

eggs are too small for *A. s. brunescens* of which the average measurement is  $22.7 \times 15.9$ , but agree with the measurements of *A. agricola* as given by Baker (*New Fauna*) i.e.  $16.8 \times 12.9$  mm. The colouration also agrees with the Baker's description of the eggs of this species in the *New Fauna*. *A. dumetorum*, which is also described as a passage migrant, is not found breeding over water. In Europe and the Altai where it breeds, it builds a deep cup-shaped nest in bushes and brambles; in the Himalayas it is described as building a ball-shaped nest low down in rose bushes well away from water. The nests of *A. agricola* however are described as 'beautifully made very deep cradles of fine grasses woven round two or more stems of a weed or rushes about 18 inches high above the ground of water'. *A. agricola* is described as a passage migrant in Baluchistan and has not hitherto been recorded as breeding in this area. A second interesting find is *Ixobrychus minutus minutus* described as a passage migrant and not previously recorded breeding in Baluchistan, though recorded breeding in the Himalayas and Sind. The Common Coot—(*F. atra*) is also described as a non-breeding visitant to North Baluchistan and common in Kushdil Khan. The finding of the nests of these two species constitute two new breeding records for Baluchistan; while the reed warbler if identified correctly as *A. agricola* would make a third, but as warblers are very difficult to identify with any certainty in the field, the record must be accepted with reserve until confirmed by actual breeding specimens.—EDS.]

#### IX.—NOTES ON WILD DUCK AND GEESE IN THE SADIYA FRONTIER TRACT, ASSAM.

The following is a note on some observations regarding duck shooting, and species found in the Sadiya Frontier Tract in Assam, gathered from several seasons experience in the District. It may be of interest in view of the fact that the country is not exactly of the type one associates with duck—dense evergreen rain forest—and that not much has been written about this area. If bags were not large, they were full of interest and one had to employ all one's ingenuity to get any return for the trouble taken.

There are no flighting and no driven birds with shooting from boats or machans. Dotted about the Central and Western portions of the Pasighat Subdivision, to which this note chiefly refers, there are numerous small areas; surrounded by very dense jungle and full of cane brakes and elephant grass, which for some reason have become water logged; possibly due to subsidences as a result of earthquakes, or to rivers and jungle streams changing their courses. The jungle has died out leaving the dead gaunt trunks and stumps of the trees standing thickly in the water which has collected. At the water's edge the elephant grass and cane brakes are almost impenetrable except along deer and wild



buffalo or bison tracks. Very few of these water logged areas or jungle 'bhils' fail to hold a pair of the White-winged Wood-Duck—(*Asarcornis scutulata*), now protected, outside Reserved Forest, all the year round by the Assam Government. Within Reserves the period of protection is 1st April to 15th September. The more overgrown and sheltered in dense jungle the pool happens to be, the more likely these birds are to be found. This species is by no means rare throughout the Subdivision; but is commonest in the Central and Western areas and I once stumbled on a herd of eleven together. This species is one of the commonest ducks met with in the areas where they are found and their peculiar whistling call can often be heard where it is impossible to get anywhere near them. A good Miri or Abor guide is absolutely essential and also an elephant, if possible, otherwise one would get lost in no time. The way these men find their way about; when to myself there was no indication of a path and the sky was very rarely seen; is positively amazing. On one occasion a Miri led me to a small 'bhil' miles from anywhere in just such country without faltering, and was only a few yards out in his calculations although he had only visited the area once seven years before when looking for a lost elephant. All these jungle pools hold a species of very large water Monitor Lizard which burrows in the banks. These creatures are also now fully protected by the Assam Government. Not many of the usual kinds of duck are to be found here until towards the end of January and on into February, for until then the 'bhils' are clogged with water grass and weeds; but by about the middle of January these have died off and rotted away leaving the water clear, with plenty of feed. The ordinary sorts of duck seem to use this area as a kind of jumping off place on their way north at the end of the season. The Himalayan (Abor) foot hills are only 15 miles or less to the North. The birds begin to collect in large numbers in February and my best bag was made on the 23rd of that month. By the end of March very few birds remain. In February the ground is covered with dry leaves so shooting becomes a contest between the alertness of the birds and one's ability to move down to the water edge, often on hands and knees, as quietly as possible and without disturbing the undergrowth—no easy task. A single mistake and there would be a startled sound of wings. Not a feather would be seen in such circumstances for the jungle is too thick overhead.

