OIDEZIA FUSCA .

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

Walter Inge

OIDEMIA FUSCA.

Velvet Scoter.

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

Melanetta fusca, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 564.

Oidemia fusca, Flem. Phil. of Zool., vol. ii. p. 260.

Anas fuliginosa, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 962, tab. 36.

Fuligula fusca, Bonap. Syn. of Birds of United States, p. 390.

THE marine ducks figured in this work under the generic title of *Oidemia* are rendered prominently distinct from all the other members of the numerous family of birds to which they belong, by the deep-black velvet-like colouring of the males. The species pertaining to our fauna are three in number, of which the Velvet Scoter is the largest and in every respect the most powerful. It not only frequents the seas and estuaries of the British Islands, but is also found on the shores of all parts of Europe, from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, and is probably identical with the Velvet Scoter inhabiting the sea-coast of the eastern side of North America. Although the Scoters have wings sufficiently powerful to enable them to fly with vigour when necessitated so to do, they are most at home on the water; and their natural feeding-ground is the bottom rather than the surface; for they neither eat fluviatile grasses and floating weeds, like the Shoveller, nor seek their food on the open marsh, like the Widgeon; their whole structure is adapted for diving, and their gizzards for crushing the hard shells of the mollusks and crustaceans which they search for on the sandy ridges at the bottom of the sea within soundings. In such situations they brave the severest storms; and there they may be seen in small companies of from six to ten or twenty in number, at one moment descending to the bottom for food, and at another rising to take air, battling with the turbulent waves and piercing winds. To the seas of the British Islands, however, the Velvet Scoter only resorts in winter, arriving in October and November, and departing in April and May. During its sojourn here, it sometimes ascends rivers such as the Ribble and the Thames. During the severe winter of 1866-7 a splendid old male was killed at Cookham, in Berkshire; and many other instances of its occurrence inland might be cited; but these instances of departure from the normal habits of the bird are quite exceptional. Although it leaves the coast entirely at the approach of summer, and takes up its quarters in freshwater lakes for the purpose of breeding and rearing its young, it never resorts to any of our Highland Lochs, but seeks the more peaceful solitudes of Lapland, Finland, and Archangel, the nursery of the young of so many of our rarer birds; there it is that the old spend their summer, breed, shed their feathers, and assume a new livery of velvety black or brownish black, according to the sex. By the time this change is effected the young are able to fly, and have become sufficiently strong to leave their upland homes for the sea, and gradually proceed on their journey southward, until both the parents and their broods arrive, and again enliven our shores with their presence in autumn. In America, a similar movement takes place; for there, as with us, the Velvet Scoter, if it be really the same, frequents the temperate seas in winter, and retires northward to Newfoundland and Labrador in summer. Audubon, who found them breeding there, has given a minute description of their proceedings.

The above is a slight and general account of the habits and mode of life of the Velvet Scoter, respecting which, as seen with us, much has been written, but not, I believe, generally read; this remark, however, does not apply to the professed ornithologist; for he is perfectly acquainted with the bird, and therefore I cannot teach him anything.

St. John in his 'Tour in Sutherlandshire' says:—"The heavy but handsome Velvet Ducks ride quietly on the sea in small companies, at the distance of about two hundred yards from the shore, apparently keeping over some ridge of sand or other feeding-ground, down to which they are continually diving. These birds drift along with the tide, till it has carried them beyond the place where they feed; then they rise, and fly back for some distance, looking more like Blackcocks than Ducks; and dropping again into the water, they continue their diving till the tide has drifted them beyond the end of their feeding-ground; and this they do again and again."

