

## THE VELVET DUCK.

+FULIGULA FUSCA, *Linn.*

PLATE CCCCI.—MALE AND FEMALE.

The Velvet Duck arrives from the north along the shores of the Middle States about the first of September, and extends to a greater or less distance southward, according to the state of the weather, often proceeding as far as Georgia. The Bay of Chesapeake and all the estuaries to the eastward are amply furnished with it, and there it is usually seen in company with the American Scoter, the Golden-eyed Duck, and some other species. It very rarely enters fresh waters during its stay on our coast, and is with great propriety called a Sea Duck. My friend THOMAS NUTTALL mentions that some, which probably were young birds, had been seen in Fresh Pond near Cambridge in Massachusetts. This is the only case of the kind that I have heard of, although these birds breed in fresh water lakes and in rivers, in which they remain at the season of reproduction about two months.

In the beginning of April, the Velvet Ducks, which are gregarious, collect in large flocks, for the purpose of removing to their northern breeding places, and as they fly steadily onwards, you may see thousands passing at short distances from the shores, and forming an almost continuous line, each flock composed of twenty or thirty individuals, which fly low and irregularly, ranged in an angular form. While on the Bay of Fundy, I went with my party to a projecting cape, round which these birds passed during our stay, from daylight until evening. When it blows hard from the sea, the Ducks come near to the shore, and afford abundant opportunities to such sportsmen as are fond of shooting them.

As we approached the shores of Labrador, we found the waters covered with dense flocks of these birds, and yet they continued to arrive there from the St. Lawrence for several days in succession. We were all astonished at their numbers, which were such that we could not help imagining that all the Velvet Ducks in the world were passing before us. This was about the middle of June, which I thought late for them, but the season had been tardy, and the fishermen informed us, that when the weather is warmer, these birds pass a fortnight earlier. The greater number merely appear for a few days on their way farther north, but some remain to breed on the





*W. Duck*  
1. Male & Female

Drawn from Nature by J. T. Audubon, F.R.S. &c.

Light Breasted Goose by J. T. Bonaparte, Italia.







southern coast of Labrador. Thousands of sterile individuals, however, spend the summer on the Bay of Fundy.

During the breeding season, the Velvet Duck resembles the Eider in its habits, only that it prefers fresh water, which is rarely the case with the other species. The males leave the females after incubation has commenced. Those which breed at Labrador begin to form their nests from the 1st to the 10th of June, and on the 28th of July I caught some young ones several days old. The nests are placed within a few feet of the borders of small lakes, a mile or two distant from the sea, and usually under the low boughs of the bushes, of the twigs of which, with mosses and various plants matted together, they are formed. They are large and almost flat, several inches thick, with some feathers of the female, but no down, under the eggs, which are usually six in number, intermediate in size between those of the Eider and King Ducks, measuring an inch and three quarters in length, one and seven-eighths in breadth, of a uniform pale cream-colour, tinged with green, not pure white as stated by some authors. On the 28th of July I procured five young ones out of a brood of six, among which, although to appearance scarcely a week old, I could readily distinguish the males from the females as they swam on the little pond around their mother, the former having already a white spot under the eye. The down with which they were covered was rather stiff and hair-like, of a black colour, excepting under the chin, where there was a small patch of white. They swam with great ease, and when we drove them into a narrow place for the purpose of catching them, they several times turned upon us and dived with the view of getting back to the middle of the pond, so that at last we found it necessary to shoot them. Only one escaped ashore, which my young friend THOMAS LINCOLN caught, but afterwards restored to its mother, which continued on the pond, manifesting the greatest anxiety, and calling to her brood all the while with short squeaking notes, by no means unpleasant to the ear. On being shot at, she flew off to another pond, but soon returned. Her plumage was rusty and ragged, but the wings seemed to be complete, as she flew with great ease, springing at once from the water.

Mr. JONES of Bras d'Or assured me, that either that individual or another of the same species, had bred on the same pond for six or seven years in succession, and that he had looked at the nest and observed her manners when leading about the young, which he said did not leave the pond until they were able to fly. That year, 1833, she and her mate had arrived nearly a month later than usual. This accounted for the small size of the young, which he was sorry to see dead; and here let me say that Mr. JONES, who is not only a good-hearted and benevolent man, but also fond of observing



nature, was the first person I met with who could give me any rational account of the Ducks which bred in his vicinity.

A few of the Velvet Ducks breed on the Island of Grand Manan, and in other places about the Bay of Fundy, but rarely farther south, and the number that remain in Labrador is comparatively small, as we did not observe there more than six or seven broods. They generally leave that part of the coast about the middle of August; but that season they were still seen after the Eider Ducks had departed, which makes me think that they require more warmth than these birds before they begin to lay their eggs. Captain JAMES CLARK ROSS, of the British Royal Navy, a gentleman, besides his professional merits, distinguished for his love of science, informed me that none of these birds were observed on either of his Arctic voyages. The extreme limits of their migrations remain unknown.

The flight of the Velvet Duck is strong and sustained, although it usually flies low; yet when pursued, or at the sight of gunners in a boat, it often rises to the height of forty or fifty yards, describes elegant curved lines as it passes and repasses, and thus continues to fly until danger is no longer apprehended. Its movements in the air are performed by continued flap-pings, and when on wing the white of the wings is beautifully contrasted with the dark hue of the rest of its plumage. It dives with as much agility as the Eider or the American Scoter, and, when wounded, is equally difficult to be caught, nor can it be killed with certainty without a heavy shot.

