

## **TREND, CURRENT STATUS AND ECOLOGY OF COMMON SCOTERS *MELANITTA NIGRA* IN THE VOORDELTA, THE NETHERLANDS**

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Common Scoters winter in shallow coastal waters in the Baltic Sea, the North Sea and the Atlantic. Along the Dutch coast one of the main winter aggregations of Common Scoters used to be found in the southwest, in the Voordelta. In the late seventies and early eighties maximum numbers regularly exceeded 20,000 birds (> today's 1% of the total population). Just over the Belgium border another 10,000 birds wintered and all these birds may be seen as the same local population. Since then the numbers declined dramatically and maximum numbers have rarely exceeded 10,000 birds in the Voordelta and Belgium. The trends in other main aggregation areas along the Dutch coast show a comparable pattern with peak numbers in the seventies-nineties and a decline thereafter. Changes in the distribution and numbers of Common Scoters in this part of the wintering range are presumably driven by changes in total population size, local food availability and local levels of disturbance (fishery and recreation). Very low total numbers of scoters were present along the Dutch and Belgium coasts, with numbers dropping below 40,000 birds (while before 2004 numbers peaked above 120,000). In the last century the occurrence of large concentrations of suitable bivalve prey species was crucial for the maintenance of high winter concentrations of Common Scoters, but since the decrease and almost complete disappearance of the Cut Trough Shell *Spisula subtruncata*, which was the most important food source in the eighties and nineties in the Netherlands, the Voordelta is nowadays predominantly used by Common Scoters as a stop over area during spring migration with maximum numbers in April. Recently there are indications that Common Scoters have switched to feeding on Atlantic Jackknife Clams *Ensis directus*. This clam first appeared in the area in the nineteen eighties but only after 2,000 it showed a strong increase in abundance and huge concentrations of Atlantic Jackknife Clam formed in the Voordelta. In terms of biomass, there is more than enough *Ensis*-food in the Voordelta, but the awkward shape and size of this prey species may prevent successful feeding by Scoters. Further research will reveal whether Common Scoters can adapt and regain their former numbers in the area.

### References

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