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# Richard Meinertzhagen's 1938 observation of Spectacled Eiders *Somateria fischeri* at Petsamo, Finland (now Pechenga, Russia)

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**SUMMARY.**—During a 1938 visit to what was Petsamo in northern Finland (today Pechenga, north-west Russia), Richard Meinertzhagen claimed to have observed several individuals of Spectacled Eider *Somateria fischeri*, a species that had previously been observed just once in Europe, in northern Norway in 1933. Due to the insufficient documentation, and inconsistencies regarding the number of birds seen, it is recommended that this sight record be treated henceforth with suspicion.

Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen (1878–1967) was widely regarded as one of the giants of ornithology (Cocker 1989). However, it has subsequently been suggested that many of his discoveries were falsified (Garfield 2007). Meinertzhagen has been accused of unauthorised removal of bird skins from museums and private collections, and of relabelling specimens with fabricated collection data (Knox 1993, Rasmussen & Collar 1999, Rasmussen & Prÿs-Jones 2003). Some of his published field observations are also considered suspicious, and several have been critically reassessed in recent years (e.g. Collar & Stuart 1985, Prÿs-Jones & Collar 2016). Here, I review a further problematic case of a published sight record of a vagrant bird by Richard Meinertzhagen: his claimed 1938 observation of several Spectacled Eiders *Somateria fischeri* in what was at the time Petsamo, northern Finland (now Pechenga in Pechengsky District, Russia) (69°33'38"N, 31°13'40"E).

In early 1938, Meinertzhagen visited Finland (Garfield 2007). Having arrived in Helsinki, he continued north, through Finnish Lapland, all the way to what was then the northernmost part of the country, Petsamo, on the shore of the Barents Sea. There, on 16 March, Meinertzhagen set off from the harbour of Liinahamari / Liinakhamari in a small boat to observe seabirds (Meinertzhagen 1938a). During this excursion, Meinertzhagen claimed to have seen four or five (see below) individuals of *Somateria fischeri*. He tried to approach the birds, but was unable to collect any specimens as they took flight before he was within shooting range (Meinertzhagen 1938a,b).

Meinertzhagen's record is remarkable. Spectacled Eider is only rarely observed outside its breeding range, which extends from easternmost Siberia to westernmost Alaska, and its wintering range, in the Bering Sea (Dau & Kistchinski 1977, Madge & Burn 1988, Carboneras 1992, Petersen *et al.* 1999, Petersen & Douglas 2004). Prior to Meinertzhagen's report, there had been only one authenticated European record of the species. On 12 December 1933, a male was shot in the harbour of the northern Norwegian town of Vardø, on the Varanger Peninsula. The Spectacled Eider collected in Norway was said to have been 'not in the least shy' (Johnsen 1937: 13) and therefore easy to shoot. The specimen was preserved as a mounted skin in the University Museum in Bergen (Johnsen 1937). Meinertzhagen was aware of the Norwegian record and cited it (Meinertzhagen 1938a,b).

Meinertzhagen reported his observation in two different papers, both published in 1938, but there is a curious inconsistency between them. In the first, published in *Ornis Fennica*, Meinertzhagen claimed that he saw 'five specimens' of Spectacled Eiders, 'two

adult males and tre [*sic*] females' (Meinertzhagen 1938a: 47) (the word 'tre' means 'three' in Swedish; this orthographic error was thus probably caused by a Swedish-speaking member of the journal's editorial board). However, in the other paper, he claimed to have seen 'four birds, two drakes and two ducks' (Meinertzhagen 1938b: 758).

At the time, the record was accepted as genuine. The Finnish zoologist Kaarlo Eemeli Kivirikko (1870–1947) referred to it in his 1940 book *Suomen selkärangaiset* [*Vertebrates of Finland*], published when Petsamo was still part of Finland. After the Second World War, Petsamo was ceded to the then Soviet Union. Thus, as far as Finnish ornithology was concerned, Petsamo / Pechenga was now foreign territory, and Meinertzhagen's record was subsequently almost forgotten in Finland. Apart from a mention in another, posthumously published book by Kivirikko (1948), I am not aware of any detailed discussion of it in the post-1945 Finnish literature. Outside of the Finnish ornithological literature, Meinertzhagen's 1938 Spectacled Eider record has occasionally been mentioned (e.g. Cramp & Simmons 1977: 612, Dau & Kistchinski 1977, Koryakin 2015).

As noted, Richard Meinertzhagen's ornithological legacy is problematic. A number of the bird specimens in his large private collection, as well as some of his published field observations, are apparently fraudulent. However, the Meinertzhagen collection also included many specimens and observations that are surely genuine (Rasmussen & Prŷs-Jones 2003). Additionally, some of his erroneous records appear to be honest mistakes rather than deliberate hoaxes (e.g. Kirwan & Grieve 2013). The question, then, is to which category his record of Spectacled Eiders belongs. No other eyewitnesses to the observation, assuming that there were others, published any corroboration. No photographs were taken and no specimens were collected. The record's credibility is not improved by the fact that Meinertzhagen mentioned different numbers of individuals in his two 1938 papers: five and four, respectively.

Since the 1930s, Spectacled Eider has been observed in the Western Palearctic a few times. It has been seen twice off the coast of northern Norway: two males and one female on 23–24 February 1988, and a single male on 15 June 1997 (Norsk Ornitologisk Forening 2021). In addition, the species has been recorded twice off Svalbard: two males and one female on 30 April 2002, and one male and one female on 20 June 2012 (Norsk Ornitologisk Forening 2021). Thus, it is obviously not impossible that the 1938 Petsamo observation is authentic. However, all things considered, in my view it is advisable to treat Richard Meinertzhagen's 1938 observation of *Somateria fischeri* with suspicion.

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