

OIDEMIA FUSCA.

Velvet Scoter.

Anas fusca, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 39.

Melanetta fusca, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 564.

Oidemia fusca, Flem. Phil. of Zool., vol. ii. p. 260.

Anas fuliginosa, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 962, tab. 36.

Fuligula fusca, Bonap. Syn. of Birds of United States, p. 390.

THE marine ducks figured in this work under the generic title of *Oidemia* are rendered prominently distinct from all the other members of the numerous family of birds to which they belong, by the deep-black velvet-like colouring of the males. The species pertaining to our fauna are three in number, of which the Velvet Scoter is the largest and in every respect the most powerful. It not only frequents the seas and estuaries of the British Islands, but is also found on the shores of all parts of Europe, from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, and is probably identical with the Velvet Scoter inhabiting the sea-coast of the eastern side of North America. Although the Scoters have wings sufficiently powerful to enable them to fly with vigour when necessitated so to do, they are most at home on the water; and their natural feeding-ground is the bottom rather than the surface; for they neither eat fluviatile grasses and floating weeds, like the Shoveller, nor seek their food on the open marsh, like the Widgeon; their whole structure is adapted for diving, and their gizzards for crushing the hard shells of the mollusks and crustaceans which they search for on the sandy ridges at the bottom of the sea within soundings. In such situations they brave the severest storms; and there they may be seen in small companies of from six to ten or twenty in number, at one moment descending to the bottom for food, and at another rising to take air, battling with the turbulent waves and piercing winds. To the seas of the British Islands, however, the Velvet Scoter only resorts in winter, arriving in October and November, and departing in April and May. During its sojourn here, it sometimes ascends rivers such as the Ribble and the Thames. During the severe winter of 1866-7 a splendid old male was killed at Cookham, in Berkshire; and many other instances of its occurrence inland might be cited; but these instances of departure from the normal habits of the bird are quite exceptional. Although it leaves the coast entirely at the approach of summer, and takes up its quarters in freshwater lakes for the purpose of breeding and rearing its young, it never resorts to any of our Highland Lochs, but seeks the more peaceful solitudes of Lapland, Finland, and Archangel, the nursery of the young of so many of our rarer birds; there it is that the old spend their summer, breed, shed their feathers, and assume a new livery of velvety black or brownish black, according to the sex. By the time this change is effected the young are able to fly, and have become sufficiently strong to leave their upland homes for the sea, and gradually proceed on their journey southward, until both the parents and their broods arrive, and again enliven our shores with their presence in autumn. In America, a similar movement takes place; for there, as with us, the Velvet Scoter, if it be really the same, frequents the temperate seas in winter, and retires northward to Newfoundland and Labrador in summer. Audubon, who found them breeding there, has given a minute description of their proceedings.

The above is a slight and general account of the habits and mode of life of the Velvet Scoter, respecting which, as seen with us, much has been written, but not, I believe, generally read; this remark, however, does not apply to the professed ornithologist; for he is perfectly acquainted with the bird, and therefore I cannot teach him anything.

St. John in his 'Tour in Sutherlandshire' says:—"The heavy but handsome Velvet Ducks ride quietly on the sea in small companies, at the distance of about two hundred yards from the shore, apparently keeping over some ridge of sand or other feeding-ground, down to which they are continually diving. These birds drift along with the tide, till it has carried them beyond the place where they feed; then they rise, and fly back for some distance, looking more like Blackcocks than Ducks; and dropping again into the water, they continue their diving till the tide has drifted them beyond the end of their feeding-ground; and this they do again and again."

For the following interesting note respecting this species, I am indebted to the kindness of Captain Elwes of the Scots Fusilier Guards:—"I find, on referring to my notes, that a male Velvet Scoter killed by me near Stromness on the 15th of April 1865, had the legs and toes pinkish magenta on the inner, and orange-red on their outer surface; the interdigital membranes slaty black; the eyes light bluish white; the colour of the bill is not described, as I was not at that time so particular respecting the colours of the soft parts. The bird is very common in Gutter Sound between the islands of Faray and Hoy, and is found there in flocks of from two or three to