For the following interesting note respecting this species, I am indebted to the kindness of Captain Elwes of the Scots Fusilier Guards:—"I find, on referring to my notes, that a male Velvet Scoter killed by me near Stromness on the 15th of April 1865, had the legs and toes pinkish magenta on the inner, and orange-red on their outer surface; the interdigital membranes slaty black; the eyes light bluish white; the colour of the bill is not described, as I was not at that time so particular respecting the colours of the soft parts. The bird is very common in Gutter Sound between the islands of Faray and Hoy, and is found there in flocks of from two or three to

twenty from October until the 20th of April, when they migrate to the north. The Sound above mentioned is their favourite resort; and although a few are found in the neighbourhood, yet they are never so plentiful elsewhere. They are strictly marine in their habits, and hardly ever come to land: their power of diving is extraordinary, and is not surpassed by any other bird with which I am acquainted, except the Great Northern Diver; for they can remain under water nearly two minutes, and always seem to dive to windward. Though they are usually very wild, yet from their great weight, and the small size of their wings, they are very slow in rising, and a shot may easily be obtained by running down on them before the wind, as they are then obliged to rise towards the boat. They are extremely hard to kill—so much so that, out of fourteen we knocked down, only four were procured, all of which were shot in the head. The white bar on the wing is very conspicuous during flight, and distinguishes them from every other bird. Their food consists chiefly of small shell-fish, which they procure at a great depth; and consequently their flesh is very strong and fishy." In order to obtain the correct colouring of the bill, which Captain Elwes had omitted to note, I wrote to Mr. J. H. Dunn, of Stromness, and requested him to shoot a fine old male, and immediately send me the head by post. This he did, after a voyage of ten miles taken expressly for the purpose; and I should be wanting in courtesy did I not here acknowledge his kind attention. With the head were transmitted the following notes:—

"The Velvet Scoters generally arrive here early in, or not later than the middle of, October; they remain all the winter, and depart about the beginning of May. Occasionally I have seen an odd one or two later in the season, but these were doubtless either unhealthy or wounded birds. While here, they are most numerous about the islands of Cava, Ryssay, and Fara, and may there be seen in small companies of from two or three to twelve or fourteen in number. Their departure and arrival are both very gradual. They begin to disappear toward the end of April; and by the close of May all have left. They reappear in like manner, and all have arrived about the beginning of November. In the places above mentioned as many as sixty or eighty may be seen any day during winter. It is equally plentiful in other parts of Orkney besides those above mentioned; but in Shetland I only saw two or three during a residence of eleven years."

That the Velvet Scoter is occasionally found in considerable numbers on the sea bordering the marshy county of Norfolk is certain; for Mr. Lubbock speaks of upwards of twenty specimens having been obtained there in the winter of 1829-30; and in some notes supplied to Mr. Stevenson by the late Sir William Jackson Hooker, no less than nineteen are stated to have been killed on the coast, near Yarmouth, in March 1832. Mr. Stevenson does "not know of any instance of so many being taken in any one season of late years; but several males, females, and young birds have been shot on the coast during the last few winters. Like the common species they are occasionally found on the larger Broads, and other inland waters."

The egg of the Velvet Scoter is very correctly figured in Mr. Hewitson's 'Coloured Illustrations of the Eggs of British Birds,' from an example in the Lapland collection of the late Mr. John Wolley, who states that "the bird makes its nest under the sweeping branches of a small Norway pine, if such is to be met with; but in the colder regions of the country, it must find some other shelter. When it prefers an island, which it more seldom does, in the inhabited districts at least, it chooses a dry spot a few yards from the water's edge. It is one of the latest breeders among the ducks, and the number of the eggs is very variable." "The usual number," according to Yarrell, "is six, and they are of a nearly uniform cream-colour, two inches and three quarters in length by one inch and seven eighths in breadth." Mr. Dann informed Mr. Yarrell that "it is common during the summer months in the interior of the whole of Scandinavia, north of latitude 60°. It frequents and breeds on the large lakes of the mountainous districts, especially those of which the shores are flat and boggy and covered with vegetation. In Lapland it is numerous everywhere, and the eggs are much sought after by the natives. It is also abundant in the Dovre-fjeld, appearing at the latter end of May. They hatch very late, seldom before the end of July. Their nests are placed on hummocks, amongst the willow-swamps or long grass near the water. They frequent the lakes as high as the birch grows."

The Plate represents a male, a female, and some young birds, about the size of life, the latter being figured from a specimen kindly lent me for the purpose by Arthur W. Crichton, Esq.

Gould, John. 1873. "Velvet Scoter, *Oidemia fusca* [Pl. 29]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324073>.

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