TADORNA VULPANSER.

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Sheldrake.

Anas tadorna, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 39.

— *cornuta*, S. G. Gmel. Reise, tom. ii. p. 185, tab. 19.

Tadorna familiaris, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 563.

— *Bellonii*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 72, pl. 45.

— *vulpanser*, Flem. Hist. of Brit. Anim., p. 122.

— *gibbera*, *littoralis*, et *maritima*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 856, 857, 858, tab. 42. fig. 1.

Vulpanser tadorna, Keys. et Blas. Wirbelth. Eur., p. 84.

It must, I think, be admitted that the Sheldrake is one of the most attractive and ornamental of the *Anatide* indigenous to the British Islands—the breadth of its markings, the purity of the white portions of its plumage, and the rich red of its bill and legs, all combining to render it a creature of great beauty. Besides these features to recommend it to our notice, its actions and manners are at once pleasing and graceful: it walks over the grass with ease, swims buoyantly, and ever deports itself with sprightliness; its flight, too, is in accordance with its other qualifications; for when rising in the air, and displaying its colouring to the greatest advantage, it flies off to the sea or to wherever its attention may be directed, in a style which must be characterized as elegant and vigorous. What part in the economy of nature is this princely species of Duck destined to perform—the useful, or the ornamental? The former it cannot be; for its flesh is strong, musky, and unsavoury, and consequently scarcely fit for human food; we must therefore regard it in the latter sense; and in this respect no bird plays its part more to our satisfaction; for, although by nature it is a strictly maritime species, whose places of resort are the most sterile of our sandy dunes and arid sea-coasts, if pinioned it readily becomes domesticated, and soon makes itself at home on any lake, pond, or sheet of water on which it may be placed; and hence it has become a general favourite with all who take an interest in water-fowl. Another reason for this favouritism may be assigned—namely, that while the Pintail, the Teal, the Mallard, and other members of the Duck tribe which are subject to periodical changes of plumage throw off their gay attire at Midsummer, and become of the dull brown hue of their females, the Sheldrakes of both sexes, having once acquired their beautiful adult garb, always retain it.

Much has been written respecting the breeding of the Sheldrake in the interior of the country, some authors affirming that salt marshes, if not salt water, are essential to its existence; but I am prepared to state that this is not the case; for, among many other persons whom I might mention, no one has been more successful in rearing it than Mr. John Noble, of Berry Hill, near Taplow, in Buckinghamshire, on whose beautiful artificial lake several of these fine birds annually breed when the season of incubation arrives, and may be seen busily disporting themselves from year's end to year's end. It is also said that water is injurious to the young brood, and that they should be kept from it for some time after they are hatched; this in the main may probably be worth attending to, but broods are successfully reared at Berry Hill without any precaution of the kind. A clutch of young Sheldrakes were hatched under a hen of the common Fowl from eggs laid the second week in June; on the 21st of August they were nearly as large as the adults, and at this time had the bill of a purplish flesh-colour; the eyes dark brown; the feet clouded purplish yellow; face white; back of the head and neck black; all the under surface white; no band of chestnut on the breast; tertiary mark brown; and no appearance of the knob on the bill. By the 8th of October in the same year the chestnut band had become almost perfect, and the plumage in every respect assimilating to that of the adult, so that in a month later the one could scarcely be told from the other.

With regard to the parts of the British Islands in which the Sheldrake is to be seen in a state of nature, the difficulty is to say not where it may, but where it may not be met with; for it is to be found more or less in every county bordering the sea, from Cornwall to the Hebrides; wherever there are any low sandy districts in the neighbourhood of the sea and its great inlets, denes and dunes of any extent, and warrens in the vicinity of the ocean, there it may be seen. In Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, and Lincolnshire, on the east, and the flat shores of Lancashire, on the west, this bird does now, or did a few years ago, bring forth its young. On the continent of Europe the Sheldrake inhabits all the maritime coasts, from the Mediterranean to the Baltic, and is equally numerous in North Africa, Asia Minor, in India, and all along the sea-shores and the borders of the great rivers of China and Japan. In America it is not found; neither did I meet with it in Australia; and I believe, but am not certain, that it does not occur in South Africa.

