

A

NATURAL HISTORY

OF

WATER BIRDS.

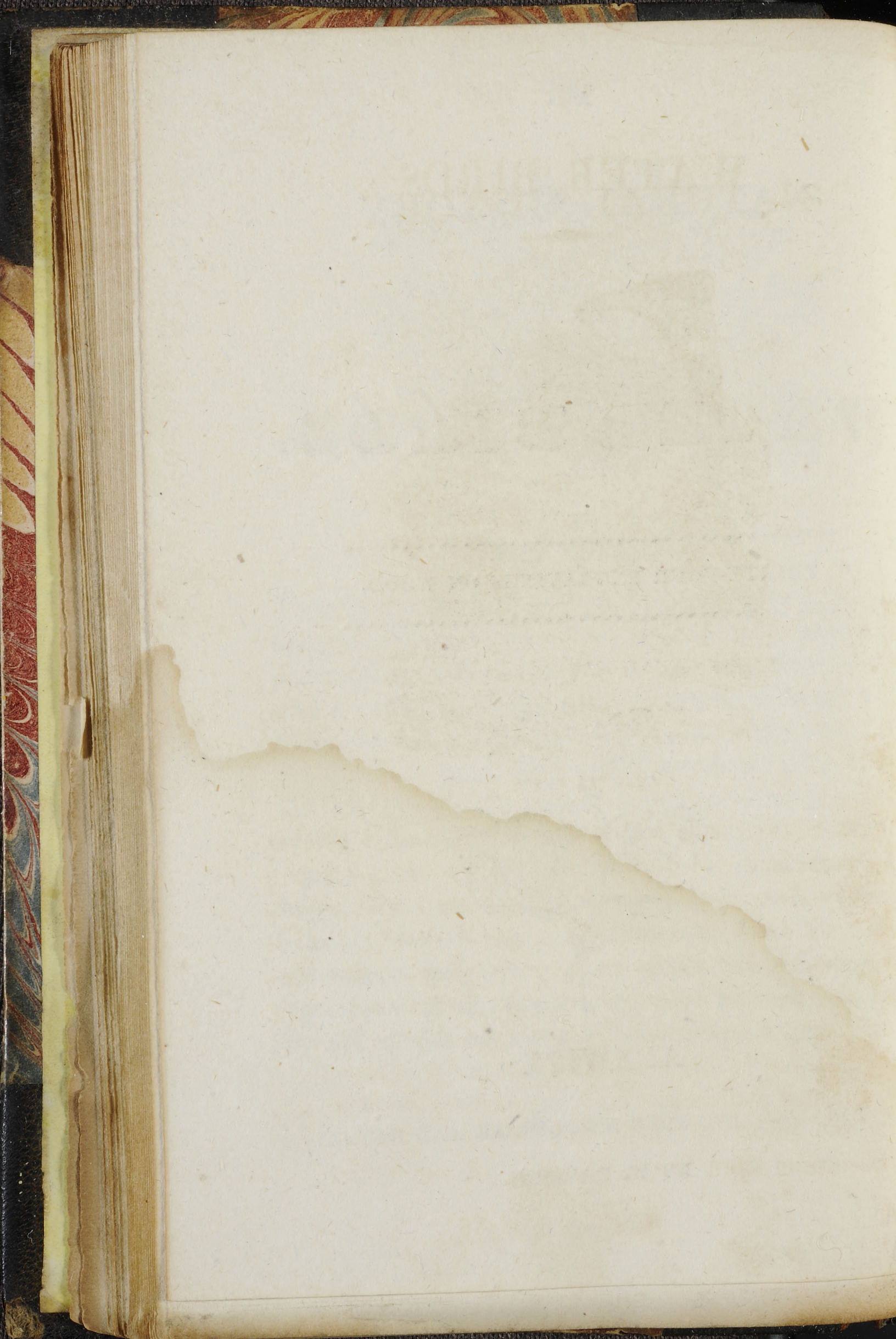
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THIRTY-FOUR ENGRAVINGS ON WOOD.  
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ALNWICK:

PRINTED AND SOLD WHOLESALE AND RETAIL

BY W. DAVISON.



WATER BIRDS.



THE BITTERN.

THE bittern is less than the heron, and is neither so voracious nor destructive. Its plumage is of a pale yellow colour, spotted and barred with black, and its flesh is esteemed a great dainty. It is impossible for words to convey an adequate idea of the terrific solemnity of the bittern's evening call, which resembles the interrupted bellowings of a bull, but is louder. The bittern is naturally a timid and inoffensive bird, concealing itself by day in the midst of reeds and marshy places, and subsisting upon frogs, insects, and vegetables.



