

THE SWANS, GEESE AND DUCKS

of the British Isles

By PETER SCOTT

Part Four

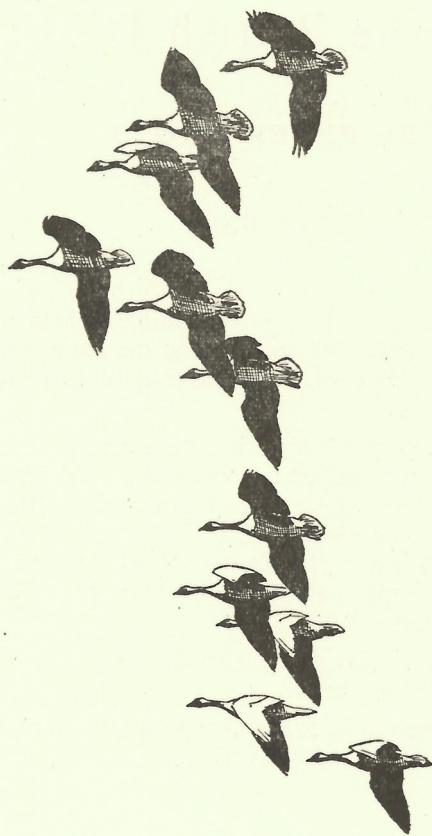
The first three parts are contained in the Third, Fourth and Fifth Annual Reports. This final part deals with the Scoters, the remaining Sea Ducks and the Mergansers. At a later date it is proposed to publish the four parts in book form—for handy reference.

In presenting the very short life histories, the author wishes to acknowledge the following sources of information : *Handbook of British Birds* ; Witherby, Ticehurst and Tucker, 1939. *Check List of Birds of the World* ; J. L. Peters, 1931. *Natural History of the Ducks* ; J. C. Phillips, 1922. *Grønlands Fugle* ; F. Salomonsen, 1950. *British Diving Ducks* ; J. G. Millais, 1913. *Records of Birds Bred in Captivity* ; Emilius Hopkinson, 1926. *Waterfowl and Game Birds in Captivity* ; A. F. Moody, 1934.

He also wishes to express his grateful thanks to Hugh Boyd for the work he has done on the text of the book.

The original oil paintings (30 in. × 20 in.) reproduced here have been presented to the Trust and are for sale in aid of the funds.





THE SWANS, GEESE AND DUCKS

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PLATE XII. (SCOTERS)

COMMON SCOTER *Melanitta nigra nigra* (L)

[American Scoter *M. n. americana* which breeds in north-eastern Asia, Aleutian Islands and northern North America, differs in colour of bill (largely brilliant yellow in adult male, female with small yellow patch) and has nail more sharply hooked downward.]

Breeds in Scotland, Ireland, Iceland, northern Europe from Norway east to the Taimyr Peninsula in N. Siberia. Not recorded as breeding in Scotland until 1855, but probably overlooked earlier ; has expanded its regular breeding ground during this century, though numbers still small. Only one regular Irish breeding place. Flocks of non-breeding birds may be found throughout summer off coasts of Scotland and Wales.

Nests close to fresh water on shores of lakes or islands. 5-10 eggs, most often 6-7, first half of June in Britain and Iceland, later farther east. Incubation 27-28 days (artificially brooded). Has not bred in captivity, the species being difficult to keep.

Outside breeding-season a marine species, wintering on western coasts of Europe south to Rio de Oro (N.W. Africa) occurring casually inland and on the shores of the Mediterranean, Black and Caspian Seas. Common on south and east coasts of Britain in winter, less plentiful in north-west and much of west coast, scarce in southern Ireland.

Food : mainly animal, especially molluscs, also crustaceans and (on fresh water in summer) insects and worms. Some water plants eaten in summer.

Voice : female a hoarse 'hurr' resembling that of other diving ducks. Male several types of utterance, including a low polysyllabic piping call, a double 'tuk-tuk,' and a prolonged rattling, perhaps derived from the double call.

Identification : Adult male wholly glossy black, except for an orange-yellow patch between and around the nostrils, and extending on to knob at base of bill. Females and immature males dark brown, with whitish-brown cheeks and throat, bill greenish-black. Females resemble those of Red-crested Pochard but darker, bill shorter and more upturned, cheeks in greater contrast with breast and flanks. Wings in both sexes uniform shades of brown, without bars. No true 'eclipse' plumage, males merely becoming duller with flanks browner.

