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The Common Eiders of the St. Lawrence Estuary: past, present and future

The objective of this plenary talk is to summarize information on the St. Lawrence Estuary Common Eiders (*Somateria mollissima dresseri*) based on data collected by several agencies and colleagues. The birds are nesting on about 35 islands scattered along the estuary with 7 of them harbouring over 80% of breeding pairs. Satellite tracking has shown that some eiders remain in the estuary to moult while others move to the Gulf of St. Lawrence or directly to the wintering grounds in coastal Maine. Monitoring of this population has been achieved through a unique collaboration with two non-profit organisations that collect down in the most important colonies. Revenues generated by eiderdown harvesting are reinvested in protecting and managing the islands and in education programs. The accuracy of these annual censuses varies according to colony size and access. Approximately 30,000 pairs of Common Eiders nest in the estuary but their numbers greatly fluctuate throughout the years. Some declines have been associated with the presence of foxes in colonies or with avian cholera outbreaks, but others could not be related to a specific cause. Duckling predation by Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*) appears to be a major problem in some colonies. Broods that survive move to the mainland coast where food resources determine their distribution. Contrary to the nesting islands, few brood rearing sites are protected from human disturbance or habitat destruction. The Common Eider is a valued quarry species for coastal duck hunters. In the early 1970s, 75% of the recoveries of adult females banded in the St. Lawrence River corridor originated from the estuary with the rest of the birds being retrieved along the Atlantic Coast, especially in Maine and Massachusetts. Recent results from on-going banding programs reveal an opposite trend. It is interesting to note that the proportion of adult females that carry the bacteria responsible for avian cholera varied among colonies and years. In 2004, an ambitious management plan that proposed population objectives and specific management measures for the Québec Common Eiders has been prepared through the collaboration of several agencies.