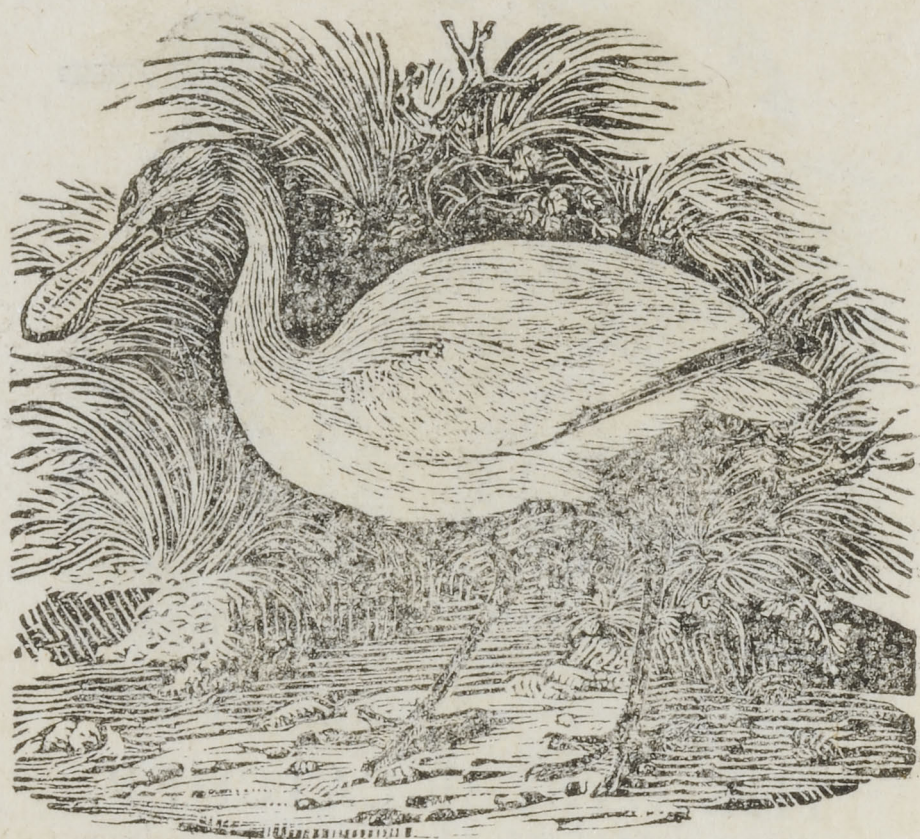
THE HERON.

THE heron is remarkably light in proportion to its bulk ; seldom weighing more than three pounds and a half, although it expands a breadth of wing not less than five feet. Its bill is five inches long from the base to the point ; and its claws are long, sharp, and formidable : but though it appears thus completely armed for war, it is indolent and cowardly, and even flies at the approach of a sparrow-hawk. In fresh water, however, it is a perfect tyrant, and there is scarcely a fish, however large, that it will not strike at and wound, though unable to carry it away ; but it subsists chiefly on the smaller fry, of which it devours immense quantities.



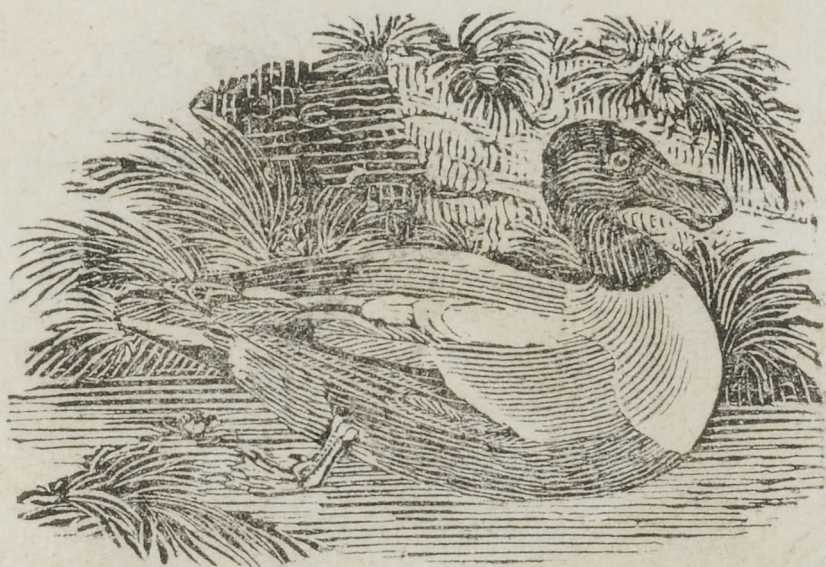
THE OYSTER-CATCHER.

