

Whistler Duck / Scoter — Kukumyaa'aq

Kukmyaa'at meqniitut.—Whistler ducks are hard to pluck.



Photo: Whistler ducks in Chiniak Bay, 2021, AM725

The whistler duck or black duck is the local name for the black scoter (*Melanitta nigra americana*). These large, sea ducks are known for taking a running start to become airborne. Males have black plumage and a distinctive rounded, orange knob on the top of their beak. Females are brown without the distinctive beak bulge. Scoters are vocal birds, known for their persistent whistle-like call. Their Alutiiq name comes from this call. *Kukumyaa'aq* translates as something that whistles.

Scoters winter in the Kodiak region. They often occur in large flocks in shallow waters near shore. This makes them one of the most popular ducks to harvest. Alutiiq hunters pursue scoters with shotguns on the water and in the air. Scoters are a favorite ingredient in duck soup, a dish made by simmering duck meat in a pot of water flavored with garlic and onions. People cook the soup for hours to tenderize the meat, and then add rice, potatoes, and noodles. As a finishing touch, some cooks thicken the soup with a roux of flour and water. People typically prefer fresh duck meat to frozen, and many cooks add the blood of a freshly harvested duck to their soup for flavor.