The Velvet Ducks enter the bays and estuaries to a greater distance than the Eiders. On land they move with more difficulty than those birds, and keep themselves in a more erect attitude, like that in which I have endeavoured to represent the male in the plate. They swim with more buoyancy than the Eiders, but at times seem to rise from the water with considerable difficulty. Their food consists of shell-fish and crustacea, as well as seaweeds, small fish, and spawn. Their flesh is extremely dark, tastes of fish, and is very unpalatable, although I have seen persons of great judgment in matters of this kind not only eat it with avidity, but praise it as highly as if it were equal to the most tender and juicy venison. They are sold in abundance in our eastern markets and those of the Middle States, at from fifty cents to a dollar the pair.

This species is, in my opinion, very closely allied to the Eider, insomuch that I frequently call it the Black King-Duck. Along our coasts it commonly receives the name of White-winged Coot. The female is smaller than the male. The young much resemble the female during the first year. The white spots of the head, however, are apparent, although mottled with dusky, and their feet now shew some of the redness of those of the old males; but I am unable to say with certainty at what age they attain their full summer



plumage, and the rich colouring of the bill. The *gizzard*, which is not so large as that of the Eider, is of a yellow colour; the gut very large, tough, and strong, about eight feet in length.

VELVET DUCK, *Anas fusca*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. viii. p. 137.

FULIGULA FUSCA, Bonap. Syn., p. 390.

OIDEMIA FUSCA, *Velvet Duck*, Swains. and Rich. F. Bor. Amer., vol. ii. p. 449.

VELVET DUCK, Nutt. Man., vol. ii. p. 419.

VELVET DUCK, *Fuligula fusca*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. iii. p. 354.

Male, 22, 39. Female, 22, 38.

From the coast of Georgia eastward to Nova Scotia, during winter, when it is extremely abundant in all the estuaries and bays. Breeds from Labrador northward.

Adult Male.

Bill about the length of the head, very broad, as deep as broad at the base, depressed and flattened towards the end, which is rounded. Upper mandible with a short abrupt prominence at the base, its dorsal line on the prominence straight, at its fore edge abruptly sloping, then slightly concave, and at the end curved, the ridge on the prominence very broad and nearly flat, towards the end broadly convex, the sides convex, the edges obtuse, with about thirty lamellæ, the unguis very large, and elliptical. Nostrils sub-basal, elliptical, very large, pervious, nearer the ridge than the edge, and placed on the lower side of the basal prominence. Lower mandible flat, with the angle long, rather narrow, rounded, the dorsal line slightly convex, the edges with about twenty-five lamellæ, the unguis nearly circular and very large.

Head large. Eyes rather small. Neck of moderate length, thick. Body large, and much depressed. Wings rather small. Feet very short, placed rather far behind; tarsus very short, compressed, having anteriorly in its whole length a series of small scutella, and above the outer toe a partial series, the rest covered with reticular angular scales. Hind toe small, with a free membrane beneath; anterior toes double the length of the tarsus, united by reticulated membranes having a sinus on their free margins, the inner with a lobed marginal membrane, the outer with a thick edge, the third and fourth about equal and longest. Claws small, that of first toe very small and curved, of middle toe largest, with a dilated inner edge, of the rest slender, all obtuse.

Plumage dense, soft, blended. Feathers on the fore part of the head extremely small, on the neck velvety. Wings rather short, narrow, pointed; primary quills curved, strong, tapering and pointed, the first longest, the second very little shorter, the rest rapidly graduated; secondary broad and



rounded, the inner elongated and tapering. Tail very short, narrow, wedge-shaped, of fourteen stiff narrow feathers.

Basal prominence and sides of the bill black, the sides towards the end bright red, the unguis flesh-colour, with a black line on each side. Iris bright yellow. Feet carmine on the outer side, orange-red on the inner, the webs greyish-black. The general colour of the plumage is brownish-black, on the upper parts glossed with blue, lighter on the lower. The outer secondary quills are white, and there is a spot of the same under the eye.

Length to end of tail 22 inches, to end of wings  $19\frac{1}{4}$ , to end of claws  $24\frac{1}{2}$ ; extent of wings 39; wing from flexure 12; tail  $3\frac{1}{2}$ ; bill  $1\frac{8}{12}$ , along the edge of lower mandible  $2\frac{7}{12}$ ; tarsus  $1\frac{11}{12}$ ; middle toe 3, its claw  $\frac{5}{12}$ . Weight 3 lbs. 10 oz.

#### Adult Male.

In the female the basal prominence of the bill is much less elevated, and the colour of the whole bill is dusky. The iris and feet are as in the male, but of duller tints. The general colour of the plumage is a sooty-brown, the breast and abdomen lighter. There are two whitish spots on each side of the head, one near the base of the upper mandible, the other behind the eye; the outer secondary quills are white, as in the male.

Length to end of tail 22 inches, to end of wings 18, to end of claws  $25\frac{1}{2}$ ; extent of wings 38; wing from flexure  $11\frac{1}{4}$ ; tail  $3\frac{1}{2}$ ; bill  $1\frac{7}{12}$ , along the edge of lower mandible  $2\frac{7}{12}$ ; tarsus  $1\frac{3}{4}$ ; middle toe  $2\frac{10}{12}$ , its claw  $\frac{5}{12}$ . Weight 3 lbs. 3 oz.

The down of this species is similar to that of the Eider Duck, and apparently of equal quality.





*W. Duck*  
1. Male & Female

Drawn from Nature by J. T. Audubon, F. R. S. & A. S.

Engraved & Col'd by J. T. Bowen, Phila.





Audubon, John James. 1843. "The Velvet Duck, *Fuligula fusca*, Linn. [Pl. 401]."  
*The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 6, 332–336. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319514>.

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