VELVET SCOTER *Melanitta fusca fusca* (L)

[*M. f. stejnegeri*, breeding in eastern Asia from the Altai to Anadyr, Kamchatka and the Commander Islands, *M. f. dixonii*, breeding in Western Alaska, and *M. f. deglandi*, of north-western Canada, south to North Dakota, differ from the typical race in the size and colouring of the bill, more markedly in the males.]

Breeds in Scandinavia and the Baltic countries, eastward to Transcaucasia and the Yenisei. Suspected, but not proved, to have bred in Scotland on several occasions.

On Baltic islands nests in cover of bushes or under a tree, in north on tundra. 5-8 eggs (up to 14 recorded), late May in south-west of range, mid-June farther north. Has never bred in captivity, and is evidently difficult to keep in good health.

Winters on coasts of Europe south to Portugal and east to Black and Caspian Seas. Regular on east and south-east coasts of Britain and off N.W. England, though not in large numbers, scarce elsewhere in west and south-west, rare Ireland.

Food : in winter almost entirely marine molluscs and crustaceans, in breeding-season some aquatic plants as well as fresh-water animals.

Voice : very silent. Male a double whistling 'whurr' and a low-pitched purring note. Female harsh 'kerr,' usually double.

Identification : resembles Common Scoter, but with white patch on wing, conspicuous in flight or when birds flap wings on water, although usually hidden when at rest. At close range white mark under eye and yellow or orange side of bill help to distinguish male. Immatures and females have two whitish patches on face in front of and behind eye, especially pronounced in immatures, bill dusky.

SURF SCOTER *Melanitta perspicillata* (L)

[No subspecies.] Breeds in northern North America, principally west of Hudson Bay, and central Labrador.

Nests on dry ground near fresh water, site usually well concealed. 5-9 eggs early June to early July. Incubation period not recorded. Has not been kept in captivity.

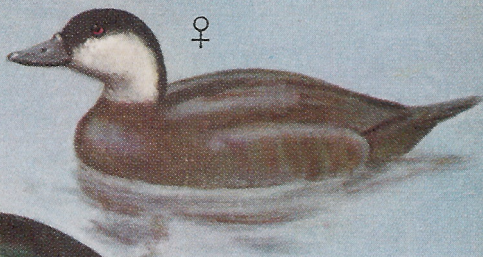
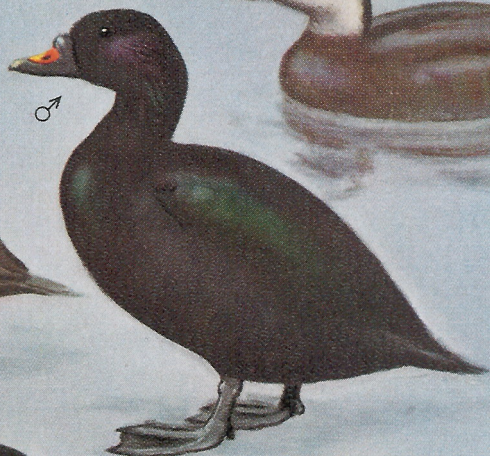
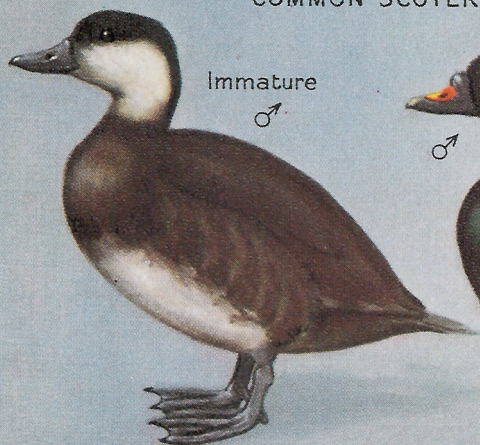
Winters on coasts from Alaska to California and Nova Scotia to South Carolina ; also on Great Lakes. Casual visitor to Greenland, western Europe and Atlantic islands. British records mainly from Orkneys and Shetlands.

