

THE AUK:

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF

ORNITHOLOGY.

VOL. XIII.

JULY, 1896.

NO. 3.

THE DUCKS OF PLYMOUTH COUNTY, MASSACHUSETTS.

BY HERBERT K. JOB.

WHATEVER may be the claims of other sections of New England, it is certain that Plymouth County, Mass., especially the southern half, is notably a favorite resort of the Ducks. Every one of the twenty-eight species attributed to New England has been noted within the last ten years.

The topographical conditions are specially favorable for their occurrence and capture. The county has an extended and varied coast-line, with good feeding grounds. Of the latter there are two specially notable,—Plymouth Bay on the east, and Buzzard's Bay on the south. Another minor feeding ground is in the southwest corner of Cape Cod Bay, where the townships of Plymouth and Bourne adjoin,—the South Plymouth resort. A few miles south of Plymouth Bay is a projection called Manomet Point, one of the finest spots for sea shooting on the whole New England coast. Vast hordes of ducks go by here in the autumn into Cape Cod Bay. The number is less in the spring, as the greater body, flying north, is deflected seaward by the convex side of Cape Cod, while in the flight south they suddenly find themselves hemmed in by the up-curving arm of the Cape.

Inquiry is often made as to the further course of those fowl that fly into this great bay from the north. I am unable at present to say how many of them follow the curve of the Cape back around Provincetown. But I know that a great many do *not* go around, but fly over the peninsula, notably at the narrows adjoining Buzzard's Bay, at Barnstable, and at Orleans into Chatham Bay. On clear days and moonlight nights they fly high, but it is otherwise in thick or stormy weather, when they are shot in transit from elevated spots, such as 'Shoot-flying Hill,' West Barnstable. In the spring flight many that do not go around the Cape enter Buzzard's Bay, and, crossing at the 'Narrows,' fly up the Plymouth shore past Manomet.

On the coast the autumn flight is observed to begin the last of August with the Scoters, the tide of migration increasing gradually to its height, which is from about October 20 to early November. By the last of the month the migration is about over. In the spring the return movement is noted by the last of March, the period of greatest abundance being early April, perhaps from the 5th to the 10th. The several Scoters are the last of the Fuligulinæ, lingering into May, sometimes collecting in great 'beds' to feed protractedly. Such a case was noted off Plymouth Harbor, April and May, 1894, when several thousand Scoters were estimated to be feeding on those flats.

Some account must now be given of the fresh water resorts. Southern Plymouth County is well termed the 'Lake Region of Massachusetts.' It is full of ponds, and is drained mainly by the Taunton River and its tributaries. The largest bodies of fresh water in the State are found here. Assowompsett Pond, the greatest in area, is a broad oval sheet, shallow, three miles long by two across. The next is Long Pond, close by, four miles long by over a mile in width. These and a number of others comprise a distinct group, known as the Lakeville Ponds. Eastward, in the southern part of old Plymouth town, a region of veritable wilderness, is another large group. Then, north and west, in Kingston, Halifax and vicinity, is still another group, the largest being Monponsett Pond and Silver Lake, the latter a noted spot for shooting geese. Many of the Fuligulinæ daily enter these ponds lying near the coast to obtain fresh water and to feed.

Last, but not least, apart from others of considerable size, in the town of Bridgewater, is Nippenickett Pond, about two miles long, shallow, irregular, excellent feeding ground, and in every way adapted to the purposes of the 'stand gunner.' One stand secured over 200 ducks in the autumn of 1895. Ducks of at least twenty species are taken here nearly every year. I am much indebted to Mr. J. E. Bassett, who owns the above stand, a careful and intelligent observer of the water-fowl, for statistics of the occurrence of the various ducks in this pond, and for many fine specimens in the flesh. From the abundance of ducks in this pond, it might be surmised that it is located in some special highway of migration, perhaps from Boston to Narragansett Bays, it being nearly in the direct line.

The influx of ducks in these ponds begins about the middle of September with the Dusky Duck, and continues until the ice forms, the whole of October being a period especially fruitful. Many of the Fuligulinæ frequent the ponds during the last half of the season. Large numbers of ducks pass over on clear nights, often without stopping. On clear, cold days, with heavy northwest wind, especially in October, great numbers of the various Anatinae keep passing in large flocks.

In the spring flight very little is seen of the Anatinae. They evidently pass much more quickly than in autumn, as well as more inland. Moreover, as they are not then decoyed and shot, to any extent, it is next to impossible to observe them, flying as they do by night, and being so exceedingly shy.

A brief résumé of the different species and their occurrence will now be in order.

Of all the Anatinae, the Dusky Duck (*Anas obscura*) is by far the most abundant. A number linger in winter on the coast. Many of these late birds, probably a northern race, are very large and finely plumaged, with deep red tarsi, and are popularly regarded as a distinct species. Quite a few remain to breed in the meadows and swamps adjoining the Taunton River and some of the ponds.

The Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*) is, of course, very abundant, frequenting the streams and smaller ponds, breeding in suitable localities.

Probably the Pintail (*Dafila acuta*) is next in abundance among the Anatinae. It is quite a common bird in autumn in the ponds, coming often in flocks as large as forty. Most are in immature plumage. The main flight is from the last of September to the middle of October.

Aside from the Blue-winged Teal, I would rank the Mallard (*Anas boschas*) next in comparative abundance. It is a much commoner bird in this section than is generally known. It regularly visits all the larger ponds, mostly in small bunches, or stragglers with flocks of the Dusky Duck, yet not infrequently in good sized flocks. The only exact figures of its capture to which I can refer are from Mr. Bassett, at Nippenickett. This year the stand took eight, singles or from small bunches, seeing a number more that escaped, and also a flock of twelve that would not decoy, but were accurately observed through field glasses. In 1894 nine were taken, and in the autumn of 1893 about twenty, when they were unusually abundant. Mr. C. C. Wood, the Superintendent of the Plymouth Rock Trout Company, a taxidermist and collector, who has had long experience with the ducks in the Plymouth ponds, regards the Mallard as "a common straggler," occurring every fall. In general, it is a regular and by no means uncommon species.

The American Widgeon (*Mareca americana*) occurs much as does the Mallard, though perhaps rather less commonly. For the past three autumns it has been much scarcer than usual, yet even then it appeared in small numbers in most of the ponds. Mr. Bassett has not infrequently shot into flocks of as many as twenty. Mr. Wood has, until within three years, found single ones in flocks of the Dusky Duck. He has noted no large flocks in the Plymouth ponds, such as are seen in Nippenickett.

Both species of Teal occur, mostly early in the fall, yet sometimes lingering late. In the past season I saw a Green-wing on Nov. 26. The Blue-wing is much the commoner of the two, though rapidly becoming scarce. Not many years ago large flocks were common, whereas now it occurs mostly singly or in small bunches. The Green-wing is quite scarce. Some of the stands have not taken them, until the past autumn, for many years. There was seemingly an irruption of this species in the fall of 1895. At Nippenickett they were taken five or six times,

and seen several times more. No large flocks occurred there. At Assowompsett a considerable flock was shot into, and a number secured.

The Shoveller (*Spatula clypeata*) is now one of our rarer ducks, and becoming more and more so. I have not been able to find it myself. Mr. Bassett has not taken it in Nippenickett in his twenty years' experience. Mr. Wood saw one captured in the fall, about 1881, taken from a flock of tame ducks, at the outlet of Billington Sea, Plymouth. He also knows of six or eight being shot at Great South Pond about five years ago. Dr. W. C. Woodward, of Middleboro, has taken the species occasionally in some of the Kingston ponds, until within ten years, since which he has not seen one.

The Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) is liable to be confounded with the Widgeon and Pintail. As I have not met with it myself, it is hard to find undoubted instances of its occurrence. Mr. Wood is the only one from whom I have obtained reliable information regarding it. He says that Gadwalls are "taken as stragglers with flocks of Black Duck during the fall migration at Billington Sea, rarely the past five years."

Passing now to the Fuligulinae, and not attempting any classification as to abundance, the Red-head (*Aythya americana*) may first be mentioned. It is found both on the coast and in the ponds. In numbers it is somewhat intermittent from year to year, though it occurs regularly each fall. From two to a dozen are said by one of the U. S. L. S. S. men to be taken off Manomet Point each season. Several at least are annually taken in Nippenickett, some years quite a number. In 1893 it was particularly numerous. On Oct. 10, eleven were secured from a flock of 32. I secured a specimen, adult male, at Chatham, Jan. 1, 1885, which shows that they sometimes winter. Mr. Wood has found them scarcer in the Plymouth ponds than I have a little further inland.

The only undoubted instance of the occurrence of the Canvas-back (*Aythya vallisneria*) which comes to my knowledge is reported by Mr. Wood. He has had in his possession one specimen, a lone bird that was decoyed and shot at Billington Sea, about 1885, in the autumn. A few other instances are reported, but cannot be proven beyond doubt.

The Scaup Ducks occur both on the coast and in the ponds. *A. marila* is much more abundant than *A. affinis*, and is one of the most common species in the larger ponds, next so, perhaps, to *Anas obscura*. Each autumn, from the middle of October until the ice forms, there is in Assowompsett a great gathering of these ducks, *marila* predominating, very shy, flying from one pond to the other, when pursued.

The closely related Ring-neck Duck (*A. collaris*) occurs but rarely. I noted two this fall, a pair, Nov. 23, which swam in to the decoys at the Nippenickett stand and were secured. Mr. Wood has noted several captures in the last ten years.

The Golden-eye (*Glaucionetta clangula americana*) is common on the coast and in the ponds in fall and winter. Its miniature, the Buffle-head (*Charitonetta albeola*), though not so common, is often seen in autumn both on salt and fresh water, and in the winter is quite frequent on the coast. In October and November they appear in the ponds in small flocks or singly, and are often surprisingly tame.

