

Islands in May, soon after which the females begin to prepare their nests, and usually commence laying about the twentieth of that month. As soon as this takes place and incubation commences, the males leave the females and again spread themselves along the shore in companies of four or five together." Brännich, who wrote an express treatise on the Eider Duck, informs us that their first object after pairing is to procure a suitable place for their nest, preferring the shelter of a juniper bush, where it can be had; where there is no juniper, they content themselves with tufts of sea-grass, bundles of sea-weed cast up by the tide, the crevices of rocks, or any hollow place they can find. Some of the Iceland proprietors of breeding-grounds, in order to accommodate them, cut out holes in rows on the smooth sloping banks where they would not otherwise build, but gladly take possession of them when scooped out to hand. It is not a little remarkable that, like several other sea-birds, they almost always select small islands, their nests being seldom, if ever, found on the shores of the mainland or even on a large island. The Icelanders are so well aware of this that they have expended a great deal of labour in actually forming islands, by separating from the main island certain promontories joined to it by narrow isthmuses. The reason of this preference for islands seems to be security from the intrusion of dogs, cattle, and other land animals, to whose vicinity they have so great an aversion that the Icelanders are careful to remove these as well as cats from their settlement.

"Both sexes work in concert in building their nest, laying a rather coarse foundation of drift grass, dry tangle, and sea-weed. Upon this rough mattress the female spreads a bed of the finest down plucked from her own breast and by no means sparingly, but heaping it up so as to form a thick roll quite round the nest. When she is necessitated to go in quest of food after beginning to sit, she carefully turns this roll of down over the eggs to keep them warm till her return. It is worthy of remark that though the Eider Duck lays only five or six eggs, it is not uncommon to find ten or more in the same nest, occupied by two females who live together in perfect concord. The quantity of down in each nest is said by Von Troil to be about half a pound, which by cleaning, is reduced by one-half. Its extraordinary elasticity appears from the fact that three quarters of an ounce will fill a large hat; and Pontoppidan says that two or three pounds of it, though pressed into a ball which may be held in the hand, upon being allowed to expand, will fill the covering of a large bed. It is worthy of notice, however, that it is only the down taken from the nests which has this great elasticity; for what is taken from the dead birds is said to be far from as light as that the female plucks to form a bed for its young. It is on this account that it is prohibited by the laws of Norway to kill the Eiders for their down."—*Rennie's edit. of Montagu's Orn. Dict.*

"The food of the Eider," says Macgillivray, "consists of bivalve mollusca, which it obtains by diving, as well as of crustacea, fishes, and the roe of both. I am not aware of its ever feeding upon vegetables in its natural state; and yet when domesticated it has been found readily to eat grain. This remarkable facility of transition from an animal to a vegetable food appears to be very common in this family of birds, and is said to produce a corresponding change in their flesh as an article of food. That of the Eider, under its common regimen, is, I think, fully as palatable as the flesh of the Mallard. The flight of this bird is direct, steady, and moderately rapid, being performed by continuous quick beats of the wings, generally low over the water. It swims well, sitting lightly, although from the flatness of its body it seems to sink considerably, and on diving is capable of remaining a considerable time under water."

I agree with Audubon in believing that if this bird were domesticated it would prove a valuable acquisition, both on account of its feathers and down and its flesh as an article of food; and that this would not be a matter of difficulty is certain, since the thirteenth Earl of Derby and Mr. Selby both succeeded in rearing young birds from the egg, which lived for more than a year; and two males and a female are at this moment (April 1870) living in the Gardens of the Zoological Society in the Regent's Park, which have become so tame that they readily advance towards any stranger and take pieces of biscuit or other food from his hand. This is the more surprising when we consider how different must be the garden enclosures from the stormy seas and the supply of marine animals there obtained; it shows how readily the bird accommodates itself to the situation in which it may be placed.

The accompanying Plate will furnish a better idea of the differences in the colouring of the sexes than any verbal description however minute. As is the case with the generality of the Ducks, the male is not always so beautifully adorned as there represented; for not only do the feathers of the head give place after the pairing-season to others of a different hue, but by the time the female has hatched her eggs, a total change also occurs in the plumage of the body, and during the months of autumn the two sexes are very much alike.

I cannot conclude my account of the Eider without recording my obligations to C. Montfort, Esq., of Worthing, for the loan of the very fine examples killed by him in the Orkneys.

The front figure in the Plate represents a male about four-fifths the natural size; the reduced ones in the distance show the difference in the colouring of the sexes.