HISTRIONICUS TORQUATUS.

Illustrated by H.C. Fisher del. et lith.

Willet, Imp.

HISTRIONICUS TORQUATUS.

Harlequin Duck.

Anas histrionica et *A. minuta*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 204.

Clangula histrionica, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 564.

Harelda histrionica, Keys. und Blas. Wirbelth. Eur., p. 87.

Fuligula histrionica, Bonap. Syn., p. 394, no. 345.

Cosmonessa histrionica, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 40.

Phlyaconetta histrionica, Brandt, Mém. de l'Acad. Imp. Sci. de St. Pétersb., 1849.

Histrionicus torquatus, Bonap. Compt. Rend. des Séances de l'Acad. Sci., tom. xliii. séances des 15 et 22 Sept. 1856.

Anas (Harelda) histrionica, Schrenck, Vög. des Amur-Landes, p. 483.

THIS fantastically marked Duck is a native of the northern parts of both hemispheres, excepting continental Europe: at the same time it is somewhat restricted in its habitat; in winter it frequents shoal bays and inlets of the sea, and on the approach of spring resorts to inland waters and the more turbulent streams and torrents, for the purpose of nidification. In its affinities it is almost as nearly allied to the Smew as it is to the Golden-eye, and, so far as we yet know, is the only member of its genus. From its summer quarters stragglers, which are generally females or young males, wander in winter into more southern latitudes, visit Vancouver Island and the north-western portion of the American continent, the south-eastern coasts of the United States, and occasionally reach the Baltic countries and Britain. Respecting its occurrence in our islands, much confusion exists, owing to the mistakes made by even our best ornithologists in regarding immature examples of other species, such as the Long-tailed Duck (*Harelda glacialis*), as female or youthful specimens of the Harlequin Duck. I fear, therefore, that much that has been written has to be discarded, and little added in favour of its having a place in our avifauna; such a claim, however, feeble as it may be, it certainly possesses.

Mr. J. H. Gurney, Jun., with an amount of pains-taking which does him the utmost credit, has lately furnished me with a list of the reported occurrences of this bird in our islands, accompanied by some very judicious remarks.

The result of his investigation tends to prove that the Harlequin Duck has only been found in our islands in two instances,—the first of which was recorded by Colonel Montagu, in his well known ornithological dictionary, published in 1802, on the authority of Mr. James Sowerby, in whose collection of the rarer British birds he had an opportunity of examining both sexes killed in Scotland, on the domain of Lord Seaforth; the other, a male, was shot by Major W. Ross King, off Buchan, on the coast of Aberdeenshire. "I learn from Major King," says Mr. Gurney, Jun., "that it was obtained immediately after several days' storm from the north-east, that it was swimming a short distance only from the shore, and that it appeared to be either wounded or much exhausted. In his opinion it would more likely have died than found its way back to its own country. It proved to be in very fair plumage, but in poor condition. Major King skinned it, and had it stuffed; but during his temporary absence it was, unfortunately, so much injured by damp and moths that it had to be thrown away."

Mr. Frederick Bond informs me that he well recollects seeing three or four young females in Leadenhall Market, many years ago, during a very severe winter: unfortunately he did not purchase them. From Mr. Bond's intimate acquaintance with ornithology, I have no doubt the birds he remembered were of this species.

"I am inclined to believe," says Professor Newton, in 'The Ibis' for 1859, "that a good deal of misconception exists as to the geographical range of this species, which I think will be found to be much more limited than is usually supposed to be the case. I am pretty sure that in Europe, with the exception of Iceland, and Western Asia it only occurs as an accidental straggler. As far as Mr. Wolley's experience goes, it is not known as a bird of Lapland, including in the term the north of Norway or Finmark; and I can hardly understand its being, as Temminck states, "abondant dans les contrées orientales de l'Europe" without its occasionally appearing in the district so assiduously worked by my friend; for I presume there can be no doubt that Temminck did not intend to refer to any but the *northern* part of eastern Europe. In more southern Scandinavia it is certainly rare. I cannot find that it is known in European Russia; but it seems to occur accidentally on the Caspian and Sea of Aral. It is also said to be met with about Lake Baikal; and, if the report be true, I think this must be taken, according to our present knowledge, as its normal western limit in Asia; for in the course of Dr. Middendorff's travels it appears to have been found only in the extreme east of Siberia. It probably also occurs in Japan."