Food : predominantly animal, molluscs 60% (especially mussels), crustaceans 10%, insects (in summer), echinoderms and fish spawn. Wide variety of plants taken, but quantities small.

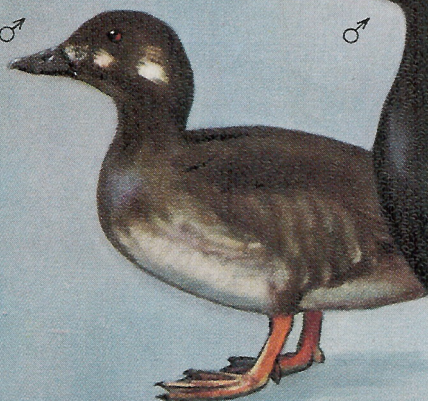
Voice : A very silent bird. Female utters a rough guttural 'hrraah.' Male has an explosive but liquid 'puh-puh.'

Identification : females and immature males brown with two whitish patches on side of head, like Velvet Scoter, but lacks white on wings (dividing line between face patches sometimes almost absent in immatures). Some females have whitish patch on nape. Adult males black with white patches on forehead and nape and bright yellow bill, with red at base of upper mandible and white patches proximally on sides. Bill very large and high, giving an Eider-like profile distinct from that of other Scoters.

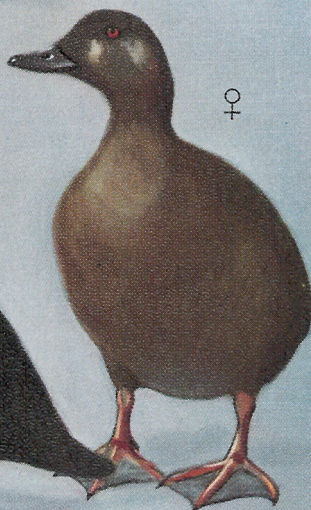
COMMON SCOTER



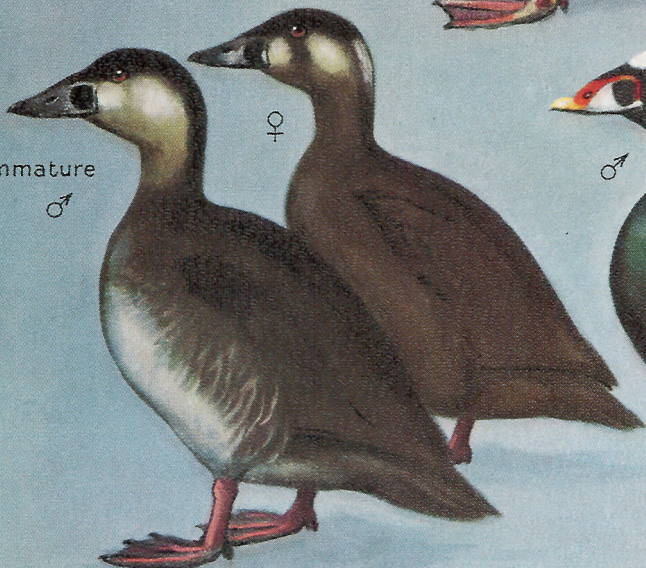
immature



VELVET SCOTER



immature



SURF SCOTER

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1954

PLATE XIII. (SEA DUCKS)

HARLEQUIN DUCK *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus* (L)

[Western Harlequin Duck *H. h. pacificus*, breeding in north-western North America and north-eastern Asia very closely resembles the typical form, but is larger and has a larger bill, higher at the base and usually broader, although females cannot always be distinguished.]

Breeds in Iceland, Greenland, N.E. Canada, Labrador and Newfoundland.

Nests in rock-crevices or in scrub or bushes, close to fast-flowing streams or rivers. Tends to form small colonies, several pairs nesting close together. Usually 6 or 7 eggs (5–10 recorded), June, occasionally late May. Incubation period uncertain, 31–32 days for eggs hatched artificially, probably several days less under natural conditions. Has not bred in captivity, and is difficult to keep.

Iceland birds are resident, remaining off coasts in winter, North American birds move southwards to the rocky coasts and offshore islands of the maritime provinces. Stragglers have been found in many European countries. There are six English and two Scottish records.

