ANSEER ALBIFRONS.

Illustrated by H. B. Baker, del. & lith.

Walter, imp.

ANSER ALBIFRONS.

White-fronted Goose.

Anas albifrons, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 509.

Anser albifrons, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 898.

THE White-fronted Goose is a regular winter visitor to the British Islands. It is supposed to come from the north; but from what particular regions is not known with certainty. Mr. Newton has confirmed Faber's observations that at least a few summer in Iceland, by stating that on the 11th of May 1858 he saw several freshly killed examples at Reykjavik, in that country; and Reinhardt includes it in the birds of Greenland. Lapland is also said to be frequented by it: but this is certainly not the case; for Mr. Wolley remarks that the only White-fronted Goose he met with in that country was the small species which Mr. Newton believes to be the true *Anas* (*Anser*) *erythropus* of Linnæus, and for which the Laps have a name, while they have none for *A. albifrons*; he was also of opinion that Nilsson is in error in assigning it a place in the fauna of Sweden, and in stating that it is the common Fell Goose of that country. As regards Norway, however, Messrs. F. and P. Godman affirm that they frequently saw flocks of from seven to ten feeding in the pools and creeks of the marsh near Bodo, in Norway, from which they all departed towards the end of May; but those gentlemen make no mention of *A. erythropus*, and possibly the birds they saw belonged to that species.

Sir John Richardson states that in spring White-fronted Geese pass through the interior of the fur-countries of America in large flocks to their breeding-places in the woody districts skirting the Mackenzie, to the north of the sixty-seventh parallel, and also the islands of the Arctic Sea; but whether his remarks have reference to our bird or the American, which is now regarded as different, and named *Anser Gambeli*, is a question I cannot determine. Their migration southwards commences in September; and their return to the fur-districts is often the first indication of winter having begun within the Arctic Circle. In England the *A. albifrons* arrives in September and October, occasionally appearing in very large flocks, and departs again in March and April to its breeding-haunts. In like manner, and at the same periods, it is very generally dispersed over the southern portions of the European continent; and there also similar movements take place. Temminck states that it is very common in Holland during its autumnal migration, but is less numerous in Germany and the interior of France. Lord Lilford found it to be common in winter in Epirus and continental Greece. The Russian naturalist Ménétries says that, at the same period, it appears in considerable flocks in the neighbourhood of the Caspian Sea, particularly near Bakou and the neighbouring lakes, where it passes the winter, and departs towards the end of February. Dr. Leith Adams states that it is the most common Goose on the Nile, and is usually seen in vast flocks at daybreak, returning to the shallows from feeding all night in the wheat-fields, but decreases southwards, and is rarely seen beyond the marsh at Edfoo. The same gentleman elsewhere states that this bird is a winter visitant to the lakes and rivers of the Punjab. In China, according to Mr. Swinhoe, it forms part of the wild fowl procurable in the markets of Shanghai and Tientsin; and he has also met with it between Takoo and Peking in North China; and, lastly, Temminck affirms that examples from Japan are exactly like our own birds.

I have been favoured by several kind friends with some fine examples of this Goose for the furtherance of this work. The Earl of Enniskillen sent me a pair from Ireland; and the Earl of Ducie, besides kindly obtaining permission from Lord Fitzhardinge for examples to be forwarded to me from his Lordship's estate in Gloucestershire, transmitted the following note:—"When you are writing on the Wild Geese, you ought to hear something of those frequenting the Severn, and their habits on the alluvial flats belonging to Lord Fitzhardinge. The spot is about ten miles from here (Tortworth Court, Wotton-under-Edge). There the Geese are regularly preserved, and the shooting of them affords great sport. I have been out the only two days of shooting this year, and on each day we killed nine. They are first found feeding on the grass, and about noon are driven over towards the guns, which are posted between them and the Severn. They then betake themselves to the mud flats, and when hungry attempt to get to the grass-meadows again. By this time the guns are posted under hedges at right angles to their probable line of flight; and as they come over, in flocks of varying size, shots are fired with long guns at from forty to seventy yards distance. The whole system is, I believe, unique in this country. The Geese arrive about the 23rd or 25th of September, are never known to be two days later, and generally leave again about the end of November. The White-fronted are not so numerous as the Pink-footed, but are increasing in number."

As a bird for the table the present species is perhaps one of the best of the wild geese; and there are few

winters in which the London markets are not well supplied with it. A fine-conditioned gander weighs from five to six pounds, and measures about 4 feet 3 inches from tip to tip of the wings when spread, so that it is a smaller bird than the Bean- and Grey Lag-Geese. The sexes are so nearly alike in colouring that they are scarcely distinguishable; both have the black interrupted bars on the breast, a character which differs considerably in extent in different individuals.

