

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.

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 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."