

OIDEMIA NIGRA.

Scoter.

Anas nigra, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 196.

— *cinerascens*, Bechst. Naturg. Deut., vol. iv. p. 1025.

— *cinerea*, S. G. Gmel. Reis., tom. ii. p. 184.

— *atra*, Pall. Zoogr., tom. ii. p. 247, tab. 18.

Oidemia nigra, Flem. Brit. Anim., p. 119.

Fuligula nigra, Degl. Orn. Europ., tom. ii. p. 470.

It will not be necessary for my readers to be told that our earth is encircled by zones termed the frigid, the temperate, and the torrid. Every school-boy knows the principal features of the poles; but perhaps there are persons who are not aware that although the conditions of the Arctic and Antarctic circles are much alike, the bird-life of these opposite ends of the globe is very dissimilar, or that Guillemots, Puffins, Divers, and Ducks of peculiar types, and very numerous in species, inhabit the northern, while Penguins, Albatrosses, and Petrels, but no Ducks, or scarcely any, inhabit the ice-bound lands of the south. The bird whose history I am about to give pertains to the north, and belongs to one of the peculiar types of Ducks above alluded to—the genus *Oidemia*, all the known species of which, commonly termed Scoters, are strictly denizens of the icy regions. They are strikingly different in colour, and somewhat in structure, from every other form in the great family of the *Anatidæ*. That nature's general laws are sometimes infringed is evident from the peculiar coloration of the birds of this genus, which does not, as is generally the case, assimilate in any way with the objects surrounding them; for what can form a greater contrast than their jetty-black colour with the masses of snow and floating ice-mountains of the part of the ocean they inhabit, the borders of the inland rivers and lakes, or the tussocky parts of the marshes upon which they breed? The black colouring of the Scoters is most positive, and in the present species there is no indication whatever of a white mark on any part of its plumage.

When the rigours of winter induce the Scoter to leave the north and seek the more temperate latitudes and seas surrounding the British Islands, and those which wash the shores of Holland, France, and Spain, it may be seen in flocks of many hundreds; and in the winter season we can scarcely take a trip from Dover to Calais, or from Folkstone to Boulogne, without the vessel steaming through little knots of the Scoter, while, from the deck, strings of forty or more may frequently be seen passing to and fro between one part of their feeding-grounds and another; how useless, therefore, would it be to enumerate the particular localities in which this bird has been shot. When a solitary individual leaves the seas for our inland waters, or ascends the Thames and other rivers far above the tide-way, we may be sure that it is incited to do so by some unwonted cause, perhaps from sickness or an internal injury; this remark, however, does not apply to the small companies which are said now and then to visit the great lakes of Cumberland, Westmoreland, &c. Saline lakes are more in unison with their habits and mode of life than fresh waters; for mollusks, shrimps, and other Crustaceans are as plentiful on their sandy bottoms as on the bed of the sea. The kind of animals mentioned form the principal food of the Scoter; which, being a marine bird, is supposed to partake of the nature of fish, and is therefore eaten in France and Spain during Lent and on fast-days. Before parting from our friends across the straits, let me append a published account of the mode employed in killing this bird. If it be true (and Mr. Yarrell appears not to have doubted it), it at least shows how plentiful the Scoter must be on the shores of the Mediterranean: it also tends to enlighten us as to the vast amount of bird-life in the North during the short summer months; for be it recollected that the vast flocks which winter in our seas and in the Mediterranean return to the northern parts of the Old World at this time. But to the *battue*!

"I am indebted," says Mr. Yarrell, "to H. L. Long, Esq., of Hampton Lodge, Farnham, for a copy of a French account, by M. Hugo, of the mode in which many of these birds are obtained upon the various salt lakes in the vicinity of Martigues, at the mouth of the Rhone. These numerous salt lakes are frequented in winter by large flocks of aquatic birds. With the first appearance of frost the Scoters and other Ducks arrive in numerous small flocks, and a destructive sort of *battue* takes place, in which all who can are induced to participate with great eagerness. About Christmas, when the Scoters have made their appearance, printed bills are posted at Marseilles, Aix, and all the principal towns in the vicinity, stating the intended order of attack upon the birds, and the day and hour at which it is to take place. The mayors of two or three of the principal places make the necessary arrangements. On the eve of the day fixed upon, all the shooters are divided into parties, and each has a boat, a pilot, and a commander