“The Sheldrake,” says Mr. Selby, “continues in its native haunts through the whole year, and when once paired seems to live with the same mate till accident or death dissolves the connexion. Montagu

remarks that the males do not appear to attach themselves to the females till the second year, when they have acquired the adult plumage; and I have also observed this to be the case on the Northumbrian coast, where these birds are common upon such parts as present a barrier of sand-hills, the chosen breeding resort of this species. In addition, however, to those that reside permanently on our shores, we are visited by considerable numbers during their periodical flights to and from the more northern countries of Europe. In the beginning of March I have sometimes seen hundreds together upon a favourite locality, where they have continued for a few days, and then departed for higher latitudes, this being the time of their return from their equatorial or winter migration. The rabbit-burrows, with which the sand-hills of the coast are so often perforated, are the places that the Sheldrake usually selects for nidification; and in such of these as have been deserted by the original inhabitants, the females form their nests of bent-grass and other dry vegetable materials, sometimes as far as ten or twelve feet from the entrance, lining them with fine soft down plucked from their own breasts. They lay from twelve to sixteen eggs, of a pure white, or with a very faint tinge of green, and of an oval form, being equally rounded at both ends. These are incubated for thirty days before the exclusion of the young, this being the period common to most of the *Anatide*. During this time the male keeps an attentive watch in the immediate vicinity of his mate; and when hunger calls her from her charge, he instantly takes her place and covers the eggs till her return. As soon as the young are hatched, they are conducted, or, as more frequently happens, carried in the bill by the parents to the water's edge; and upon this their native element they immediately launch, seldom quitting it till fully fledged and well able to fly. Bewick observes, that if the family in their progress from the nest to the sea should happen to be interrupted by an intruder, the young ones seek the first shelter, and squat close down, whilst the parents, directed by the instinctive feeling that so universally prevails throughout the feathered race at this interesting period, adopt the same kind of stratagems as the Partridge, wild Duck, &c., feigning lameness and inability of flight, in order to attract attention and divert the pursuit to themselves. As the Sheldrake is much prized as an ornamental appendage to large pieces of water for its handsome form and varied plumage, the inhabitants of the coast are in the practice of watching the old birds to their nests during the early part of the breeding-season, and digging up the eggs. These are placed under a hen or tame Duck; but great care and attention is requisite in rearing the young, and it is seldom that more than three or four survive from a hatching of a dozen eggs. They soon become tolerably tame and answer to the call of the person who feeds them; when fully fledged, however, being very active birds, they are apt to stray away, and, if left with their pinions un mutilated, generally in time fly entirely off, though I have known them return, in two or three instances, after an absence of many months. . . . Upon the approach of spring, the fleshy knob at the base of the upper mandible, which during the autumn and winter is scarcely perceptible, begins to swell and acquire a beautiful *crimson* hue, and at its full development is nearly as large as a marble. At this season, also, the males pay particular court to the females, erecting themselves and uttering a shrill whistling note, repeated with great quickness, and attended with a frequent movement of the head; they are also very jealous and irascible at the approach of any other bird to their mates. The food of the Sheldrake, in its wild state, consists of marine vegetables, molluscos shell-fish, insects, &c.; but when domesticated thrives well upon grain, and indeed upon the usual fare of poultry."

"On examination of the gizzards of nine birds killed in Belfast Bay, Strangford Lough, and Dundrum Bay, in winter weather of all kinds, and in the months of March, April, and May," says Thompson, "I found them all to contain a number of minute univalve shells, with some sand or gravel. A few of these, from the two first-mentioned localities, were entirely filled with *Paludina muricata*, a most abundant species. The tenth individual, shot in Belfast Bay, in February 1849, during mild weather, had its stomach wholly filled with minute mollusca, *Montacuta purpurea*, in profusion, *Skenea depressa*, and a few *Paludina muricata*. Its crop was full of the two former species, chiefly of very small *Skeneæ*, it alone containing not less than 9000 of these shell-fish; the stomach produced still more, so that 20,000 of these minute mollusca were estimated to be in the bird at the same time. The *Skenea* is about the size of clover-seed, or one-eighteenth of an inch in diameter; the *Montacuta*, when large, is one-twelfth of an inch broad. The bird was very fat, as might be expected from such nutritious diet, the same on which the Grey Mullet (*Mugil chelo*) attains a great size in this bay."

Prince Frederick, of Holstein, tells me that in his country the Sheldrakes habitually lay their eggs in the earth-burrows of the foxes, with which they live in harmony—but will not go into the holes of the badger, as that animal will eat their eggs; and hence, I suppose, has arisen the specific term *Vulpanser*, and the trivial name of Fox-Duck or Fox-Goose, sometimes given to this bird.

The Plate represents a male and a group of young, of the size of life.

Gould, John. 1873. "Sheldrake, Tadorna vulpanser [Pl. 11]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324055>.

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