

## LITTLE GREBE, OR DABCHICK.

*Podiceps minor, Linn.*

Le Grêbe custagneux.

THE changes in plumage which even a bird so common as the Dabchick undergoes, have been until lately so little understood as to have produced for a single species a double nomenclature. It is now, however, known that the black-chinned Grebe of older authors, and by them supposed to be a distinct species, is the *Podiceps minor* in its summer plumage. In this state, as well as in that which it assumes in winter, we have introduced it in our Plate.

To this little bird, as to its congeners, the water is the native and familiar element. Extensively spread over Europe, except as we approach the more northern regions, it may be seen busily traversing the surface of inland waters, or dipping and diving in pursuit of its food; still it is shy, and distrustful of man, disliking his presence, and avoiding his prying curiosity by retreating at his approach to its reedy covert; or, if this be impracticable, diving among floating weeds and water-lilies, where, with its bill alone above the surface, for the purpose of breathing, it will remain patiently watching till the danger be past, when it will cautiously emerge and seek its wonted haunt.

At ease and alert as is the Dabchick on the waters, it exhibits on *terra firma* a complete contrast, waddling along in an awkward and constrained manner, and glad to escape to its congenial element again. Its powers of flight are also inconsiderable; unless, indeed, it rises to a certain elevation, when, notwithstanding the shortness of the wings and absence of tail, it can sustain a long and rapid excursion.

The young when just excluded are in the perfect possession of all those powers which especially tend to their preservation. While yet covered with down, and perfectly incapable of flight, they may be seen, in company with the parent birds, swimming and diving, either in the exuberance of animal enjoyment, or in pursuit of food: hence the legs and beak, which in most birds are long in acquiring their full development, outstrip in the present instance the acquisition of the powers of wing, this latter endowment being less immediately and intimately connected with their preservation and the manner of obtaining subsistence.

In winter, while in its brown plumage, the Dabchick gives the preference to broad extensive waters, lakes or rivers, associating together in small numbers during the season of clouds and storms, and on the approach of spring separating by pairs in different directions over the country in search of a more secluded and congenial breeding-place; often taking up their abode in small ponds close to the habitation of man.

Should the lover of nature watch them at the time of their building without being discovered, (an attainment of the utmost difficulty, as every sense seems alive to danger and gives notice of intrusion,) he will be delighted to mark their playfulness and agility, while the tone of happiness and enjoyment which pervades their actions and their mutual labours, throws an additional charm over the picture.

The nest of this bird is composed of a mass of green plants, loosely interwoven, which floats on the water. In this the female deposits her eggs to the number of four or five, the original whiteness of which becomes discoloured, apparently from the juices of the plants in contact with them, and the wet feet of the parent birds.

The female Dabchick, at least under certain circumstances, (as the author has often personally witnessed,) is undoubtedly in the habit of covering her eggs on leaving the nest; and he has watched while this action has been performed: it is effected in a rapid and hurried manner, by pulling over them portions of the surrounding herbage.

In the summer plumage the beak is blackish; tip, base, and naked skin which extends to the eye, yellowish-white; eyes reddish; crown of the head, back of the neck, and chin, of a brownish black with green reflections; sides and front of the neck of a lively chestnut; the whole of the upper surface together with the sides and wings blackish with olive reflections; the thighs and rump tinged with ferruginous; the under surface more or less silvery; legs and feet dark olive-green, without assuming a flesh-colour on the inner surface.

In winter the colour of the plumage differs little from that of the birds of the first year, which consists of a uniform brown above and more or less silvery beneath; the two sexes having little external distinction either in winter or summer.

The total length nine inches.