Food : almost entirely animal, mainly crustaceans and molluscs, including *Chiton*, rare as a food for all other ducks, also insects, echinoderms and fishes. Vegetable matter found in stomachs probably taken incidentally, if not accidentally.

Voice : Apparently a rather silent bird. Calls of male include a low, piping whistle, a hoarse 'heh-heh,' and a squeak. Female has a low, harsh croak, 'eh-eh-eh-eh' and both sexes use a two-syllabled note 'gi-eh' in the breeding season.

Identification : markings of drake very distinct, notably the white streaks on neck, breast, and back, and the chestnut flanks. Duck may be confused with young Long-tailed, though it has two light spots in front of the eye and a round spot behind it and is uniform dull brown. Buoyant manner of swimming is characteristic.

LONG-TAILED DUCK *Clangula hyemalis* (L)

[No subspecies.] Of circumpolar distribution, breeding in Europe in Iceland, Bear Island, Spitzbergen, northern Norway, Sweden and Finland and North Russia, in Siberia and across North America from the Aleutian Islands and Alaska to Labrador and Greenland. A few British breeding records.

Nests in hollow on ground on islands and shores of lakes and on tundra, in willow-scrub or among rocks. 6–8 eggs (5–17 recorded, larger numbers probably due to two females), from late May to end of June. Incubation about 24 days. Has not bred in captivity, though young have been reared from wild-taken eggs.

European birds winter on coasts of Iceland, Britain, Faeroes, Scandinavia, Northern France, Holland, Belgium and the Black Sea, and casually in many other parts of Europe. In Europe (though not America) essentially a sea duck, found only occasionally inland in winter. Common off the east coasts of Scotland and England October–May, scarcer west coasts, very common Orkneys and Shetlands. Individuals sometimes remain through the summer and breeding has been reported in Shetlands and Orkneys on several occasions.

Food of adults largely animal of great variety, especially crustaceans, also molluscs, insects and fish, often obtained by deep diving, to 15 fathoms or more. Vegetable matter taken includes grain, algae, roots of aquatic plants. Young also feed largely on crustaceans (insects forming only a small part of the diet in some areas), though many other kinds of food, both animal and vegetable, have been found in stomachs.

Voice : Calls of male, frequently heard and uttered both on water and in flight, are loud, resonant and unusually musical, 'Aa-aardelow.' Female has a low single-syllabled 'ved,' infrequently heard.

Identification : the sequence of moults in this species is exceptionally complicated so that birds in a great variety of plumages may be seen, but at all seasons the shape of the head and the short bill are characteristic in both sexes and the very long pointed tail of the male is also distinctive except during the short eclipse period. The male plumages are always boldly dark brown and white, the female browner. Winter females and immatures have a pale 'washed-out' appearance. The wings of both sexes are blackish, the drake in winter plumage having two broad white streaks on the scapulars.

GOLDENEYE *Bucephala clangula clangula* (L)

[American Goldeneye *B. c. americana*, breeding in Alaska and across Canada from coast to coast, is not distinguishable in the field. Adult males of American race larger, females may be larger.]

Breeds in northern Scandinavia, the Baltic States, Germany, Yugoslavia, N. Bulgaria and Russia, across Asia to Kamtschatka and N.W. Mongolia, southern limits Kirghiz Steppes and Altai. Only two definite records of breeding in Britain (Cheshire 1931, 1932).

Nests in holes in trees on shores of rivers and lakes, occasionally in burrows. Takes readily to nesting-boxes, now provided on a large scale in Sweden and Finland. 6-15 eggs (usually 8-12), from mid-April in south of breeding range but not till June in north. Incubation 26-30 days. Believed to have bred only once or twice in captivity.

European birds winter in south of breeding range and south and west to France, northern Mediterranean and Black Sea. Passage-migrant and winter-visitor in Britain, widely distributed, though not usually in large numbers, on coasts, estuaries and inland waters. Frequently seen in summer also, but does not breed (except as noted above).

Food : very largely animal, principally molluscs, crustaceans and insects. Worms, leeches and small fish also recorded. Vegetable matter usually algae.

