

THE SWANS, GEESE AND DUCKS

of the British Isles

By PETER SCOTT

Part Three

Parts One and Two are contained in the Third and Fourth Annual Reports respectively. This report deals with the Diving Ducks, the single species of Perching Duck which may reasonably claim inclusion in the British List (the Mandarin Duck) and the Eiders. It is hoped to complete the list of British species in the Sixth Annual Report; the Scoters, the 'Goldeneye-Harlequin-Longtailed' group and the Mergansers are still outstanding—eleven species.

In presenting the short life histories, the author wishes to acknowledge the following sources of information: *Handbook of British Birds*; Witherby, Ticehurst and Tucker, 1939. *Check List of Birds of the World*; J. L. Peters, 1931. *A Natural History of the Ducks*; J. C. Phillips, 1922. *Grønlands Fugle*; F. Salomonsen, 1950. *British Diving Ducks*; J. G. Millais, 1913.

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THE SWANS, GEESE AND DUCKS of the British Isles

PLATE IX. (POCHARDS)

RED-CRESTED POCHARD *Netta rufina* (Pall.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds in Europe and Asia from E. Spain through Lower Danube, Southern Russia across Caspian and Kirghiz Steppes to west Siberia (northern limits), Caucasia and Yarkand. Spreading as breeding species in western Europe. Now regular in Holland.

Nests on ground in very thick cover close to water. 6-13 eggs (larger numbers probably due to two ducks laying in one nest, apparently frequent in this species) end of April and May. Incubation 25-28 days. Breeds freely in captivity.

Winters principally Mediterranean, Asia Minor, India, Burma : in small but increasing numbers western Europe, especially Holland. Vagrant to many parts of England, mainly eastern counties, rare Scotland and Ireland. Most British records in winter months, some doubtless due to escapes from captivity.

Food : mainly vegetable, roots, buds and seeds of a variety of aquatic plants, often obtained by diving though less so than other species of diving ducks. Many kinds of animal food have been found in stomachs, but forming only small proportion of diet.

Voice : male, a harsh unmusical ' Kheech ' most commonly heard in spring. Female, the grating ' Kurr ' characteristic of all female diving ducks, but it is very rarely heard.

Identification : golden crown, crimson bill and black breast make full plumage male unmistakable. White of flanks and wing is suffused with very pale pink in healthy males. Female has dark crown and pale grey cheeks ; line through eye which divides the two is more sharply contrasted than in female Common Scoter. In flight white wing bar extending onto primaries is conspicuous in both sexes.

EUROPEAN POCHARD *Aythya ferina* (L.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds in British Isles, the Low Countries, Germany, S. Sweden, the Baltic States through Central Russia and west Siberia to Lake Baikal ; southern limits S. Spain and Algeria east through Balkans to Transcaucasia.

Builds Coot-like nest over mud or shallow water or on land very near water. 6-11 eggs (up to 18 recorded) from end of April, more usually mid-May. Incubation 24-26 days. Breeds, but not very freely, in captivity.

RED-CRESTED POCHARD

♀



♂



♂ in eclipse



♀



♂



♂ in eclipse



EUROPEAN POCHARD

♀ winter



♂



♀ summer



♂ in eclipse



COMMON WHITE-EYE
or FERRUGINOUS DUCK

In west winter range much as in breeding season, also in Egypt, Asia Minor, Persia, Afghanistan, N. India, Burma and S.W. China. In Britain more numerous in winter than summer, formerly in very large rafts, but numbers have greatly decreased in recent years. Frequently in association with Tufted Ducks on reservoirs, lakes, etc. Rarely on salt water except during frost.

Food : mainly roots, leaves, buds and seeds of aquatic plants, seeds of sedges and grasses. Animal matter includes crustaceans, snails and worms. Food largely obtained by diving.

Voice : female, typical harsh growling 'Kurr' of female diving ducks. Male, a soft wheezing whistle, more or less confined to the display.

Identification : chestnut head, black breast and very pale grey back and flanks make drake easily distinguishable from other diving ducks. Female, dull brown with characteristic face pattern of whitish on cheeks, at base of bill and on chin. No white in wing.

WHITE-EYE, OR FERRUGINOUS DUCK *Aythya nyroca* (Güld.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds in southern Europe, Germany, Poland, Balkans, Russia and west Siberia to the Ob Valley, south to northern Africa, Persia, Turkestan, Kashmir and southern Tibet.

Nests very close to, sometimes over, water. 7-12 eggs (6-20 recorded) end of April Spain, mid-May Germany. Incubation 25-27 days (28 in captivity). Breeds readily in captivity.

