SOMATERIA SPECTABILIS.

J. Gould & H.C. Richter, del. & lith.

Walter Inge.

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King Duck

Anas spectabilis, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 89.

Somateria spectabilis, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 564.

Fuligula spectabilis, Bonap. Syn. Birds of Unit. States, p. 389.

IN size, general contour, and in the colouring of some parts of its plumage, the King Duck resembles the Eider; but different indeed are the form and colouring of its bill, and the hue of its legs and feet. How successfully by varying ornamentation does nature furnish characters by which one species may be distinguished from another! In their habits and entire economy the two birds are said to assimilate as closely as they do in general structure and appearance. However far north the Eider may proceed, the King Duck is found still further towards the pole, and is probably much more common in the high northern latitudes than its congener, who makes the comparatively warm islands of Britain one of its breeding-places, which the King Duck never does. In a word, the Arctic regions, both of the Old and New World, are the natural home of the present species; and its visits to England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, the United States of America, and California must be regarded as merely accidental.

"The King Duck has acquired a place in the list of our British Birds," says Mr. Hewitson, "by having appeared two or three times upon our coast. It is abundant in Spitsbergen; and Holboëll expresses his surprise that it is very seldom seen in Iceland, whilst in Greenland it is spread over the whole country, although its proper breeding-zone lies further north than the part of the country inhabited by Europeans. It is found breeding, though very rarely, in the sixty-seventh degree of latitude, but is not numerous south of seventy-three degrees. In its habits it very much resembles the common Eider. It migrates in the same direction, but begins later in autumn to move towards the south. Its spring migration also begins later, although it has to go a greater distance northwards, probably because the sea is not earlier open. The young birds occasionally become victims to their unwillingness to move south, by remaining till the sea is everywhere ice-bound. In its powers of diving, this species far surpasses all the other Greenland birds; it also remains the longest time under water. It uses its wings in diving, and descends to the depth of two hundred yards, remaining as much as nine minutes under water. These remarks are translated from Holboëll's 'Faunæ Groenlands,' which is singularly deficient in that information as to its nesting-habits which would have been the most valuable."—*Hewitson, Ill. of Eggs of Brit. Birds*, vol. ii. p. 417.

"Vast numbers of this beautiful Duck," says Sir James Clark Ross, "resort annually to the shores and islands of the Arctic regions in the breeding-season, and have on many occasions afforded a valuable and salutary supply of fresh provisions to the crews of vessels employed in those seas. On our late voyages comparatively few were obtained, although seen in very great numbers. They do not retire far to the south in winter, but assemble in large flocks. The males by themselves and the females with their young brood are often met with in the Atlantic Ocean, far distant from any land, where the numerous crustaceans and other marine animals afford them abundance of food." Upon this passage Mr. Hewitson remarks:—"The great distance from land at which these birds were met with by Capt. Ross may be explained by the statement of Holboëll as to their vast power of diving, who says also that it is wonderful with what instinct they discover banks in deep water."

In Asia the King Duck is found on the coasts of Siberia and Kamtschatka; and in North America it is plentiful about Hudson's Bay and Labrador, but, according to Audubon, rarely advances further south along the eastern coast of that continent than the neighbourhood of the Bay of Boston.

From Otho Fabricius we learn that the natives of Greenland hunt the King Duck, both for their down and skins, in the following manner:—On discovering a flock upon the water, the natives assemble in their canoes and begin shouting and making as great a noise as possible; this sudden outcry so frightens the birds that, instead of flying away, they begin to dive; the moment they come to the surface they are again pursued; and, after three or four of these chases, the birds begin to be so tired that they are easily taken and killed. The flesh is accounted excellent, and the gibbous part of the bill an especial delicacy; the skins are sewn together, and made into various comfortable articles of clothing.

Mr. Hewitson says the eggs are five in number, somewhat less than those of the Eider, and usually, though not always, of a bluer tint, and sometimes of a deep blue-green. They are about two inches and a half in length by one inch and three quarters in breadth.

Mr. Newton, in his 'Notes on the Birds of Spitsbergen,' says:—

"This species has several times been noticed :—by Professor Lovén, in Ice Sound, in 1837 ; by Professor Sundevall, in Bell Sound, the following year ; and by Professor Nordenskjöld, who killed two examples on the south-east coast in 1858 ; but it is certainly not of common occurrence there, as most writers have asserted. I very much question if it breeds in the country ; and it has not been met with further north than Ice Sound, lat, 76° N., where last year I believe I saw a young drake flying on the 22nd of July ; and Ludwig, the same day, was in unsuccessful pursuit of three birds which were, I suspect, of this species. Dr. Malmgren, however, showed me one which was shot out of a small flock at the beginning of the month, in Safe Haven. Another little flock was also observed by him in August, on the Horn-Sound Islands ; but in the south-east harbour of Bear Island, on the 18th–19th of June, he saw a very large flock, consisting of hundreds of ducks and young drakes, with only one or two old drakes among them. They do not appear to breed there."

