ANAS BOSCHAS, Linn.

Mallard or Wild Duck.

Anas boschas, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 46.

— *adunca*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 206.

— *fera*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 39.

— *archiboschas*, *subboschas*, et *conboschas*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 862, 864, 865, tab. xlii. fig. 2.

ON referring to the opposite plate the reader will perceive figures of the male and female of a species of Duck which plays a most important part in the world; for although it does not inhabit every part of the globe, its distribution is very extensive, and where it is not indigenous it is one of those birds which, has become thoroughly domesticated, and, moreover, accompanies the Caucasian in all his wanderings, and, wherever he settles down in a foreign land, forms part and parcel of his surroundings, contributing to his enjoyment and constituting no inconsiderable portion of his subsistence. Among the Hindoos, the Chinese, the Australians, the New-Zealanders, and many other nations, either the pure bird itself or some of the domestic varieties derived from it may be seen almost as constantly as the common fowl,—the Black Duck of the River Plate, our own snowy Aylesbury birds, and many other varieties all having the *Anas boschas* as a common progenitor. In Europe it is distributed universally, from the arctic circle to the confines of the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and from Britain to the most eastern parts of Russia, being as common on the Don and the Volga as it is on the broads of Norfolk and Suffolk. In North Africa, India, China, Formosa, and Japan it is as numerous in certain localities as with us. In America it occurs in the northern portion only, or from the latitude of Hudson's Bay to Mexico, but not further south, except the few stragglers which are said to be now and then seen in Guatemala. In Australia and New Zealand it certainly does not naturally occur; neither have I seen examples from any of the Polynesian islands, although its range may extend to some of them.

From the many favourable localities for the breeding of this Duck in almost every part of England, Ireland, and Scotland vast numbers, both of the old and young birds (or "flappers" as they are termed), are annually sent to our markets through the agency of the gunner and the decoy-man. With reference to the numbers taken by the latter means, I may mention that Mr. J. H. Gurney, jun., informs me that "in the Ashby decoy, which was one of the most famous in Lincolnshire, he learns, from the 'Stamford Mercury,' that the greatest number between 1833 and 1867 was 4287."

Speaking of the habits, manners, &c. of the Mallard, Macgillivray says:—

"Marshy places, the margins of lakes, pools, and rivers, as well as brooks, rills, and ditches, are its principal places of resort at all seasons. It walks with ease, even runs with considerable speed, swims, and occasionally dives, though not in search of food. Seeds of gramineæ and other plants, fleshy and fibrous roots, worms, mollusca, insects, small reptiles, and fishes are the principal objects of its search. In shallow water it reaches the bottom with its bill, keeping the hind part of the body erect by a continued motion of the feet. On the water it sits rather high, with the tail considerably inclined upwards; when searching under the surface, it keeps the tail flat on the water; and when paddling at the bottom, with its hind part up, it directs the tail backwards. The male emits a low and rather soft cry, between a croak and a murmur, and the female a louder and clearer jabber; both, on being alarmed, and especially in flying off, cry 'quack;' but the quack of the female is much louder. When feeding they are silent; but when satiated they often amuse themselves with various jabberings, swim about, approach each other, move their heads backward and forward, 'duck' in the water, throwing it up over their backs, shoot along the surface, half flying, half running, and, in short, are quite playful when in good humour. On being surprised or alarmed, whether on shore or on the water, they spring up at once with a bound, rise obliquely to a considerable height, and fly off with speed, their hard-quilled wings whistling against the air. When in full flight their velocity is very great. Like other Ducks they impel themselves by quickly repeated flaps, without sailings or undulations. In March they pair, and soon after disperse and seek a breeding-place. When incubation commences, the male takes his leave, though he keeps in the neighbourhood, and, joining others, undergoes his annual moult. The female sits very close, and rather than leave her charge will often allow a person to approach quite near. Frequently on leaving the nest she covers it rudely with straw and feathers, probably for the purpose of concealing the eggs. The young are hatched in four weeks, and,

being covered with stiffish down and quite alert, accompany their mother to the water, where they swim and dive as expertly as if they had been born in it."