The usual method was to crawl down to the water along a game track avoiding the worst of the cane and general unpleasantness and having got that far safely to take up a position behind the outermost fringe of jungle. A liberal plastering of mud by this time acted as a camouflage! The birds were put up from the other end of the 'bhil' and they came past the gun if things had been well calculated and one was well hidden. Fun was fast and furious while it lasted, which was not long, for the birds very soon disappeared over the trees. They apparently cleared off altogether for a shoot over these 'bhils' never caused the birds to go from one to another close by. Matters were somewhat complicated by the birds dodging in and out of the dead



tree trunks and more often than not the charge of shot went into a tree instead of into a duck! Leeches were at times a great nuisance also. The commonest bird was the Common Teal (*Nettion crecca crecca*). The next most plentiful was the Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) followed by the Gadwall (*Chaulelasmus streperus*), White-winged Wood-Duck, and Spot Bill (*Anas poecilorhynchos*) in that order. I unfortunately did not determine the local race of the last named except in one case which proved to be a curious aberration midway between *zonorhynchos* and *harringtoni*. This bird was recorded in the *Journal* (vol. xxxix, p. 638, 1937). The Garganey or Blue-winged Teal (*Querquedula querquedula*) is extremely rare, so far as my experience goes, and I only secured one and saw no others. Similarly the Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*) is very rare and I only saw one specimen. There are only a very few pairs of the Pink-headed Duck (*Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*), now also completely protected by the Assam Government, and I have only seen one bird which must have been this species. This last species must be dying out for some obscure reason for hardly anyone shoots duck in the area and the birds are very rarely disturbed.

The Tufted Pochard (*Nyroca fuligula fuligula*) and the White Eye (*Nyroca rufa rufa*) are irregular in their incidence from year to year and not at all common. I have only shot one of each and not seen more than thirty or forty of each species. The Shoveller (*Spatula clypeata*) always found in pairs, is more common but very wary. The Pintail (*Dafila acuta*) is met with in fair numbers at times but is more of a migrant only. A curious fact is that most of the Pintails met with by me were immature birds. This species apparently prefers more open water and the young birds had not evidently acquired this habit. There is a small flock of Common Whistling Teal (*Dendrocygna javanica*) resident on a piece of open water in a patch of grass land near Koplong; but curiously I have never seen a Cotton Teal (*Nettapus coromandelianus*) anywhere in the District although it should be present in large numbers. Riverine duck shooting as opposed to shooting in the depths of the jungle can also be quite amusing—and profitable—for I was lucky enough to secure the second record of the Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) in India on the Brahmaputra which was also recorded in the *Journal* (vol. xxxviii, p. 193, 1935). The Brahminy (*Casarca ferruginea*) is common everywhere on the Brahmaputra and Lohit rivers and curiously enough is not at all shy, possibly because they are not chased by every gun in the neighbourhood as they are everywhere else. I found them very rank, though one made excellent soup! All the rivers and hill streams of any size always have a large quota of Merganser (*Mergus merganser orientalis*) dashing and splashing about in the white water of the rapids, except where it is fiercest, after small fish. They can provide some very pretty shooting when the river is narrow enough. They will seldom deviate from the course of the water when driven. The gun can stand right out in the open and they will not take the slightest notice or alter their course in any way. They can fly very fast indeed especially



down-stream in the hills, and good shooting is necessary for a good bag. The birds are by no means wasted, for the Abor camp followers greatly appreciate them; though I found them absolutely uneatable. I could never get past their rankness when cooked—skinned or otherwise. These birds have a very pretty and curious habit when cruising in calm water of arching their necks (especially the males) and then thrusting their beaks vertically skywards with a kind of darting motion. I feel sure this is not due to the effort of forcing an extra large meal down the gullet but seems to be a sort of game.

