

## MERGUS SERRATOR.

### Merganser.

*Mergus serrator*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 208.

———, var. *leucomelas*, *serratus*, et *niger*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 546.

*Merganser cristatus*, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 237, pl. 23.

——— *niger*, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 251.

——— *serrata*, Shaw, Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 165.

If my readers were to picture to themselves a zone in the northern hemisphere between the 40th and 70th degrees of latitude, and could further carry in their minds all those parts of the land that are studded with lakes, or intersected with rivers and salt lagoons, they would then be able to form a just conception of the area over which the Merganser is spread. In the British Islands generally all the northern lakes, bays, and inlets of the sea are frequented by it. It also occurs in similar situations in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Russia, Switzerland, and Savoy, and doubtless on all the other waters between the Black Sea and Kamtschatka; the north of China and Japan are also among the countries in which it is found. In America it frequents all the lakes and rivers from Canada to Texas. It is also, I believe, found in Iceland. In the British Islands it is rather a northern than a southern bird; for although it is sometimes killed as far south as the sheltered bays of the Hampshire coast, and as far west as the waters of Cornwall and Scilly, it is during the winter months only that such occurrences take place. Although comparatively a common bird, and so widely distributed, I question if more than one out of twenty of my readers has seen the Merganser in a state of nature. To those who have the desire to do so, I may say that the bird is a constant resident in all the northern parts of Scotland, Ireland, the Western Islands, Orkney, and Shetland, wherever such situations as those above described occur. I must remark, however, that its presence depends greatly upon its freedom from persecution; if absent from its usual haunts, molestation is the cause. In the London markets, and doubtless in those of Liverpool, Manchester, and Edinburgh, specimens may frequently be seen during the months of winter, showing that the gunner, in his flat-bottomed boat, has pulled his trigger at the Saw-bill (as it is commonly called), as well as at the more profitable Mallard. As an article of food, I suspect few birds can be more unsuited; and hence the only purchaser of those that grace the market-shambles is the Taxidermist, who obtains them at a price remarkably low, especially if they be females, or young males of the year, as is mostly the case; for the finely-plumaged males either do not migrate so far south, or by the exercise of greater vigilance contrive to keep out of harm's way.

Like the other species of the genus, the Merganser differs very considerably in the colouring of the sexes. The fine coral-red bill of the male, his double-crested green head, showy epaulets, and lovely-coloured breast, all combine to render him one of the handsomest of our water-birds. This spring or nuptial dress is not, however, carried all the year; for when the female has commenced the task of incubation, or has taken her young to the water, he becomes careless, as it were, of his finery, throws off his gaily-coloured feathers, and assumes an appearance so much like that of the female, that at a distance, except by their difference of size, one could not be distinguished from the other. The males are now said to associate by themselves in small communities of ten or more in number, regardless both of their females and their progeny. On the approach of spring the sombre dress is again exchanged, the finer garb renewed, the female sought for and wooed, and some quiet place on the loch-side selected for the nest; and thus we are brought round to the period whence we started.

I fear that some of my readers will perceive an inconsistency between the accompanying illustration and the description; but it is not at all impossible that a male should carry his fine garb and remain with the female till the month of July, the period when the young are hatched; indeed it is probable that he frequently does so.

Much of the time of the Merganser is spent on the water. The lengthened form of its body, the oily character of its plumage, and its entire structure are, indeed, admirably adapted for swimming and diving. The bird frequently hunts in companies, commencing at the lower end of a reach or river, and gradually fishing the whole stream from end to end; and since, as with the voracious Cormorant, digestion goes on quickly, the amount of fish each Merganser takes is enormous. "Comparisons are odious" is an old saying, but I cannot omit remarking how vastly more destructive must be this bird to the salmon and trout than the cheerful little Water-Ouzel.

Independently of lochs and rivers, the Merganser seeks its living in most of the bays and salt-water estuaries, where it feeds on sand-eels and other fishes common to such localities.

The young, as will be seen from the figures in the accompanying Plate, taken from examples about ten