Winters in southern part of breeding range, N. Africa, Nile Valley, Persian Gulf, India and Burma. Vagrant in Britain and Scandinavia. Has occurred in over thirty counties in England and Wales, very few records in Ireland and Scotland. Unusually numerous in England in winters of 1949-50 and 1950-51.

Food : very varied ; in Europe mainly vegetable (aquatic plants), in India reported preponderantly animal matter, including small fish and frogs and their spawn, also worms, snails, crustaceans and insects. Food obtained largely by diving.

Voice : female, a harsh 'Kurr,' similar to calls of other female diving ducks but less loud than Common Pochard. It is rarely heard. Male, a grating wheeze heard only during display.

Identification : chestnut colour and conspicuous white eye distinguishes male from Tufted Duck, but female with brown eye may be confused. Conspicuous white under tail-coverts in both sexes usually diagnostic, but Tufted Ducks sometimes show some white under tail. In flight white wing bar is prominent, and extends onto primaries.

PLATE X. (POCHARDS AND PERCHING DUCKS)

TUFTED DUCK *Aythya fuligula* (L.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds in British Isles, Iceland (Mývatn only), Scandinavia, most of Europe and Asia, rarely north of 70°N., south to central Europe, Balkans, Kirghiz Steppes, Baikal, Amur, Sakhalin, Japan, Commander Is. Since 1900 has greatly increased and extended its range as breeding bird in Britain. It is nevertheless still curiously local, confined to the south and west sides of England, Wales, the west side of northern Scotland and the southern half of Ireland (although not in the extreme south-west). It seems still to be extending its range.

Nests usually but not always within a few yards of water, often on islands in lakes, sometimes in colonies. Common site in tuft of rushes. 6-18 eggs (28 recorded but several females frequently lay in same nest) from mid-May, mainly June. Incubation 23-25 days. Breeds in captivity, though not always freely.

Winters from southern half of breeding range to north and tropical Africa, Arabia, India, Malay, S. China, Philippines. In Britain sometimes in large rafts in association with European Pochards on reservoirs. Rarely on salt water except during frost.

Food : more animal than vegetable, obtained by diving. Molluscs, insects, but some aquatic plants.

Voice : female, typical diving duck 'Kurr,' male gentle, aspirate whistle—very soft—'hoi,' only used during display, often multi-syllabled. Courting note—'tuc-took-tōok' very rapidly so that whole body shakes.

Identification : black and white male with crest is easily identified. Black back and white flanks distinguish from drake Scaup in which back is pale grey. Female sometimes has white at base of bill, but never so extensive as female Scaup. Some crest usually shows. Bill smaller and narrower than Scaup. Females and immature males occasionally show white under tail, though not so much as White-eye. In flight white wing bar is conspicuous.

COMMON SCAUP *Aythya marila marila* (L.)

[American Scaup (*A. m. nearctica*) from North America is said to be larger and darker, but is rather doubtfully distinct. Eastern Scaup (*A. m. mariloides*), which breeds on Bering Is., probably Kamchatka, and winters in China and Japan, is smaller and has coarser vermiculations on back.]

Breeds mainly north of 60°N., from Iceland and Scandinavia, Russia, Siberia, Eastern Limits not defined. Has bred in Scotland at least 12 times, probably more (possibly still does so regularly in certain areas), mainly Hebrides and Orkneys but at least once on mainland.

