

PODICEPS MINOR.

Little Grebe or Dabchick.

Colymbus minor, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 591.

——— *Hebridicus*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 594.

Podiceps minor, Penn. Brit. Zool., vol. ii. p. 137.

——— *Hebridicus*, Penn. Brit. Zool., vol. ii. p. 138.

——— *fluvialis*, Briss. Orn., vol. vi. p. 59.

EVERY one must be familiar with the name of Dabchick ; for where is the person who has lived a country-life that has not heard it applied to the least of the British Grebes—the *Podiceps minor* ? The natural home of this well-known bird is the water ; and its whole structure is admirably adapted for obtaining its food and almost dwelling beneath the surface, its leaden body, impenetrable plumage, its apology for a tail, and flattened tarsi being all especially suited to this mode of life. With us it is a stationary bird ; for, whether it be summer or winter, it may always be found, merely changing from place to place, either from the severity of the season forcing it to leave the ice-covered waters for running rivers, or the approaching period of incubation inducing it to retire to the reedy nooks of meres and small ponds. To enumerate the portions of the British Islands in which the bird may be sought for would be superfluous, since it is universally dispersed ; but it is said to be less common in Scotland than in England ; still it is found as far north as the Orkneys ; in Ireland it is, I believe, as equally abundant as in England. In like manner the Dabchick is to be seen in all parts of the Continent ; but I suspect that its European range is limited in a northerly direction ; for although it is an inhabitant of Sweden and Norway, countries further north will not be congenial to it. Strange to say, it is stated to be less common in Holland than in Switzerland. I have but little doubt that the same species also extends its range to India, China, and Japan, at all events. I have at this moment before me Grebes from all those countries, which are so like our bird that it would be difficult to separate them ; specimens from China and Japan, carrying the red of the neck and the dark upper plumage, have, however, their breasts more silvery than our bird. In the northern parts of Africa the Dabchick is certainly found ; and it would be difficult to point out, at least from dried skins, wherein the Little Grebe from South Africa differs ; the latter has, however, been regarded as distinct by Bonaparte, who has assigned to it the specific name of *Capensis*. The Australian bird, to which I have given the name of *australis*, is undoubtedly different.

I shall now proceed to describe the states of plumage assumed by the Dabchick at different periods of the year. In winter, when it is most usually seen, its dress is light olive-grey above and silvery white beneath, quite the opposite of that with which it is clothed in summer. So remarkable is the difference, that many persons might be induced to regard them as distinct birds ; the ornithologist, however, is perfectly aware of these changes, and has no doubt of their identity. The nuptial or breeding-dress, in both sexes, is the same ; the feathers in this state are rich and silky in texture, and the colours harmonious and ornamental ; the general hue of the body is deep olive-black, except the chin, which is the colour of jet, and the sides and front of the neck, which are of the richest chestnut ; the bill is black, and the bare part of the gape is largely developed and of a beautiful greenish yellow. The bird, thus clothed, is all animation ; its loud ringing cry is often heard ; its nest is made, and the female is performing the task of incubation. The Dabchick at this particular season is extremely shy, especially if the nest be approached and intruded upon. I have frequently known the Dabchick to select small ponds, far away from the open river, for the purpose of nesting, their desire apparently being to be the sole occupants of a situation where they may find a plentiful supply of insect food for themselves and their progeny ; such ponds or mere water-holes must, however, be well supplied with aquatic plants, and their sides furnished with reeds, rushes, and similar herbage. Independently of such situations, they resort to the sedgy sides of all our rivers, meres, and large ponds. The month of April is the breeding-season ; and although the nest is frequently placed in an exposed situation, and always on the surface of the water, much artifice is displayed by the bird in this part of its economy ; so little of its floating nursery is seen above the water, and so similar is it to the surrounding vegetation, that it may and doubtless often is passed by without being discovered. The materials composing this raft or nest are weeds and aquatic plants carefully heaped together in a rounded form : it is very large at the base, and is so constantly added to, that a considerable portion of it becomes submerged, at the same time it is sufficiently buoyant to admit of its saucer-like hollow top being always above the surface ; in this wet depression five or six eggs are laid. The bird, always most alert, is still more so now, and never or scarcely ever admits of a near examination of the nest-making or of a view of the eggs. In favourable situations, however, and with the aid of a telescope, the process may be watched ; and it is not a little interesting to notice with