

## Surf Scoter *Melanitta perspicillata*



**Folk Name:** Booley Duck

**Status:** Migrant, Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Rare

**Habitat:** Large lakes

Scoters are often called “sea” ducks. They nest in freshwater lakes in the northern United States and Canada, but they spend most of their lives diving for fish in cold ocean waters. Atlantic scoters winter in large flocks along the East Coast, as far south as Florida. Occasionally, some of these scoters stray inland to large lakes in both Carolinas.

All three types of scoters have been sighted in the Central Carolinas. The White-winged Scoter (21 inches) is the largest, the Surf Scoter (20 inches) is the middle-sized bird, and the Black Scoter (19 inches) is our smallest scoter. Scoters have heavy, “swollen,” or “knobby” bills, a trait which immediately sets them apart from all our other diving ducks.

Bill Cobey photographed the first Surf Scoter ever seen in the Central Carolina region. His sighting was later announced in the Mecklenburg Audubon Society newsletter:

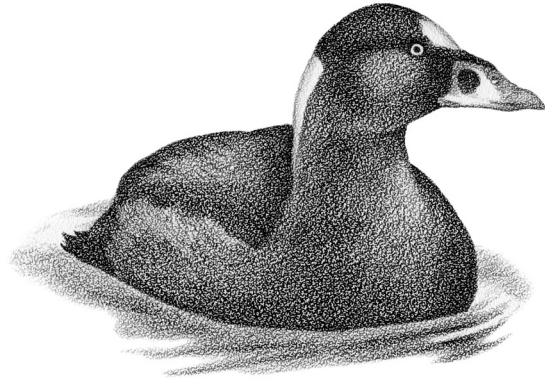
A New Record for Mecklenburg. If you missed the November 5th meeting, then you really missed something! Bill Cobey told us an incredible story (and had pictures to prove it) about a diving duck who decided to visit Mecklenburg. Hurrah for Dr. Bill!... Surf Scoter...October 18, 1970—Dr. William G. Cobey.

He found this scoter swimming alone on Lake Wylie. Cobey described it as an immature male.

The next Surf Scoter showed up in a strange spot—a small fishing pond, surrounded by forest, at Crowders Mountain State Park in Gaston County. Park Ranger Paul Hart found it on November 10, 1986. The bird had probably been forced down during a storm.

A solitary Surf Scoter appeared on Lookout Shoals Lake in Catawba County on November 5, 1998. This bird was found by Dwayne Martin and Lori Owenby. The following week, three were seen on Lake Wateree, just south of Lancaster County. The following year, Surf Scoters were reported four times on Lake Hickory between 25 October and November 30, 1999. Most were immature birds. One flock of eight birds is the largest single group of Surf Scoter ever recorded in this region.

Thirty years after the first Surf Scoter was seen in Mecklenburg County, another showed up, but this one was found in a peculiar place—the center of campus at UNC Charlotte. Rob Bierregaard and Judy Walker found an immature female in a tiny pond adjacent to the



Colvard Hall on January 4, 2000. They quickly notified other birders and this bird was seen and photographed by many.

Sightings of Surf Scoter have increased since the turn of the twenty-first century. Three were found on Lookout Shoals Lake on December 9, 2001, four were found on Lake Hickory in November 2003, and, since 2008, this species has been reported annually along the Catawba River corridor. Dates of Surf Scoter sightings in the region have ranged from 18 October (1970) through 21 February (2014), with one surprising spring date of 3 April in 2014.

Two more unusual locations were documented in 2011. A pair of Surf Scoters was found on the lake at Cane Creek Park in Union County on 23 November, and a female landed in a tiny pond in the parking lot of the Concord Mills Mall in Cabarrus County in mid-December during the height of the Christmas buying season. Birders stopping to take a look at this bird had to actively avoid over-zealous “mall cops” who had chased several observers away. After repeated requests, the mall management relented and allowed anyone who wanted the chance to drive up and take a look at this local rarity.



Surf Scoter on Lake Norman. (Jeff Lemons)