

Who Knew? A Smew (*Mergellus albellus*)!

by Robert T. Chapel

On 13 January 2001, a field trip group to the Riverlands wetlands in West Alton, Missouri, St. Charles County, would make a discovery that would send the North American birding world into a frenzy. Like many others, I learned about the discovery via the Internet. On the morning of 14 January, just before going to some of my favorite local winter birding areas, I checked IBET (Illinois birders' list serve) and read that

an adult male Smew (*Mergellus albellus*) had been found at Riverlands just over the Illinois border. My plans immediately changed and by shortly after 10 a.m. I pulled up at the base of the soon-to-be famous Clark Bridge over the Mississippi River. I soon spotted Keith McMullen and Dan Kassebaum standing there, who quickly pointed out the cooperative Smew to me.

Once having seen the bird, being intrepid Illinois birders, we waited to see if the Smew would venture onto the Illinois side of an invisible line. As we waited, the stories of its discovery circulated among the birders present, surprisingly few, so far, as the word had not yet spread. Apparently, a nine-year-old girl, later identified as Anne Hendricks (see Granlund 2001) first spotted the bird, wondering what the white bird was. It was shortly realized that it wasn't a Long-tailed Duck as first thought, but a Smew. Matt Gearheart and Roger McNeil identified it as a Smew.

By noon, I had tired of the vigil and needed a break, but returned at 1 p.m. to find there had been no change. The Smew hung closely to the Missouri shore, feeding with the Common Mergansers. However, at 1:30 p.m., the local Peregrine Falcon roused all the gulls and ducks, at which point we lost track of the Smew. After a few minutes of scanning the gulls and ducks that had landed on the far ice, I picked out a duck that turned out to be the Smew flying from the farthest side of the open water toward us. A discussion ensued as to whether the bird had been in Illinois.



Smew. 13 January 2001. Riverlands Environmental Demonstration Area. East Alton, Missouri. St. Charles County. First State Record for Missouri. Video capture photo by Chris Wood.

After carefully reviewing U.S. Geological Survey maps and looking at the open water from the Clark Bridge, I decided it was too close a call to determine whether the Smew had entered Illinois.

As luck would have it, I would have another opportunity to see the Smew. On 20 January 2001 Greg Lambeth, who hadn't yet seen the Smew, offered to drive and asked if I would accompany him. It was a good opportuni-

ty to go to an excellent birding area, and most of the gulls showed up on the Illinois side of the border there. We quickly found the Smew and observed it at length. By 9:30 a.m., my eyes had wandered to other ducks when Lambeth noted that the Smew was a long way out and swimming northeast. We watched the bird as it continued to swim steadily northeast for about fifteen minutes, until it was the farthest east duck in the entire basin. Lambeth then called excitedly to all the birders present, "It's in Illinois." But no one seemed to care. It turned out that all the birders around us were from two large groups from Ohio and Pennsylvania and had no interest in the Illinois/Missouri border. All the Illinois and Missouri birders had either departed or were searching out the large numbers of gulls. After checking the U. S. Geographic Survey maps, it was evident the bird was well over 100 yards into Illinois and perhaps closer to 200 yards. The Illinois border runs fairly close to shore at the Clark Bridge and actually crosses onto land on the Missouri side of the river near the lock and dam, so that all of the lock and dam is in Illinois. One other birder, Richard Biss, also saw the Smew in Illinois on a different day (pers. comm.).

While there is no question of the identity of the Smew, there have been doubts raised as to its origin. On 14 January 2001, those present did discuss the origin and looked for obvious signs of captivity, including bands and signs of clipped wings. None were observed. Chris Wood got good closeup photos that showed the left leg very well with no bands. Wood said he has