Mr. Proctor informed Mr. Hewitson "that the Harlequin Duck is by no means common in Iceland, where it chiefly frequents cascades and rapidly running streams, building its nest (which is composed of dry leaves, grass, and reeds, lined with down) amongst low bushes and water-growing plants, the eggs being from six to eight in number. . . . Mr. G. C. Atkinson, of Newcastle, whilst visiting the celebrated Geysers during a summer's ramble in Iceland, had the eggs brought to him, together with the bird, which had been shot in rising from them. . . . I have to thank Mr. Henry B. Milner," continues Mr. Hewitson, "for the following particulars :—'Of this species, which is scattered throughout the island, though nowhere abundantly, I was fortunate enough to discover one nest containing six eggs. It was situated on an island in the rapid river Laxa, nearly in the centre, amongst the low arbutus; I also saw a female and two half-fledged young ones in a stream near the Geysers. As far as I could observe, the Harlequin Duck only haunts the rapid rivers and streams. I saw about twelve pairs while in Iceland, and never in one instance observed them in any of the numerous lakes which abound throughout the island.' . . . Holbœll says that this is a rare bird in North Greenland, whilst it is very common between 62° and 65° N. lat. The nest is always on the bank of a very rapid brook, and is so well concealed under plants and willows that it is very rarely discovered. The young ones are immediately led into the sea. They like a ruffled sea, and, when not breeding, are usually found at the most outward islands, where they dive in the midst of the breakers."

Audubon states that the flight of the Harlequin Duck "is rapid and generally straight. At sea it flies at a small height; but when flying over the land or even when approaching it, should there be any suspicion of danger, it rises to a considerable height. Its food consists of shrimps, small fishes, roe, aquatic insects, and mollusca, which it procures by diving. The flesh is dark-coloured and generally tastes of fish; but that of the female is good during the period of her sojourn on the freshwater ponds."

The same author informs us that "the male takes three years to acquire his full plumage, though many individuals breed in the second year;" but neither Audubon nor any other author, so far as I am aware, informs us whether the fantastic colouring of the male is constant, or if it be only assumed during the breeding-season—that is, a nuptial dress only. Judging from what is known with respect to the Mergansers and the diving ducks allied to the Harlequin, probably the latter is the true state of the case, and in winter both sexes are very similarly coloured.

The eggs are pale buff with a slight tinge of olive, and are two inches and an eighth in length by one inch and five eighths in breadth.

"The colour of the male is so singularly diversified," says Swainson in his 'Animals in Menageries,' "as to require much precision in a description which is to convey any accurate idea of the bird. We should say that the ground-colour of the whole plumage, both above and below, is bluish black—of different tints, indeed, but in all parts dark; upon this ground are many bold bands, stripes, and spots of white, giving the bird a most elegant appearance. A large patch of this sort fills up the head between the eye and bill; another, small and round one is just on the ear; and a third, longer and narrower, is behind it; the crown is margined on each side by a stripe of white, which changes to ferruginous after it passes the eye; at the bottom of the neck is a narrow white collar, which separates the deep black of the head and throat from the cinereous or lavender-black of the breast; on each side of the breast is a broad transverse stripe of white, margined above and below by a narrow one of velvet black; the greater wing-coverts terminate in a white bar, and the outer edges of the tertials are marked with black and white stripes; the speculum, which covers all the secondary quills, is of a very dark glossy blue; sides of the body and flanks chestnut-brown; vent, rump, and tail-coverts velvet black; at the base of the tail on each side is a white spot; quills and tail brownish; bill and a small fleshy flap of naked skin at the base of the upper mandible bluish black, tip and legs brown."

The female is thus described by Dr. Richardson :—"Above, dark liver-brown; quills and tail blackish brown; rump and the flank-feathers that hang down over the thigh pale umber; a spot behind the ears, a smaller one on each side of the forehead, and some mottling under the eye white; upper part of the breast and the sides under the wings yellowish brown, edged with brownish grey; rest of the under plumage greyish white, broadly barred across the middle of each feather with dove-brown. The size is much inferior to that of the male."

The Plate represents a male, of about the natural size, a female, considerably reduced, and a second male in the distance.

Gould, John. 1873. "Harlequin Duck, *Histrionieus torquatus* [Pl. 32]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324076>.

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