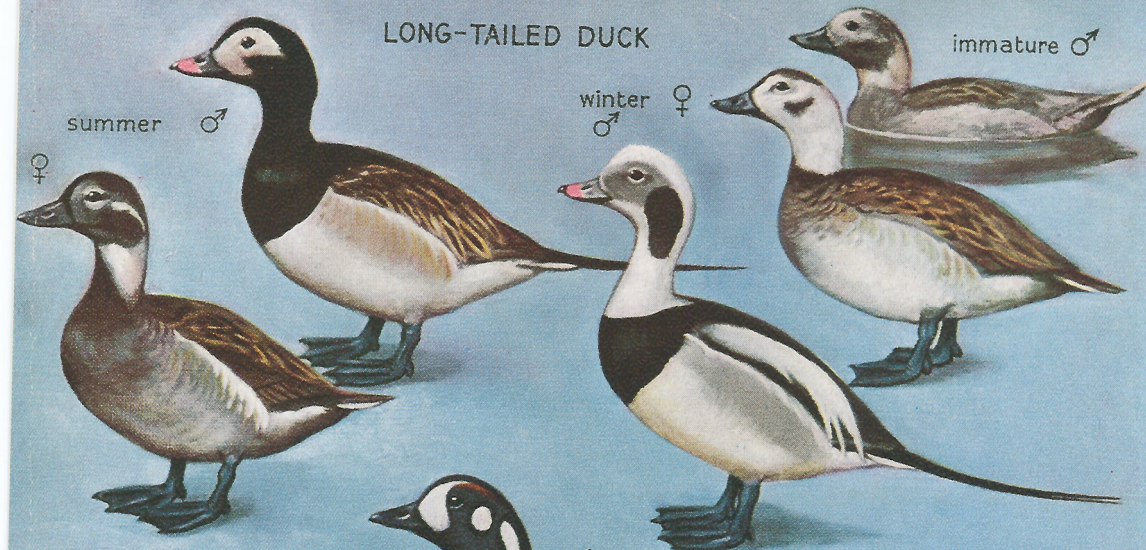
Voice : little heard. Male has a harsh but quiet double note used in display and female a hoarse note similar to that of other diving ducks.

Identification : on the water bold black-and-white pattern and high-crowned appearance make male very distinctive. Brown-headed females and immatures may also be recognised by the shape of the head and the short bill. In flight black wings with a broad white patch on inner half extending nearly to leading edge are a striking feature of both sexes. Wings whistle loudly in flight.

BUFFLEHEAD *Bucephala albeola* (L)

[No subspecies.] Breeds in northern North America, in Alaska, Yukon, British Columbia and south to Montana in the west, across Canada from the Mackenzie River and the shore of Hudson's Bay south to the Great Lakes in the east.

LONG-TAILED DUCK

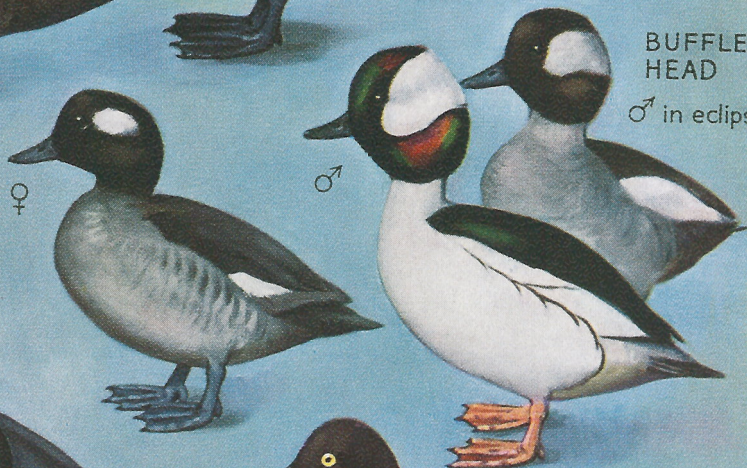


HARLEQUIN DUCK



BUFFLE-HEAD

♂ in eclipse



GOLDENEYE



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1954

PLATE XIV. (MERGANSERS)

SMEW *Mergus albellus* (L)

[No subspecies.] In Europe breeds only in north of Norway, Sweden and Finland, across north of Russia to Siberia, south to the Volga, Turkestan and the Amur.

Nests in holes in trees (or nesting-boxes where available), close to freshwater lakes or backwaters of large rivers. 6-9 eggs (5-14 recorded), late May and June. Incubation period about 28 days, but not yet reliably recorded. Believed to have bred only once in captivity.