Apparently requires rather less cover than Tufted Duck for nest. Sometimes

♀

TUFTED DUCK

♂ in eclipse

showing exceptional plumage

♂

♀

♀ summer

♂

COMMON SCAUP

♂ in eclipse

♀

♂ in eclipse

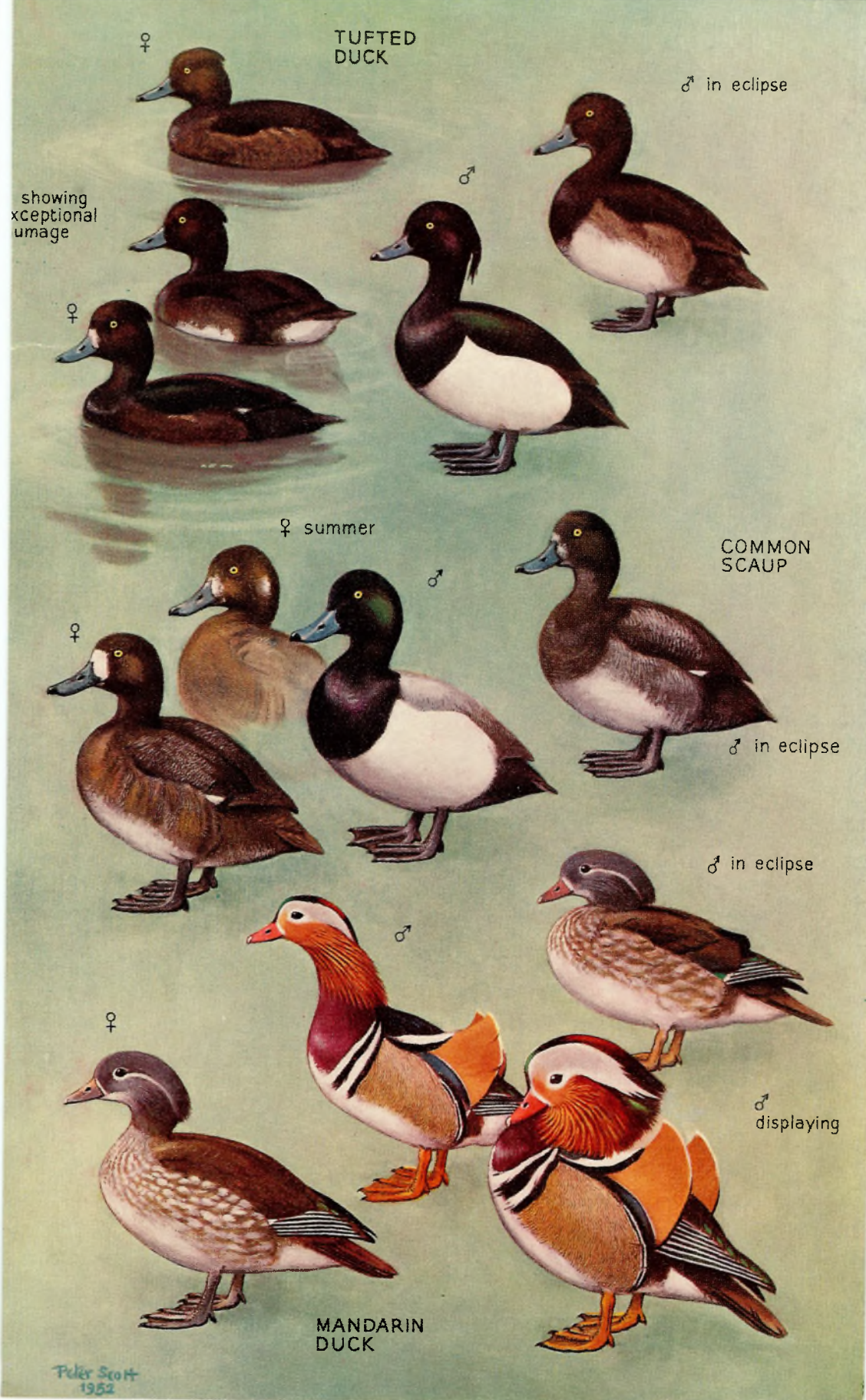
♂

♀

♂ displaying

MANDARIN DUCK

Peter Scott
1952



nests in colonies. 6-13 eggs (22 recorded due to more than one female using same nest) end of May and June. Incubation 27-28 days. Breeds in captivity.

Winters on coasts of western Europe (not S.W.), eastern Mediterranean, Black Sea, Persian Gulf, North-West India. Siberian birds which winter in China may be intermediate between *marila* and *mariloides*. In Britain winters mainly on tidal waters, only rarely inland except on passage. Occasionally in very large rafts, but local.

Food : almost entirely animal, except in summer when many buds and seeds of aquatic plants are eaten. In some areas mussels (*Mytilus edulis*) form main diet, but other molluscs, crustaceans, insects, worms and even small fish are sometimes taken.

Voice : female, the usual diving duck call, but normally trisyllabic 'kurr-kurr-kurr' although the call is seldom heard. There is also a low clucking 'chuk-chuk-cherrr.' When enticing male it has been described as 'aar-wuk-wuk.' Male, low double whistle or coo 'whe-oo,' very quick and soft ; only heard during courtship. With the display as the head is thrown back 'tuc-tuc-tuc—wic-coo.'

Identification : pale grey vermiculated back distinguishes male from Tufted. In poor light can be confused with Pochard but head black glossed green instead of chestnut brown. Female has more extensive white patch round base of bill than female Tufted. Bill is longer, broader, more spoon-shaped than in Tufted, and bird itself is substantially larger.