From the late Mr. Wheelwright's 'Spring and Summer in Lapland,' we learn that the King Duck is only occasionally seen in Lapland ; and from Mr. Newton's 'Notes on the Birds of Iceland,' that it is by all accounts a rare bird in that country, and that those which occur there are generally only stragglers from Greenland and elsewhere.

In Mr. H. E. Dresser's Translation of Pastor Sommerfeldt's 'List of Birds noticed in East Finmark,' it is stated that the King Duck is not a common bird, though it has been said to have been found in numbers in the Varanger Fjord in October. It is true enough that in October and November the Eider Ducks collect in large flocks and fly about over the Fjord and the surrounding country in the afternoon and the dusk of the evening ; but in these flocks the Eider constitutes the chief portion. Steller's Duck is also found in large numbers, but the King Duck only singly in proportion to the other species.

In Mr. Henry Reeks's 'Notes on the Zoology of Newfoundland,' it is stated that "the King-Eider, which is there called 'King-bird' is tolerably common during its periodical migrations, and is frequently shot in company with the Eider. On the 17th of December, 1867, I obtained an adult male, and on the 19th an immature bird of the same sex ; the latter was one of two killed at a shot, with eight of the Eider. King Ducks are more abundant at some seasons than others : in 1865 twenty of these birds were killed at a double shot by one of the settlers at Cow-Head. Young males resemble the females during their first year, but in the second have the throat and neck copiously spotted with white. The adult female is easily distinguished from the female of *S. mollissima* by its much smaller size, its shorter bill, and by having a more decided rufous tinge on the upper plumage."—*Zoologist*, 1869, p. 1759.

Although several examples of the King Duck have undoubtedly been killed on the shores of the British Islands, all the recorded instances are not to be relied on. Messrs. Paget, on the authority of the late Mr. Samuel Wigg, state that a female was shot on Breydon Broad, near Yarmouth, in July 1813 ; and the Rev. L. Jenyns mentions one as having been killed at Aldborough, in Suffolk. More recently, two instances of its occurrence at Lowestoft have been recorded ; but Mr. Stevenson is not inclined to give credence to this statement. It is said that it formerly bred on Papa Westra, one of the Orkneys ; but the late Mr. R. Dunn sought for it there in vain. The late Mr. Thompson, after saying that it is extremely rare in Ireland, mentions the occurrence of a female, shot at Kingstown Harbour in October 1837 ; two on the coast of Kerry, one in the winter of 1843, at Derrynane, the other in that of 1845–6, at Tralee Bay ; and a fourth which was shot on the 11th of March 1853, while swimming alone in Belfast Bay. This bird, which came under Mr. Thompson's examination on the 12th, weighed 3 lbs. 5 oz. ; the bill was dusky, having the colour and appearance of india-rubber as sold by the stationers ; tarsi and toes very pale olive or dull fawn-colour ; the membranes dusky ; irides very dark brown. On dissection it proved to be a female ; the stomach was filled with the remains of crustacea and mollusca, viz. an *Inachus* of middle size, the largest *Portunus arcuatus* he had seen (and perfect, excepting the arms), a *Nucula margaritacea*, and a small *Buccinum undatum*. "The preceding notes," adds Mr. Thompson, "relate to more King-Eiders than are on record as obtained in Great Britain south of the Orkney Islands, at least until 1845."—*Nat. Hist. of Ireland*, vol. iii. p. 116.

I am especially indebted to my friend Dr. Rae, the celebrated Arctic traveller, for a drawing made by him, at my request, of the proportions and colouring of the bill and surrounding soft parts of the male, and which he kindly transmitted to me soon after his return from one of his journeys in search of the lamented Franklin ; the colouring of this ornamental part of the bird may therefore be regarded as strictly accurate. I believe that two, three, or more years elapse before the protuberance above the bill assumes the form and colouring represented ; for in some examples I have seen it was but little developed, while in others it was about midway in size ; and I suspect that it is only in the breeding-season that it is so large and so highly coloured as it is depicted in my Plate.

The front figures represent fully adult examples of the two sexes, somewhat under the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "King Duck, Somateria spectabilis [Pl. 27]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324071>.

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