape and wing-bar would, however, remain a prerequisite for acceptance. As with any difficult species, finders of a potential Lesser Scaup are well advised to encourage other observers to see the bird and, if possible, obtain photographic evidence.

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