

## SOMATERIA MOLLISSIMA.

### Eider Duck.

*Anas mollissima*, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 41.

— *Cuthberti*, Pall. Zoogr. Ross.-Asiat., tom. ii. p. 235.

*Anser lanuginosus*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 37.

*Somateria mollissima*, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 564.

— *St. Cuthberti*, Eyton, Hist. of the Rarer Brit. Birds, p. 58.

*Fuligula mollissima*, Bonap. Syn. Birds of Unit. States, p. 388.

THE Eider Duck has especial claims to our notice, first, because it is really a fine bird, and, secondly, on account of the important part it plays in commerce. Its range over the globe is somewhat extensive, since it frequents alike the continents of Europe, Asia, and America, its principal places of resort being a few degrees within and without the arctic circle. Thus it is plentiful in the northern parts of Britain and along the shores of Norway, Sweden, Lapland, Denmark, Iceland, Spitzbergen, Greenland, Nova Zembla, and other places in the same degree of latitude. It is strictly oceanic in its habits, always evincing a preference for small islands gradually sloping towards the sea, and rarely visiting the mainlands. Under ordinary circumstances the Eider is most difficult of approach; but in the breeding-season its usual shyness is thrown off, and, like the Rook and the Woodpigeon, it courts our protection and friendship; patiently and without evincing any displeasure does the female then allow her nest to be robbed of the beautiful down she has plucked from her own breast to form a warm covering for her eggs; again and again will she permit the toll to be taken, seemingly desirous alone of being allowed to remain on the selected site and bring forth her young. Few of those who feel the comfortable warmth of an Eider-down coverlet ever give a thought to the bird which affords the material of which it is composed—a material so wonderfully elastic that the entire contents of the quilt may be compressed into the closed hand. Yet it is this down which renders the bird so valuable and which contributes so largely to the revenue of the proprietors of the islands whereon the bird breeds, some idea of the extent of which may be obtained from Mr. C. W. Shepherd's account of a visit to the north-western peninsula of Iceland, where it is stated that Vigz, a small island three quarters of a mile wide, is tenanted almost exclusively by Eider Ducks, which the widow whose property it is makes her sole care.

“On the coast was a wall built of large stones, just above the high-water level, about three feet in height, and of considerable thickness. At the bottom, on both sides of it, alternate stones had been left out, so as to form a series of square compartments for the ducks to make their nests in. Almost every compartment was occupied; and as we walked along the shore a long line of ducks flew out.

“The farmhouse itself was a great marvel. The earthen walls that surrounded it, and the window-embrasures were occupied by ducks; on the ground the house was fringed with ducks; on the turf slopes of the roof we could see ducks; and a duck sat in the scraper.”

The yield of down is about 100 lb. per annum, worth from twelve to fifteen shillings per pound.

“In Mr. Crowe's Consular Report from Iceland, recently issued by the Foreign Office, it is stated that the Eider Duck is found in great numbers on the coast of that island. Early in July it lands on the numerous small islets or holms in the bays and fiords, where it lays its eggs after lining its nest with down plucked from its own body. As the bird is protected from molestation by severe laws, it has become tame, and always repairs to the same spot to hatch its young. As soon as the eggs are laid, the owners of the hatching-grounds rob the nests of the down and a part of the eggs, both which the poor bird replaces a second and a third time, when she is left to complete the process of incubation, but with her body completely denuded of down. This method of procuring it is had recourse to because the down of the dead bird loses its elasticity, and is of comparatively little value. The hen bird gives eight to nine ounces of down to a nest; but when cleansed, this weight is diminished by half. The value of the uncleaned down is about 8s. a pound, and the cleaned down about 19s. the pound. The annual produce is about 6000 pounds weight of down, valued at about £5000. Sometimes one little holm will give its owner an annual income of £150; and such is the care taken of these useful birds, that during the hatching-season no guns are allowed to be fired in their vicinity; and foreign vessels arriving are forbidden to fire salutes, for the same reason.”—*Land and Water*, Feb. 1867.

The Eider Ducks pair some time in March; and “about April,” says Mr. Selby, “they are seen assembling in small groups along the Northumbrian shores, from whence they cross over to the Fern