Noteworthy Spring Concentrations of Surf Scoters on the North Mainland Coast of British Columbia

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Surf Scoters (*Melanitta perspicillata*) nest on freshwater lakes across much of northern North America, and winter primarily along the entire length of coastal British Columbia (Campbell et al. 1990). Autumn migration begins in late August and birds arrive on coastal wintering areas from late September through November. Spring migration begins in late March and peaks in late April to early May (Campbell et al. 1990). Small numbers of non-breeding subadults and moulting males occur in coastal locations during the summer months. Non-breeding and staging habitats of Surf Scoter (Figure 1) includes a variety of freshwater and marine habitats. On the British Columbia coast the species seems to prefer shallow (<6 m in depth), open waters of straits, spits and points, as well as more protected bays, harbours, and lagoons (Campbell et al. 1990).

It is estimated that migrant and winter populations of Surf Scoter in British Columbia may contain 30 to 50 percent of the North American population (Campbell et al. 1990), which would represent up to 500,000 individuals (Sea Duck Joint Venture 2004). Birds tend to congregate around suitable foraging areas, such as Pacific herring (*Clupea pallasii*) spawn sites. Surf Scoters are blue-listed in British Columbia. Although they are a managed game bird, their population has been declining over the past 50 years (Boyd et al. 2001). Since this species spends the majority of its annual cycle in non-breeding

Figure 1. Each year Surf Scoters stage in immense flocks during the non-breeding season at favourite locations along the British Columbia coast. Vancouver (Stanley Park), BC. 16 January 1995 (Michael I. Preston).

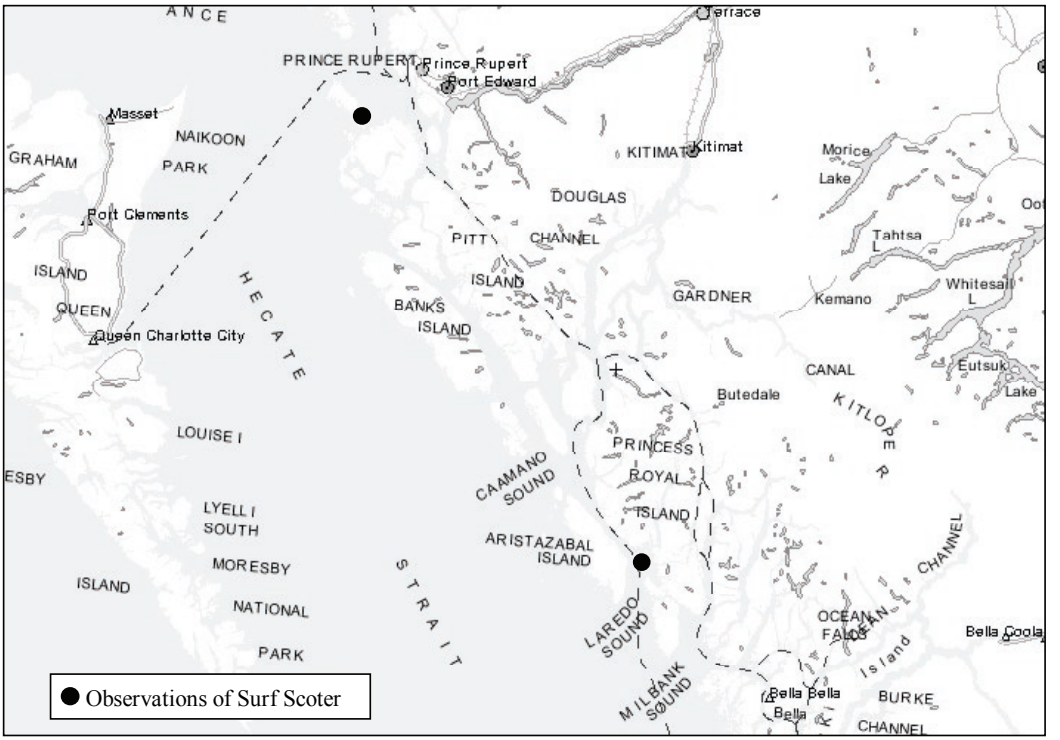

Figure 2. Locations of spring aggregations of Surf Scoters on the north mainland coast of British Columbia in 2006.

habitats, identification of these areas is critical in order to formulate appropriate management plans (Boyd et al. 2001). The purpose of this note is to document two observations of large concentrations of Surf Scoters on the central and north mainland coast of British Columbia in 2006.

From 15 to 21 April 2006, a vessel reconnaissance survey was conducted for marine birds and waterfowl utilizing coastal areas of northern mainland British Columbia. The survey was conducted from a 19 m aluminum seine fishing boat. Observations were conducted daily (as weather permitted) from 0800 to 1800 hrs. Observations of marine birds were recorded in 10 minute intervals while the vessel was traveling in order to document concentration areas. Vessel speed averaged around eight knots and the distance from shore ranged between 400 m and 1 km. Locations were recorded using a hand-held Global Positioning System (GPS) device (Garmin Map 76).

During the survey two large groupings of Surf Scoters were observed. The first grouping of 25,000 to 30,000 birds was estimated to be distributed over a 10 km^2 area between Kitasu Bay, near the entrance to Meyers Passage, and Dallain Point, at the south end of Princess Royal Island, on 15 April 2006. The second grouping of approximately 30,000 Surf Scoters was observed feeding on Pacific herring spawn within a 1 km^2 area (Figure 2) at Gurd Point within Kitkatla Inlet, on 17 April 2006. Other birds observed at these locations included similar numbers of Mew Gulls (*Larus canus*) and relatively small numbers of White-winged Scoters (*Melanitta fusca*).

The north mainland coast is an important spring staging area for migrating waterbirds, especially Surf

Scoters. During waterbird surveys in the vicinity of Chatham Sound in the late 1970s Martin (1980) estimated a population of about 300,000 scoters (almost exclusively Surf Scoters) in Big Bay near Prince Rupert on 16 and 17 April 1975. A "similar but slightly smaller population" was seen in Kitkatla Inlet on 11 and 12 May 1977. Martin (1980) also mentioned that "*Surf Scoters congregate in large numbers in areas where* [Pacific] *herring spawn, apparently after spawning has taken place*".

More recently, Savard and Kaiser (1982) reported an aggregation of 30,000 Surf Scoters in the vicinity of Billie Bay, 5 km east of the community of Kitkatla, in May 1979. Disturbances at traditional spring staging areas, from industrial and shipping activities, wind generator developments, and low-flying helicopters, all have the potential to disrupt Surf Scoters, and other concentrations of marine birds during a narrow window of time when they are resting and feeding during spring migration each year.

My observations in 2006 demonstrate that the north mainland coast continues to provide an important habitat for staging Surf Scoters during spring migration.

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

Marc is a Senior Wildlife Biologist with Jacques Whitford AXYS Ltd. in Burnaby, BC. He has been working on bird-related projects in eastern, northern, and western Canada for the past 20 years. He has been fascinated with wildlife since he was a boy and continues to study and photograph them when he has a chance.