In autumn, winter, and spring the Mallard is clothed in the style of plumage represented in the front figure of the accompanying plate; but the latter season being passed and reproduction achieved, his finery is exchanged for a sombre dress of various shades of brown, the beautifully curled feathers on his rump are thrown off, and his appearance so closely resembles that of the female that they are scarcely distinguishable one from the other. This summer-plumage of the Drake is carried while the Duck hatches forth her young; so that father, mother, and chicks, on the latter assuming their first feathers, are all very much alike in appearance. A change, however, soon takes place in the plumage of the Drakes, who assume a characteristic dress, which, as before stated, is carried through the winter and spring.

The change in the plumage of the Mallard is thus characteristically described by the late Mr. Waterton from personal observation:—

"At the close of the breeding-season the drake undergoes a very remarkable change of plumage. On viewing it, all speculation on the part of the ornithologist is utterly confounded; for there is not the smallest clue afforded him by which he may be enabled to trace out the cause of this strange phenomenon. To Him, alone, who has ordered the Ostrich to remain on the earth, and allowed the Bat to range through the ethereal vault of heaven, is known why the Drake for a very short period of the year should be so completely clothed in the raiment of the female that it requires a keen and penetrating eye to distinguish the one from the other. About the 24th of May the breast and back of the drake exhibit the first appearance of a change of colour. In a few days after this the curled feathers above the tail drop out, and grey feathers begin to appear amongst the lovely green plumage which surrounds the eyes. Every succeeding day now brings marks of rapid change. By the 23rd of June scarcely one single green feather is to be seen on the head and neck of the bird. By the 6th of July every feather of the former brilliant plumage has disappeared, and the male has received a garb like that of the female, though of a somewhat darker tint. In the early part of August this new plumage begins to drop off gradually; and by the 10th of October the drake will appear again in all his rich magnificence of dress, than which scarcely any thing throughout the whole wide field of nature can be seen more lovely or better arranged to charm the eye of man. Thus we may say that once every year, for a very short period, the drake goes, as it were, into an eclipse, so that, from the early part of the month of July to about the first week of August, neither in the poultry-yards of civilized man nor through the vast expanse of nature's widest range can there be found a drake in that plumage which at all other seasons of the year is so remarkably splendid and diversified."

The situation of the nest is exceedingly varied, being sometimes placed among the reeds at the edge of the water the birds frequent; at others it is constructed far up on the heath or in the forest, and not unfrequently on the head of a pollard oak or willow, in a hollow of the bare ground, in the midst of a tussock of grass, under a stone, &c. The composition of the nest is as varied as its site, being in some instances a bulky mass rudely constructed of flags, sedges, grasses, &c., at others of grass intermixed and lined with feathers and down. The eggs are from six to ten in number, rather larger and longer than those of the common fowl, and of a dull light greenish stone-colour. The chicks immediately after their exclusion from the eggs are exceeding alert, have all their energies perfect, and readily seek for, and obtain, their insect food both on the land and on the water, and hide themselves, on the approach of a fancied enemy, with great facility among the herbage or any other object that may offer seclusion and safety; indeed, at this period of their existence their shyness is most remarkable, a disposition not readily effaced if an attempt be made towards their domestication, either when hatched by a tame Duck, or by their frequent foster-parent, the ordinary fowl.

The Mallard frequently interbreeds with the Pintail, the Muscovy Duck, and other species, the produce being sometimes twice the weight of those from which they spring: thus in December, 1862, the late Earl of Craven sent me two birds, the product of a cross between the Mallard and the Pintail, which weighed, the one 6 lbs. 3 oz., the other 6 lbs. Of course these enormously heavy Ducks were domesticated and not wild birds. The weights of two wild Mallards I killed at Somerleyton, in fair but not extraordinary condition, were respectively 2 lbs. 11 oz. and 2 lbs. 15 oz.

It is quite unnecessary for me to speak of the excellence of this bird as a viand for the table, or the usefulness of its feathers, since both are so generally known that they need not be commented upon; neither need I attempt to describe the various modes of capturing the bird on its arrival in this country by means of nets, decoys, &c.; those who desire information on these points will find them admirably described and illustrated in the Rev. Richard Lubbock's 'Observations on the Fauna of Norfolk.'

The figures are a trifle smaller than the natural size, with a flight of these birds in the distance,

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