European birds move south in winter as far as Mediterranean and Black Seas. Found on reservoirs, lakes and estuaries in southern England in small numbers September to May, infrequent northern England, Wales, scarce Scotland and Ireland.

Food : very largely animal, chiefly fish, of many species. Also crustaceans, molluscs, insects and frogs. Grass and other vegetable matter has been found in stomachs.

Voice : A rather silent bird. Male has a short hissing whistle and a prolonged grunt. Female a hoarse 'harr-r,' like other sawbills.

Identification : smallest species in this group. Adult male very conspicuous, largely pure white with black patch on face and black band on back of head. In flight much more pied, wings being black with white patch on coverts. Adult female also distinctive, with red-brown crown and nape and white cheeks. Young birds resemble female and males in eclipse are similar, but blacker on the back and with more white in wing.

GOOSANDER *Mergus merganser merganser* (L)

[Asiatic Goosander *M. m. orientalis* (breeding Afghanistan, Turkestan, Altai, Tibet) is smaller, with a shorter bill ; in American Merganser *M. m. americanus* (breeding in North America south of line from south-eastern Alaska to James Bay) female and young have back and flanks greyer, male has thin black wing bar and bill less hooked than in typical form.]

Breeds in Europe and Asia from Iceland, British Isles (Scotland and northern England) and Switzerland in the west through Scandinavia, Germany, Balkans and Russia east to Kamchatka and the Kurile and Commander Islands.

When trees are available most common nesting site is in hollow tree, otherwise in holes in banks or amongst boulders, makes use of nesting boxes where provided. Nests usually close to fresh water, sites often used year after year. 7-13 eggs (up to 19 recorded), from April in south of range to late June in north. Incubation 32-35 days. Not recorded breeding in captivity.

Winters south to Mediterranean, Black, Caspian and Aral Seas. Found in Britain in winter on estuaries and larger inland waters, scarcer in south-west England, Wales, Ireland, Outer Hebrides, infrequent Orkneys and Shetlands.

Food : entirely animal, principally fish, of many kinds, usually small but up to 12 in. long recorded. Supposed to interfere with sporting fishing and much persecuted on that account. Other food crustaceans, insects, worms and frogs.

♀

SMEW

♂

♂ in eclipse

♀

♂

HOODED
MERGANSER

♂ in eclipse

♂ in eclipse

♀

♂

RED-BREASTED
MERGANSER

♂ in eclipse

♂

♀

GOOSANDER

Peter Scott
1954



Voice : male reputed silent except in display, when uses a soft crooning call. 'croo-croo-croo' becoming more metallic in excitement and forming ascending sequences. Female has a hoarse 'harr-r.'

Identification : the largest of the 'sawbills,' of characteristic shape, only liable to be confused with Red-breasted Merganser, which is smaller, slimmer and rarely seen inland except in breeding season. Bill of male is hooked, the breast and sides are white, more or less suffused with yellowish-pink, and there is no distinct crest. The female and juveniles have blue-grey backs (not brownish-grey as in the Red-breasted Merganser), the chestnut of the head is sharply demarcated at the neck instead of merging into the white throat patch. In flight more white in wings of both sexes than in the smaller species.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER *Mergus serrator serrator* (L)

[Greenland Red-breasted Merganser *M. s. schioleri* is very similar but has a longer wing and a broader, stronger bill.]

Breeds in British Isles (Scotland and Ireland), Iceland, Faeroes, northern Europe south to North Germany, Poland and America, eastwards across northern Asia and North America.

Nests on ground, in shelter of scrub or boulders or in shallow burrow, on islands in sea-lochs as well as by inland lakes and rivers. 7-12 eggs usual (up to 19 recorded), late May or early June. Incubation 29 days. Has bred in captivity.

Some European birds are resident, others move south for winter as far as Mediterranean and Black Seas. Occurs on most coasts of Britain as passage-migrant or winter-visitor though rarely abundant and infrequent inland.

Food : entirely animal, principally fish. Like the Goosander persecuted by man for this reason. Also crustaceans, and a few worms and insects.

Voice : usually silent, except in display or alarm. Male calls include a loud rough 'da-ah,' a low rattling sound and a soft cooing note. Female a hoarse 'harr' like Goosander's and a harsh 'quark' when disturbed.