The Smew (*Mergellus albellus*) I have never seen although it is reputed to occur on the rivers of the District; nor have I come across the Widgeon (*Mareca penelope*) though it is said to be found just outside the Sadiya boundary in the Lakhimpur District. Stuart Baker records the Scaup (*Nyroca marila marila*), from the Lakhimpur District on the borders of Sadiya; but I must have missed seeing it.

The Spot Bill (*Anas poeciloryncha*) undoubtedly breeds in the district for I have seen them in September. The White-winged Wood Duck and the Common Whistling Teal are also resident and must nest.

It may be worth while recording that on one occasion I shot a female Common Teal on a small bog at Pangin about 40 miles into the hills and at an altitude of between 2000 and 3000 feet during the winter of 1934-35, and I also saw a large flight of Spot Bill in the Brahmaputra gorge in the same area that year.

Geese are met with fairly frequently on the sandbanks of the Brahmaputra, but very few are shot; and I have secured none, as they are too wary and unapproachable. I understand there is a particular area on the Dihang River between Pasighat and Kobo where large numbers of geese collect at the end of February and during March just prior to their migration to Tibet; but I have not seen this spot and am unable to say anything further on this subject, although I think it must exist because of the well defined migration route of geese over the village of Dambuk not far away. In connection with this migration route, which I have recorded elsewhere (*Journ. B.N.H.S.*, xl, 764-765, 1939), further enquiries show that this is used by geese far more on their northward flight than on their southward migration; only comparatively few birds coming south this way, unless they pass unnoticed at night. I have never been in this area during the time the southward migration would ordinarily take place, so it is difficult to say what the position is exactly about the southward flight and further investigation is necessary on this point.

I cannot say anything about the species of geese found in the Sadiya Frontier Tract for I have never got close enough to identify any I have come across and the ones that have been shot, I have not had the opportunity to examine in the flesh.

Most of the Sadiya Frontier Tract forms a large natural sanctuary for Duck of all species as they are very rarely shot at or disturbed and I feel sure there is much of great interest still to be found there, especially with regard to the inter-gradation of races



when one considers that the District lies at a point on the map where it is possible that the Far Eastern, Burmese and Indian races overlap to a certain extent.

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F.R.E.S

*Indian Police.*

NOWGONG,

NOWGONG DISTRICT,

ASSAM.

July 25, 1939.

#### X.—THE NOMENCLATURE OF BIRDS.

All interested in Birds are recommended to read again the admirable letter of Mr. Hugh Whistler's in the Society's Journal of June 15, 1931.

It contains a timely warning of the dangers of the trinomial system that has been adopted—and its truly dreadful term of 'subspecies'. This is indeed a 'supercream' product of taxonomy—and we may expect a further enrichment of it into 'super subspecies' and 'infra-subspecies' very soon unless we return to sanity in nomenclature.

Few will agree however with Mr. Whistler's statement that 'the millennium of all good zoologists is uniformity of Nomenclature'. Nomenclature is nothing of real importance in Ornithology. It is but the technique of arrangement and is no more important than the technique of painting in the Art of Painting. We must ever be on our guard against allowing technique to be our master—it is but a humble servant to us in our Science.

Nomenclature has then to *serve us*, and so let us chastise it and mould it to our will that it may serve—and not direct us. A suitable system must be devised then for international use as free of error and absurdities as is possible.

It is not difficult to predict that the present system of dog-Latin appellations will soon be scrapped entirely and simple symbols as in chemistry adopted. When Chemistry was in its infancy we had the simplest chemical compounds and elements called by the most fantastic terms that had to go as soon as the science became serious. Such a cleansing and approach to reality is what is now called for in Ornithology.

Biology is the Science of Truth—and we do not serve her by the perpetuation of error. If the minor sciences of Biology disobey her principles they must be chastised and corrected. Ornithology needs correction. The most important thing in Ornithology is knowledge of the Living Bird—and not thousands



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