MANDARIN DUCK *Aix galericulata* (L.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds in eastern Asia from the Amur and Ussuri south through Korea, eastern China, Japan, Formosa. Now much rarer than formerly in its Asiatic range. Introduced into England through escape from captivity during present century. Now well established as resident (some hundreds of pairs) in Surrey, also Bedfordshire.

Nests in holes in trees. 9-12 eggs end April early May (in Asia) mid-May in Britain. Incubation 28-30 days. Breeds freely in captivity, but young rather difficult to rear.

Winters in Asia in that part of range south of 40° N. In Britain no apparent migration, but collects in quite large flocks (more than 100 together) on suitable lakes and ponds.

Food : probably mainly vegetable, though some animal food (snails, worms) also taken. Extremely partial to acorns both in Asia and in England.

Voice : male, a low rather resonant 'uib' like a belch, used mainly during courtship. Female, a single 'sneezing-quack' uttered as a single syllable but sometimes frequently repeated, and most commonly heard in flight.

Identification : male's amazing plumage is unique among ducks. In distance sandy brown colour predominates, with conspicuous white stripe above eye. Female's soft lilac-grey with white round eye and slight crest at nape are unlike any other British species. In flight shortish neck, long trowel-shaped tail and white belly are characteristic ; male's sails are laid flat when flying and bright plumage is not so striking.

PLATE XI. (SEA DUCKS)

EUROPEAN EIDER *Somateria mollissima mollissima* (L.)

[Four other subspecies recognized : Faeroe Eider (*S. m. faeroensis*), resident in the Faeroes, is smaller with much smaller bill. Northern Eider (*S. m. borealis*), N.E. Canada, Greenland and Spitzbergen, has smaller bill, bright orange yellow in spring and the sickle-shaped inner secondaries are usually longer. American Eider (*S. m. dresseri*), Hudson's and James Bays, east coast of N. America (Labrador to Maine), bill orange yellow in spring and frontal processes of bill wider. Pacific Eider (*S. m. v-nigra*), Arctic coasts of N.W. Canada and N.E. Asia, wintering in Aleutians, is large and has black V under chin. Eiders from Norway and Iceland have been separated as *S. m. norvegica* and *S. m. islandica*, but differences are not considered enough at present to justify subspecific separation. Nevertheless many Eider populations may be sufficiently isolated to become slightly different from other populations, and may be regarded as races of the future, now in process of evolution.]

Typical race breeds in Iceland, Norway, Finland, N. Russia, Baltic Islands, Denmark, Holland, France, Britain—Shetlands, Orkneys, Hebrides, coasts of Scotland, south to Farne Islands (Northumberland) on east and Galloway on west, commoner on West Coast ; also on islands of Donegal, Ireland.

Nests chiefly on islands off coast but sometimes on hills and lochs inland, often in colonies ; little cover required. 3-6 eggs (up to 10 possibly laid by one female, 19 recorded) mid-May and June. Incubation 27-28 days. Females can be touched on nest. Breeds in captivity.

Winters mainly in sea areas near breeding grounds, some concentrations in areas of plentiful food supply. Stragglers seen all coasts of British Isles.

Food : mainly molluscs, crustaceans, echinoderms, coelenterates, etc., very small proportion vegetable (green seaweeds).

Voice : male, a loud sweet cooing. ' Ah-ooo ' used mainly in display ; a very musical sound. Female, a guttural croaking, often polysyllabic but not essentially so : ' gook, googook ' or ' gogok. '

Identification : adult drake easily recognized, but eclipse and immature drakes show considerable range in amount of white on head, back and breast. Female most easily recognized by outline of head and bill, also barred (as opposed to spotted or streaked) plumage. At a distance female Eiders look very dark.

KING EIDER *Somateria spectabilis* (L.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds on Arctic coasts of Europe, Asia and North America ; nearest breeding grounds to Britain, Labrador, Greenland, Spitzbergen, Novaya Zemlya, Kolguev. Individual males have been recorded with some regularity in large Eider colonies in Iceland, mated to *mollissima* females.

