

MARECA PENELOPE.

Widgeon.

Anas penelope, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 44.

— *fistularis*, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 391, tab. xxxv. fig. 1.

— *Wigeon*, Vieill. Ency. Méth., Orn., part i. p. 129.

Mareca penelope, Selb. Ill. Brit. Orn., vol. ii. p. 324.

— *fistularis*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 131, pl. 50.

THE Widgeon is a compact and trim little duck, whose structure is equally well adapted for walking on the land and for swimming on the water. Its weight is about two pounds, though some examples may be a trifle more and others a little less. As an esculent it is sometimes remarkably good, particularly when rich and succulent grasses have formed a part of its diet. Unlike the Mallard and Shoveller, which feed in soft and oozy places, or the Scaup, which gathers mollusks from the bottom, the Widgeon wanders over marshes and nibbles the grasses and other plants which there abound, much after the manner of the goose. Even a cursory examination of the peculiar formation of its bill, its feet, and legs will be sufficient to show that they are admirably adapted for such a mode of feeding; and as regards flight, few ducks are better furnished with the means of progression through the air. In disposition it is less shy than its congeners; and from the vast numbers which frequent our eastern and southern coasts during the months of autumn and winter, it affords an abundance of amusement to the sportsman and gunner at those seasons of the year. In all parts of England the Widgeon must be regarded as a winter visitant; but in Scotland a few remain during the summer and breed. That some Widgeons arrive on the south coast of England from their northern breeding-quarters as early as the month of September I can affirm, since, while on a visit to A. J. B. Beresford Hope, Esq., at Bedgebury Park, Kent, the keeper brought in, on the 28th of that month, as nondescript birds, two which he had just shot, and which proved to be young Widgeons of the year. It is generally stated that the bird does not breed in this country; but that it will occasionally do so in partial confinement is evident from the following note, kindly communicated to me by the Rev. John Fountaine, of Southam, in Norfolk:—"A pair of Widgeons I have had pinioned in my decoy for five or six years have bred this season (1864) and reared their young ones, which I have had plenty of opportunities of watching since they were very small up to the present time, when they are able to fly. This I believe to be an unprecedented occurrence; for I never knew of an instance of the Widgeon breeding in this country, either in a wild or tame state." Granting that the main body of the Widgeons that winter here go northward to breed in March or April, it becomes necessary to state into what countries they proceed for that purpose. According to Mr. Wolley and Mr. Wheelwright it breeds abundantly in Lapland, being one of the most numerous of the birds of that country; and Mr. Proctor informed Mr. Yarrell that a few breed in Iceland, forming their nests generally among low bushes near the edge of the fresh waters. Generally speaking the Widgeon frequents, at one season or the other, the whole of the northern and temperate regions of the Old World, from Iceland in the west to Japan in the east. In Finland it is especially common during summer, as it doubtless is in all the northern portions of the countries within the limits I have mentioned. In China, in India, and in Southern Europe it also occurs during summer as numerously as with us. Loche states that it is found in all the three provinces of Algeria; and Dr. Baird that it is an accidental visitor to the Atlantic coast of the United States of America. On examining a number of male examples, differences in their plumage may be observed not unworthy the attention of the ornithologist, some having the whole of the shoulder or upper half of the wing white, while in others the same part is mottled with brown. This difference was pointed out to me, in the first instance, by Mr. Fountaine, coupled with the remark that the whiteness of the shoulder shows very conspicuously when the bird is swimming; I consider that the examples thus distinguished are the older birds. The females are more uniform or browner, as may be seen in the accompanying plate.

Speaking of the birds inhabiting Sutherland, Mr. Selby says:—"As the Widgeon had not previously been detected breeding in Britain, we were much pleased to see several pairs upon the smaller lochs near Lairg, which, we concluded, had their nests among the reeds and other herbage which grew in their vicinity. We were not so fortunate as to find one here; but afterwards, upon one of the islands of Loch Laighal, we sprung a female, which was shot from her nest containing seven eggs. It was placed in the heart of a large rush-bush, and was made of decayed rushes and reeds, with a lining of warm down from the bird's body. The eggs were smaller than those of the Wild Duck, and of a rich cream-white colour." Sir William