MERGUS CASTOR, Linn.

Goosander.

- Mergus merganser*, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 47.
——— *castor*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 209.
——— *rubricapillus*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 545.
Merganser Raii, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 36.
——— *gulo*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 161, pl. 53.
——— *castor*, Bonap. Geog. and Comp. List. of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 59.
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THE Goosander is the largest and the finest species of *Mergus* known. The plumage of the male in his nuptial dress is remarkably striking, the rich green of the head, the delicate salmon tint of the breast and abdomen, and the jet-black of the back being all most harmoniously arranged; and in this state few water-birds are more beautifully attired. The members of the genus to which it belongs dwell entirely on the waters, and, like the Cormorants, live almost exclusively on fish: the Mergansers, however, are more lacustrine in their habits; for they do not go far out to sea, or fish so frequently in great estuaries and bays, but prefer the inland lochs and great lakes of the countries they respectively inhabit. With few exceptions, all the species are found in the northern hemisphere, in the Old and the New World, and consequently are natives of high latitudes. The above somewhat general remarks apply to the four species which frequent our waters, and not to the one inhabiting Brazil, or to the two frequenting the streams of the Andean ranges; for although they undoubtedly belong to the same family, they pertain to very distinct genera. In summer the Goosander is to be found in the northern portions of Europe, where, and in other countries in similar high latitudes, it breeds. The greater part of those which come to us in autumn are doubtless from Iceland, Norway, and Lapland. I am aware that Macgillivray, Dr. Dewar, and others have stated that the bird breeds in the Outer Hebrides and other parts of Scotland; but I trust I shall be excused if I doubt this, and suggest that the Red-breasted Merganser may have been mistaken for it. It is in November that those who live in the Midland counties of England look for the arrival of the Goosander; and so truly does it keep the time of coming that it seldom varies more than a few days. The late Duke of Newcastle informed me that the small number which pass the winter on his fine lake at Clumber, in Nottinghamshire, generally arrive within a few days of the 15th of November, and remain until the following spring, when they suddenly leave for their breeding-grounds in the north. The quantity of fish that the ten or twelve Goosanders which resort to Clumber lake destroy during their five months' sojourn must be enormous; for a twenty-pound pike does not, in my opinion, take a larger weight of fish per diem than one of these voracious birds. The Duke very kindly invited me to Clumber, and assigned me a bedroom the windows of which opened towards the lake, that I might see how regularly the Goosanders fished the upper and shallow part of the stream at sunrise. As if acting in concert, the troop kept nearly in line, and traversed the lake from end to end; the morning meal over, and their appetites appeased, they resorted to the low and deeper water, and there remained until evening, when they again resumed their fishing. In a trout-stream, I know of no bird that would be more destructive; for the alacrity it displayed in diving clearly convinced me that no fish could escape.

The employment of the word "nuptial" at the commencement of this paper, with reference to the plumage of the Goosander, will have indicated that this fine species is subject to a change of costume; and no metamorphosis could effect a greater difference in appearance than is exhibited by the male before and after the breeding-time. As soon as the nesting-period is over, he gradually throws off his beautiful silky green head-dress, the black colouring of his back, and the buffy colouring of his breast, for a plumage so similar to that of the female that, were it not for his superior size, at a short distance the two sexes could not be distinguished from each other. The young of both sexes are alike in colour, and very similar to the old female, until at least the second year.

The site chosen for the incubation of its eggs is a hole in a tree, under a great stone, the lee side of a bush, or among the herbage by a lake-side. The late Mr. Wheelwright, in his 'Spring and Summer in Lapland,' tells us that the only two sets of eggs found by him were both placed on the bare ground. Mr. Hewitson states that "the eggs of this species were first added to our collections by the perseverance of Mr. Proctor, of Durham, who procured them during his visit to Iceland. The nests he found there were upon small islands in the freshwater lochs near the sea-coast. They were composed of very few materials—a small quantity of dry grass, with a lining of down and feathers—and contained from four to six eggs, which nearly resemble those of the Red-breasted Merganser, but larger, and of a lighter colour."

