MERGUS CUCULLATUS, *Linn.*

Hooded Merganser.

Mergus cucullatus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 207.

Merganser Virginianus cristatus, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 258.

——— *cucullatus*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 168.

SEVERAL instances are on record of the occurrence of this ornamental species of *Mergus* in England and on the continent of Europe; but its true home is America, over the northern portion of which, from the United States to the Fur-countries, it is very numerously distributed, and where, like the other members of the genus, its movements are influenced by the season; that is to say, in the summer months it lives in the north, where it breeds, and migrates southward as far as the Gulf of Mexico in autumn and winter.

Mr. Selby has the honour of having made known its first occurrence in Britain, through the medium of the first volume of the 'Transactions of the Natural History Society of Northumberland, Durham, and Newcastle-upon-Tyne,' p. 292. The specimen referred to was killed near Yarmouth during the winter of 1829. "Since that period," says Mr. Yarrell, "T. C. Eyton, Esq., has obtained a specimen, which was killed in the Menai Straits, near Bangor, in the winter of 1830–31. Mr. Hoy, of Stoke Nayland, in Suffolk, obtained an adult male, as recorded in the 'Naturalist;' and I have heard of another that was shot at Benton Park, the estate of Anthony Ralph Biddulph, Esq."

Mr. W. Christy Horsfall, of Horsforth Low Hall, informs me that he has a pair in his collection which were killed in the neighbourhood of Leeds. With such evidence of the occurrence of the bird in our islands, I must necessarily give it a place in the 'Birds of Great Britain.' The spring dress of the Hooded Merganser, like that of the other species of the genus, is by no means devoid of ornament, the beautiful hood of the male, which is capable of being raised and depressed at the will of the bird, adding much to the grace of its appearance. That this hood or crest is merely a seasonal decoration, I think there can be no doubt; for I have seen male specimens killed at the season when the female necessarily has her entire attention devoted to her progeny, which were so much like females in outward appearance as to convince me that at that time both sexes are similarly attired. These forlorn males now proceed southward and rove about until the autumn, when nature again prompts them to associate with the females; they gradually assume their courting-dress, once more become beaux, and when spring arrives pair and proceed north to their breeding-quarters. This, however, only occurs in America; for I question if any of those that have been found in Europe have been known to breed therein: this being the case, I shall be excused for giving a lengthy extract from Audubon's 'Ornithological Biography,' descriptive of the habits of the bird as seen in America:—

"Excepting the Smew or White Nun, the Hooded Merganser is the handsomest of its family. Its broad and rounded crest of pure white, with an edging of jetty black, renders the male conspicuous on the waters to which it resorts, as the activity of its motions and the rapidity of its flight contribute to render it a pleasing object. It seems to prefer fresh water, and is by no means frequent along the sea-coast. Long, narrow, and moderately deep creeks, or small ponds, are more frequented by it than large rivers or lakes. On the waters of the Western and Southern States, these Mergansers are seen to arrive from the north early in October. At the approach of night, a person standing still on the banks of such a river as the Ohio, first hears the sound of wings whistling through the air, and presently a different noise, like that produced by an Eagle stooping on his prey, when, gliding downwards with the rapidity of an arrow, he dimly perceives Hooded Mergansers sweeping past. Five or six, perhaps ten, with quick beats of their pinions, fly low over the waters in wide circles, and, having spied the entrance of a creek, shoot into it; and in a few seconds is heard the rushing noise they make as they alight on the bosom of the still pool. Up the creek the Mergansers proceed, washing their bodies by short plunges, and splashing up the water about them. Then they plume themselves, and anoint their feathers, now and then uttering a low grunting note, apparently of pleasure. Now they dive in search of minnows, which they find in abundance, and which no doubt prove delicious food to the hungry travellers. Having satisfied their appetite, they rise on wing, fly low over the creek with almost incredible velocity, return to the broad stream, and rove along its margin until they meet with a clear sand-beach, where, secure from danger, they repose until the return of day.

"This bird ranges throughout the United States during winter, content with the food it meets with in the bays and estuaries of the eastern coast and in the inland streams. The dam of the Pennsylvania miller is as agreeable to it as that of the Carolina rice-planter; and I have found them as full of life and gaiety on

the numerous streams and pools of the interior of the Floridas as on the Missouri and great lakes. When the weather becomes too cold for them they move southwards, many proceeding towards Mexico.

"The Hooded Merganser is a most expert diver, and so vigilant that at times it escapes even from the best percussion gun. If you wound one, never follow it; for the bird, when its strength is almost exhausted, immerses its body, raises the point of its bill above the surface, and in this manner makes its way among the plants until, finding some safe retreat along the shore, it there remains, and you may search for it in vain, unless you have a good dog. Even on wing it is not easily shot. If on a creek, ever so narrow, it will fly directly towards its mouth, although you may be standing knee-deep in the middle.

"Like all the rest of the genus, which, when far north, breed on the moss or ground, the Hooded Mergansers that remain with us nest in the same kind of situation as the Wood Duck. They dive as it were directly into their wooden burrows, where, on a few dried weeds and feathers of different kinds, with a small quantity of down from the breast of the female, the eggs are deposited. They are from five to eight in number, measure one inch and three-fourths by one inch and three-eighths, and in other respects perfectly resemble those of the Redbreasted Merganser. They are laid in May, and the young are out some time in June.

"The young are conveyed to the water by their mother, who carries them gently in her bill; for the male takes no part in providing for her offspring, but abandons his mate as soon as incubation has commenced.

"The affectionate mother leads her young among the tall rank grasses which fill the shallow pools or borders of creeks, and teaches them to procure snails, tadpoles, and insects. On two occasions the parents would not abandon the young, although I expected that the noises I made would have induced them so to do, but in both instances followed their offspring into the net I had set for them. The young all died in two days, when I set the old birds at liberty.

"The Hooded Mergansers move with ease on the ground, and even run with speed. When migrating, they fly at a great height, in small flocks, without any regard to order. Their notes consist of a kind of rough grunt, variously modulated, but by no means musical, resembling the syllables *croo*, *croo*, *crooh*. The female repeats it six or seven times in succession when she sees her young in danger. The same noise is made by the male, either when courting on the water, or as he passes on wing near the hole where the female is laying her eggs.

"The males do not acquire the full beauty of their plumage until the third spring, but resemble the females for the first year. In the course of the second the crest becomes more developed, and the white and black markings about the body are more distinct. The third spring it is complete."

The male has the forehead brown; sides of the head and crest black, with a large patch of white in the centre of the latter; back and two crescentic marks on each side of the chest black; scapularies black, with a stripe of white down the centre; flanks marked with undulated lines of yellowish brown and brownish black; bill reddish black; irides golden yellow; feet yellowish brown, claws dusky.

The female, which is considerably smaller than the male, has the head and crest of a yellowish brown; chin whitish, upper part of the neck and the sides of the head greyish brown; upper surface, wings, tail, and flanks blackish brown, with paler edges; speculum greyish white; breast and abdomen pale yellowish brown.

The young resemble the female from their first moult.

The accompanying Plate represents an adult, nearly as large as life, in its summer plumage; while in the distance are reduced figures of both sexes at the same period. The plant is the *Ranunculus fluvialis*.

Gould, John. 1873. "Hooded Merganser, *Mergus cucullatus* [Pl. 36]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324080>.

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