A single instance of the capture of Barrow's Golden-eye (*C. islandica*) is given me by Mr. Wood. A fine male was sent to him to be mounted, in the autumn of (about) 1885, shot in Plymouth, whether in fresh water or on the coast not being stated.

The Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*), that prince of flyers, is a familiar sight as it goes scaling past the points. It often comes into the ponds in autumn, in flocks or bunches. Mr. Bassett and I shot nine out of a flock of eleven in Nippenickett, Nov. 12, 1894, following them up in a row-boat. They could not be driven from the pond.

Three specimens of the Harlequin Duck (*Histrionica histrionica*) were taken off Manomet Point, Nov. 3, 1894. One of these is in my collection. This is the only record for this county with which I am acquainted. The species is common at Cape Sable, Nova Scotia, where it is known as the 'Rock Duck.'

One of the few ducks never as yet known to occur in our ponds is the Eider (*Somateria mollissima dresseri*). It is notably a marine bird, being commonly known as the 'Sea Duck.' Comparatively few come into Cape Cod Bay, most of them keeping

off outside the Cape. At Chatham it is abundant. Early in April thousands can be seen well off shore, flying north in long lines, or double lines.

The rare King Eider (*S. spectabilis*) has recently occurred at Manomet Point. Mr. W. H. Cleveland, of the Manomet Life-Saving Station, a careful and conscientious student of birds, is the authority. A single specimen was shot while flying past the Point, Nov. 15, 1895. Thick fog prevailed, and the day is remembered by many for the unusual number of Brant then taken. Another specimen was taken in the autumn of 1888, swimming alone in the cove south of the Point, thought perhaps to have been crippled while flying past the line of boats. This specimen, mounted, is at present in the possession of Mr. Cleveland's brother. Both of the above were males in full plumage. Still another specimen, said by the Station men to be of this species, was taken some years before this last, but Mr. C. cannot vouch for its identity.

Bare mention may be made, in passing, of the three Scoters, *Oidemia americana* being the least abundant of the three. They all occur in the ponds, though the one just mentioned is not so often seen there.

The tame little Ruddy Duck (*Erismatura rubida*), though sadly slaughtered, is not yet exterminated. I should call it far from uncommon, some years occurring in considerable numbers in some of the ponds. Flocks of as many as two dozen occasionally appear in October. Sometimes there is an irruption of them for a few days, and then all suddenly disappear. The past season they were scarcer than usual, only a few scattering ones being taken in Nippenickett. But in the previous autumn they were taken a number of times. About the middle of October a flock of twenty or more came into the pond, and not one got out alive.

The list closes with the Mergansers. The Red-breasted (*Merganser serrator*) is much the commonest, being the one usually taken on the coast, though common in the ponds. The Goosander (*M. merganser*) is popularly known as the 'Pond Sheldrake,' a term which describes its predilection for fresh water. The Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) is not common, but occurs regularly in the ponds, singly or in small flocks.

According to general testimony, the diminution of late years in the numbers of the ducks is very marked. Mr. Bassett, however, sees and takes in Nippenickett a larger number and greater variety of ducks of late years than ever before. The causes of the change in this case are not known, and it may be left to the reader to speculate upon them.

In all there are 28 species of ducks attributed to Massachusetts. We of course do not consider the Labrador and St. Domingo Ducks as occurring in the State. All of these 28 have occurred within comparatively recent years in Plymouth County. Twenty-four of them have been taken on fresh water. Barrow's Golden-eye would doubtless be added to this list, were the facts known, leaving only three of the ducks which, when with us, are strictly maritime, the two Eiders and the Harlequin. Of the 28 I should class seven only as decidedly rare,—the Ring-neck, Gadwall, Shoveller, Harlequin, King Eider, Barrow's Golden-eye, and Canvas-back.

JOHN ABBOT'S DRAWINGS OF THE BIRDS OF GEORGIA.

BY WALTER FAXON.

JOHN ABBOT's illustrations of the Lepidoptera of Georgia, edited by Sir James Edward Smith and published in two folio volumes at London in 1797, have made his name familiar to entomologists, but few ornithologists are aware that Abbot, during his sojourn in Georgia, made a series of colored drawings of the birds of that State. The Boston Society of Natural History has long possessed many of Abbot's unpublished drawings of Georgian insects¹, and there has lately come to light, in the

¹ These are bound in two volumes, one comprising 174 plates given to the Society by Asa Gray who received them from J. E. Gray of the British Museum, the other comprising 193 plates purchased of Dr. Oemler of Georgia.



Job, Herbert Keightley. 1896. "The Ducks of Plymouth County, Massachusetts." *The Auk* 13, 197–204. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4068784>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/54125>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/4068784>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/89587>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

Sponsored by

Smithsonian

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.