Identification : resembles the Goosander but smaller and slimmer. Adult male readily distinguishable by brown breast and much less white on sides, with pronounced erect crest, divided into two. Adult female has brownish-grey back, brown of head shading off gradually into dingy white neck and usually more prominent crest than in Goosander. Males in eclipse and juveniles resemble females but have shorter, less conspicuous crest.

HOODED MERGANSER *Mergus cucullatus* (L)

[No subspecies.] A North American species, breeding from north of British Columbia through south central Canada to New Brunswick and eastern and south-eastern United States.

Found only in wooded areas with ponds and streams, nesting in holes in trees, close to water where possible. Usually 10-12 eggs (6-18 recorded), late April to early June, varying with latitude. Incubation period said to be 31 days, but this requires confirmation. Has not bred in captivity.

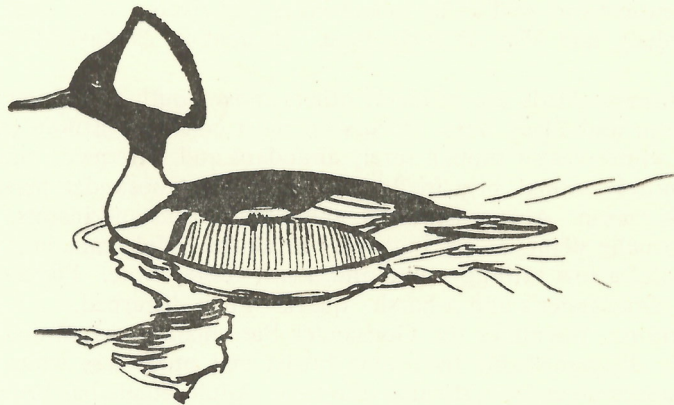
Winters chiefly in southern states of U.S., but also Great Lakes, remaining as far north as open water can be found. Accidental in Bermuda, Alaska and western Europe. Four fully-authenticated British records (three Ireland, one Wales), at least nine others less certainly established.

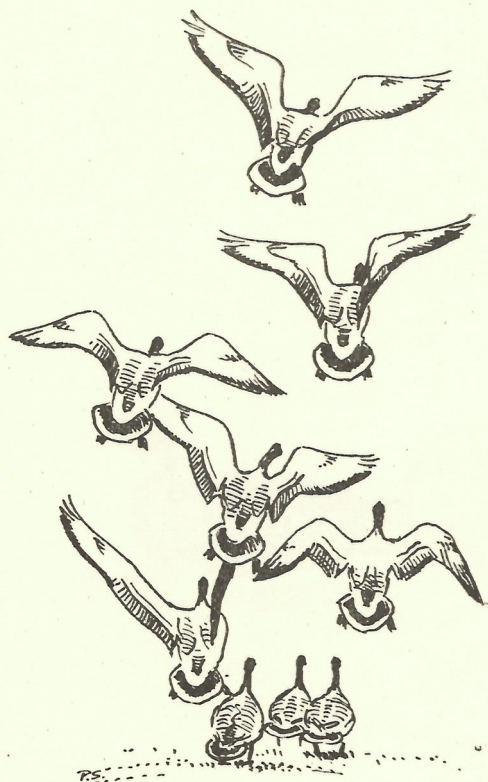
Food : mainly animal, including insects, small fish, crustaceans, molluscs and

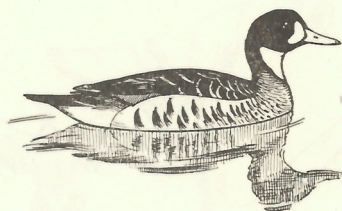
amphibia. Fish less important than in diet of other sawbills. Some vegetable food : seeds, grasses and aquatic plants.

Voice : male a rough grunting 'crooh, crooh, crooh.' Female has low croaking note like three related species and a guttural chattering alarm call, when with young.

Identification : only a little larger than Smew. Adult male readily recognised by black-and-white markings and prominent fan-shaped white crest, constantly raised and depressed. Wing dark with white patch. Female distinguished from other mergansers by small size, dark coloration, dark head and neck and buffy-brown crest. Juveniles and yearling males like females. Males in eclipse show brownish mottling of head and neck and breast and flanks like those of female.







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