

MERGUS ALBELLUS.

Smew, or Nun.

Mergus albellus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 209.

—— *minutus*, Linn. ibid.

—— *Asiaticus*, S. G. Gmel. Reis., tom. ii. p. 188, t. 20.

—— *stellatus*, Brünn. Orn. Boreal., no. 98.

—— *panmonicus*, Scop. Ann., i. no. 92.

Merganser stellatus, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 252.

—— *cristatus minor*, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 243.

Mergellus albellus, Bonap. Comptes Rendus de l'Acad. des Sci., tom. xliii. séances des 15 et 22 Sept. 1856.

I THINK that it was a happy simile when this bird was compared with a nun ; for where can we find one more chaste in its colouring, more graceful in its form ? Let us be fanciful for once at least, and consider the Smew as the representative among birds of all that is fair and all that is charming. Romance apart, this is really one of the prettiest, if not the most beautiful, of water-birds ; to see it, however, with its plumage pure and unsullied, it must be viewed in a state of nature. How different is the bird when seen in our Museums ! The taxidermist, in despite of all his care, has found it impossible to preserve more than its skin and feathers ; the glory of the bird has fled with its departed life : and this, unfortunately, is the case with all birds ; for, however beautiful their mounted skins may appear, they are but shadows of the past. The Smew is not sufficiently common in this country to admit of many persons seeing it in its wild state : the British Islands are not its native home ; and its visits to us are only paid when the severities of the winter within the arctic circle force it to seek more genial climes. In mild winters we are scarcely favoured by it at all, and then only by young males or females. Perchance Norway, Sweden, and Denmark are ice-bound ; if so, Great Britain, Holland, France, and Spain are visited by it ; and it is now that the males arrive. It will be useless for me to enumerate all the places in which this bird has been killed : during the next severe winter, it would be just as likely that we might see the Smew on one of the long reaches of the Thames as in the Ribble or Tamar, the Norfolk Broads, or the Lakes of Cumberland and Wales. The home of the Smew, as I have before said, is within the Arctic circle ; and from thence it migrates towards the equator, some proceeding to Central Europe, and others to India, China, and Japan. But in none of those countries has it been known to breed ; indeed, the place of its nidification had not been recorded with any degree of certainty until the indefatigable researches of the late Mr. Wolley placed it beyond doubt ; and I feel I should be wanting in respect to that gentleman's memory were I not to acknowledge his great services and sacrifices in the cause of ornithological science, and give some extracts from the very interesting paper on this portion of the bird's economy, published by him in the first volume of 'The Ibis.' It may not be known to many of my readers that Mr. Wolley spent two dreary winters in Lapland, for the sole purpose of ascertaining the breeding-places and obtaining the eggs of some of our rarer birds, which nidify there early in the spring, when travelling from England to that country is impracticable. Although the Smew was one of the last with whose nidification he has made us acquainted, it is by no means one of the least in interest.

The delicate white plumage, relieved by crescentic markings of black, is characteristic of the male alone ; for the female is very differently coloured, as will be seen on reference to the distant and reduced figure in the accompanying Plate, or to the detailed description of the sexes given below. It is only during the months of winter and spring that this pure-white plumage is borne : about midsummer a complete change takes place ; for as soon as the bird is mated, this delicate attire disappears, and one very similar in colour to that of the female commences, and is perfected by the time the young are hatched : this change will even take place with birds in captivity, as I have witnessed in the aviaries in the Gardens of the Zoological Society in Regent's Park. The white crest is moulted, as well as the rest of the plumage ; but no material change occurs in the colouring of the space before the eye : that nearly circular patch of greenish black also distinguishes the young males of the year from the females, to which they assimilate in many other respects. The annexed illustration, then, depicts the bird in its full winter dress, and, with the accompaniments, is intended to represent a tranquil winter scene. Neither spirit nor animation seems to possess the two males. How different, however, are they at other times, especially just before their pairing, or when they leave us for their northern home ! They then exhibit the greatest animation, stretching forward their necks, erecting their crests, and swimming and circling in the water as if their bodies turned on a pivot. Thus did I see the Smew during a tour through Holland ; and long shall I remember it. I wish it were in my power to give further details respecting the habits, actions, and economy of this winter visitant to our country ;