Macgillivray gives so meagre an account of this species that it would seem to be far less plentiful in Scotland than in England; yet Sir William Jardine has met with it in Dumfriesshire and in the Edinburgh market, and St. John says that "it arrives in Morayshire from its breeding-quarters in the arctic and northern regions about the middle of October in small companies of from six to twelve, and, if left tolerably undisturbed, frequents regularly the same swamp or piece of marsh till the end of April, feeding on aquatic plants, and in the spring frequently grazing on the young clover or green wheat. It is more easy of approach than any other wild goose;" and he "has often seen it feeding in small hollows and spots easily got at, where the Bean-Goose would never trust itself. Its cry is very loud and peculiar, sometimes wonderfully resembling the loud laugh of a human being, whence its trivial name of "Laughing Goose." Sir John Richardson mentions that the Indians of the American fur-countries imitate this sound by patting the mouth with their hand, while they repeat the syllable *wah*." Mr. Thompson informs us that it "is a regular winter visitant to Ireland, where, as in Great Britain, it is, next to the Bean-Goose, the species most frequently met with, and is brought during the season of every year to the Dublin market."

Mr. Selby remarks that "this species varies from the Bean-Goose in preferring low and marshy districts rather than the upland and drier haunts affected by that bird, and in such localities subsists on aquatic grasses, being very seldom seen to frequent corn- or stubble-fields." A specimen sent to him which had been killed near Alnwick, in Northumberland, "had its stomach gorged with the tender shoots and leaves of the common clover (*Trifolium pratense*), upon which it had been feeding on the termination of a severe snow-storm." The bird also feeds on the leaves of turnips, beetles, other insects, and their larvæ. Its flight is described as vigorous, and its gait on the ground as characterized by grace, rapidity, and ease. When a flock proceeds to any distance, the birds of which it is composed keep in single file.

The White-fronted Goose is not known to breed in a wild state in any part of our islands; and a pair in the Gardens of the Zoological Society in the Regent's Park brought forth their brood from one of the islands to which they were restricted, and showed great anxiety for their safety. The egg is pale buffy white, about 2 inches and 10 lines in length by 1 inch and 11 lines in breadth.

Speaking of this bird, as seen in Norfolk, Mr. Stevenson says:—

"This species, which is never observed in very large flocks, can scarcely be called a regular winter visitant, being rarely seen in our markets, except in severe weather. As an exception, however, to this rule, in the mild winter of 1851-2, a very unusual number of wild geese were shot in different parts of the county; and on the 20th of December, the Norwich market exhibited the unusual appearance, amongst other fowl, of two couple and a half of White-fronted, with Bean and Bernicle Geese, from Hickling and other localities; and another White-fronted, from Blakeney, was sent up to Norwich the same day. All these birds were in perfect plumage—the White-fronted Geese, from the markings on the breast, being evidently adult; but their poor condition seemed to indicate 'hard times,' although, as already remarked, the weather was then unusually mild with us, and continued so up to the following February. From Mr. Dowell's notes for the same year (1851) I find that on the 18th of December he saw a flock of some twenty White-fronted Geese at Holkham, and on the same day he received a fine specimen which had been killed at Blakeney. This goose is considered by Lord Leicester rare at Holkham, except in hard weather, when it commonly appears in flocks of from five to ten, and, being less shy, is easier of approach than others; but singularly enough, during the severe winter of 1870-71 this species, as Lord Leicester informs me, was not seen at all at Holkham; and a single adult bird which I purchased in the Norwich market, on the 18th of February, was the only example that came under my notice during that inclement season.

"The few recorded in my own note-books, since 1854, have been all killed during sharp frosts, between December and February—which agrees with Hunt's description of this species, that 'they visit the fenny parts of this county in small flocks, in severe winters.' In West Norfolk, according to Mr. Lubbock, a good many White-fronted Geese are sometimes observed with the Bean-, or, as now distinguished, more probably with the Pink-footed. Blakeney and Holkham have been already mentioned as localities where it is occasionally remarked; and the brackish waters of Salhouse would seem to have attractions, as a fine old bird in my own collection was killed there on the 22nd of December 1866, and Mr. Dowell had one sent him from the same place so early as the month of October, 1850. The Messrs. Paget describe them as 'occasionally seen on Brendon;' and Hickling Broad appears to be a favourite resort in sharp weather.

"The majority of specimens procured are in immature plumage, the bars on the breast being either wanting or only partially assumed."

For further particulars as to the localities in Norfolk in which this bird has been procured, I must refer the reader to my friend Stevenson's third volume on the birds of that county.

The front figure is about half the natural size; the young birds somewhat less than life.

Gould, John. 1873. "White-fronted Goose, *Anser albifrons* [Pl. 4]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324048>.

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