

Ducks spend winters in Bering ice packs

Early this spring, federal biologist of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Biological Service combined satellite technology with 20/20 eyesight to solve one of the great biological mysteries of North America: *Where do spectacled eiders, a rare and mysterious sea duck, go during the winter?*

In late March, responding to a single location signal from a satellite transmitter attached to an eider hen, Fish and Wildlife biologists Bill Larned and Greg Balogh flew out over the frozen Bering Sea to visually search for an answer. To their amazement, they discovered tens of thousands of the elusive

ducks jammed into tiny holes in the Bering Sea pack ice, which they kept unfrozen despite the minus-20-degree (F) temperatures by their own body warmth and movement.

Larned and Balogh returned to the remote location in early April to document 140,000 spectacled eiders, which biologists estimate to be at least half the total world's population.

"This was the last waterfowl species in North America whose winter range was almost completely unknown," said Larned. Some had hypothesized that they dispersed on the open water near the sea ice during the winter, he said. "Finally finding these birds,

this concentrated and *inside the ice pack*, is the most important and exciting find of my 20 year career. It's incredible."

The colorful duck, which sports a distinctive white eye patch circled by a black ring to give the look of spectacles, was listed as "Threatened" under the Endangered Species Act (Act) in 1993 after their western Alaska populations declined more than 90 percent in the last 30 years. No one knows the cause for the decline, but they are known to spend summers and breed in tundra areas of coastal Alaska. More than 90 percent of the world's population is believed to breed in the Russian arctic.