Mr. Alfred Newton informs me that both, in Lapland and Southern Sweden, Mr. Wolley invariably found the Goosander breeding in holes of trees, or in artificial nest-boxes affixed to the trunks of trees by the settlers for the use of this species and the Golden-eye. This therefore must be regarded as its usual mode of nidification; and it is only when trees fail, as in Iceland, that it adopts the plan of forming its nest in the open.

Old Acerbi, quoted by Mr. Yarrell, states, in his 'Travels in Lapland,' that "The person who waylays the bird for her eggs places against a fir or pine tree, somewhere near the bank of the river, a decayed trunk with a hole in its middle; the bird enters and lays her eggs in it; presently the peasant comes and takes away the eggs, except one or two. The bird returns, and, finding but a single egg, lays two or three more, which are purloined in the same manner, the bird again returns and, as if she had forgotten the eggs she had laid, proceeds once more to complete the intended number. She is defrauded of her eggs as before, and continues repeating the same process four or five times, when the peasant, who has by this time gathered perhaps a score of eggs from the same nest, suffers her to lay the last for the increase of her family. As soon as the eggs are hatched, the mother takes the chicks gently in her bill, carries and lays them down at the foot of the tree, where she teaches them the way to the river, in which they instantly swim with astonishing rapidity."

This account of the Goosander would be incomplete without a word on its flight. When the bird is hard pressed and cannot escape by diving, it readily takes wing and flies vigorously. If chased in a boat, while ascending our inland rivers, it frequently eludes the pursuer by diving back under the boat and rising again at a distance out of gun-shot. When on the surface and unmolested, it swims deep in the water, with its neck upright and its tail wholly submerged.

In conclusion, although I have given prominence to the Clumber Lake, I must state that in winter it visits in small numbers all similar waters in the northern parts of England, that it is also seen on the broads and decoys of Norfolk, Suffolk, and Lincolnshire, and that the Ribble, the Trent, and the Thames may enumerate it among the birds which irregularly plash down upon their glassy surface. Those that do so are, however, generally males in their plain dress, or females, and are known to gunners and country-people as Dun Divers and Saw-bills. So seldom do they see the male in his fine spring plumage that, if they did, they would not know what it was.

Head and upper part of the neck black, glossed with green and purple; remainder of the neck, breast, and under surface beautiful rich buff, fading into white on the tips of the under tail-coverts, and minutely undulated with grey on the thighs; upper part of the back and inner scapularies deep rich black; outer scapularies buff; centre of the back dark grey, lower part of the back and rump light grey, undulated with dark grey; tail slate-grey, with black shafts: of the lesser wing-coverts those nearest the body are grey, with a band of black at the tip, while those along the margin of the shoulder have an additional band of white, the remainder of the lesser and all the greater coverts creamy white; primaries blackish brown, becoming much lighter on their inner webs; secondaries creamy white, with a wash of brown near the tip of the inner web; tertiaries buff, the first four with a narrow line of black along the margin of the outer web, the fifth similarly margined on both webs, and the sixth narrowly margined on the outer web, and stained with black on the inner web near the tip; bill rich deep blood-red, with the exception of the culmen and the tip of the upper and the under surface of the lower mandible, which are black; legs and feet orange-red, webs darker; nails pale brown; irides crimson-red.

The young male has the throat whitish; head and upper part of the neck deep rusty brown; upper surface grey, with a dark centre to each feather; under surface white, washed in some parts deeper than in others with buff; wing-coverts grey, with black shafts; primaries as in the adult; posterior portion of the greater coverts and the secondaries white, on the apical half of their outer webs, back, and tail as in adult; bill, feet, and eyes also, but paler.

The Plate represents a male and a female, somewhat smaller than the size of life, with a reduced figure of a Kingfisher in the distance.

Gould, John. 1873. "Goosander, *Mergus castor* [Pl. 34]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324078>.

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