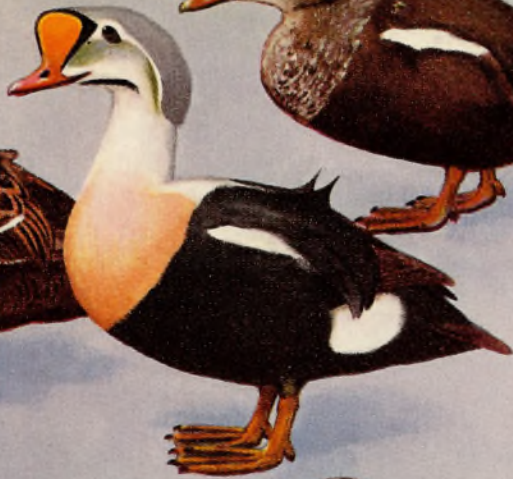
Nests near fresh water pools in tundra up to about 20 miles inland, seldom in colonies, but exposed site similar to European Eider. 3-7 eggs (16 recorded,

KING
EIDER

♀



♂



♂ in eclipse

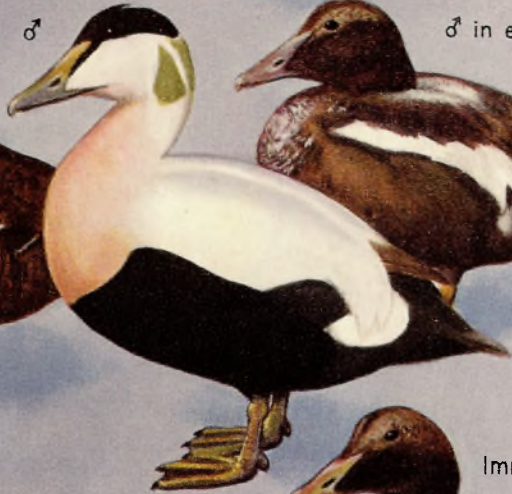


EUROPEAN
EIDER

♀



♂



♂ in eclipse



STELLER'S
EIDER

♀



Immature
♂



♂



♂ in
eclipse



Peter Scott
1952

possibly 3 females using same nest) mid-June to mid-July. Incubation period unknown. Has never bred in captivity as mature specimens have never been kept.

Some evidence of complex moult migration of males to west Greenland coast near Disko Island in early August. Thereafter immense flocks spend winter on S.W. coast of Greenland (as far north as ice permits). Many of these undoubtedly come from breeding grounds near the north and east coasts of Canada, and in the Arctic islands. About 50 recorded in Britain, mostly in winter.

Food : at sea molluscs, crustaceans, echinoderms, ophiurids, actinians and fish spawn ; on fresh water insects, especially mosquito larvæ and some aquatic plants.

Voice : male, usually a musical triple 'Croo-croo-crooo,' very pigeon-like (Stock Dove or display call of Wood Pigeon). Female, very similar to European Eider—guttural 'gok, gok-gok.'

Identification : shape and colour of head and bill very striking in adult male. Pointed feathers on back ('spurs') evidently under some control by bird. These occasionally show on female's back during breeding season. Female hard to distinguish from female *mollissima*, but chin and throat paler in comparison with top of head, wing coverts more sharply marked. Said to be more 'rusty or buffy-brown,' but individual variation in both species makes this a dangerous character. Only at close range can differences in feathering at side of bill be detected.

STELLERS EIDER *Somateria stelleri* (Pall.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds on Arctic coast of Siberia from Taimyr Peninsula to Bering Strait and the coast of Alaska. A colony which probably formerly bred in northern Lapland now no longer exists. This may indicate a general decline in the species. [The Labrador Duck (*Camptorhynchus labradorius*), a related species with somewhat similar requirements, became extinct in 1875.]

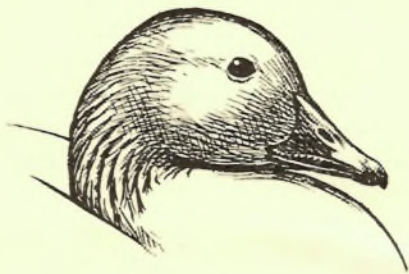
Nests on tundra in little cover, or among coastal rocks. 6-10 eggs mid-June to mid-July. Incubation period unknown.

Winters Aleutian, Commander and Kurile Islands, Kamchatka, still in very large flocks in some localities, also formerly on north coast Lapland. This must be regarded as outpost at western end of range as it is absent from Greenland, except as straggler. Only five records in Britain.

Food : molluscs, crustaceans, young fish and spawn.

Voice : male, a low croon, harder, but much less in volume than European Eider's. Female, growling noise like that made by female Wigeon.

Identification : chestnut buff of male unmistakable as distinction from Long-tailed Duck, with which it might be confused at first glance on sea. Much smaller than other Eiders and has higher forehead, less Eiderlike profile. Wings whistle in flight, as in Goldeneye, but louder.



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