THE oyster-catcher generally weighs about sixteen ounces, and measures seventeen inches in length. The bill is of a bright scarlet, about three inches long, wide at the nostrils, and grooved beyond them nearly half its length; thence to the tip it is vertically compressed on the sides, and ends obtusely. With this instrument, which, in its shape and structure, is peculiar to this bird, it easily disengages the limpets from the rocks, and plucks out the oysters from their half-opened shells. On these it feeds, as well as on other kinds of shell-fish, sea-worms, and insects. Though it is not provided with powers fitted for an expert swimmer, yet it does not shew any aversion to taking the water. These birds inhabit the sea-shores, and are seldom found inland.



THE SPOONBILL.

THE most remarkable peculiarity of this bird is its bill, from the shape of which it derives its appellation. This part is of a shining black colour, and has its upper surface waved with dotted protuberances. It is about the size of the crane, but not quite so tall. The common colour of those of Europe is a dirty white, but in America they are seen of a beautiful rose colour or a delightful crimson. It feeds among waters; its toes are divided; and it seems to possess the natural dispositions of the crane. The female lays from three to five eggs, and in Europe its nest is usually found in high trees, near that of the heron, and constructed of the same materials.



THE SHOVELER.

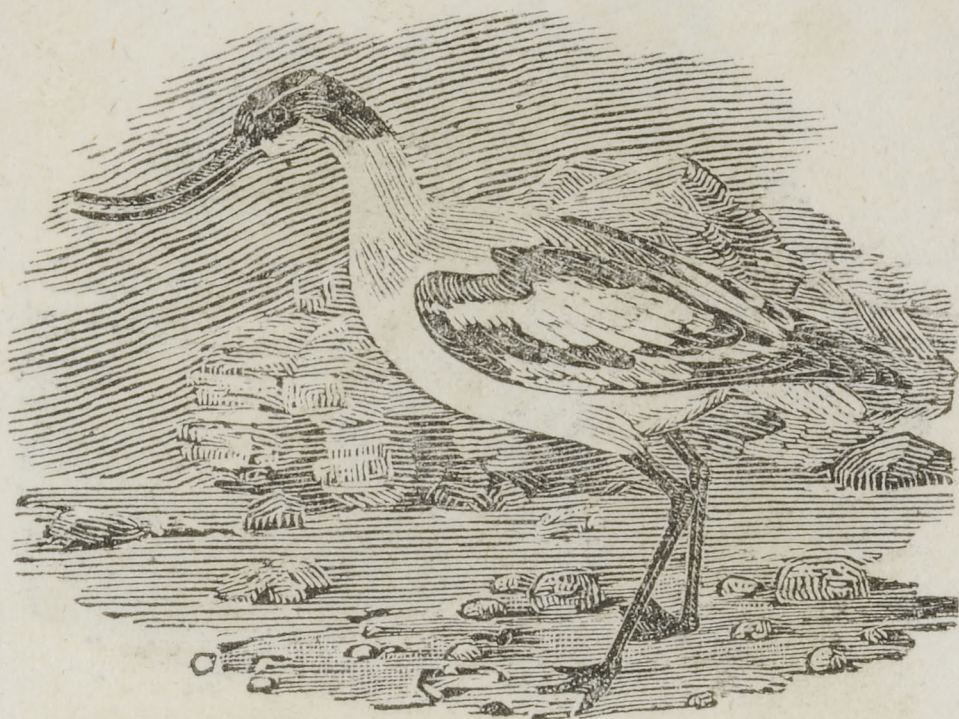
THE shoveler chiefly feeds upon frogs, toads, and serpents; of which, particularly at the Cape of Good Hope, they destroy great numbers. The inhabitants of that country hold them in as much esteem as the ancient Egyptians did the ibis: the shoveler runs tamely about their houses; and they are content with its society, as a useful though a homely companion. They are never killed; and indeed they are good for nothing when they are dead.

This bird breeds in Europe, in company with the heron, in high trees; and in a nest formed of the same materials. The inhabitants who claim the trees they build in, furnish themselves with a long pole hooked at the end, with which they shake out the young ones; but sometimes the nest and all tumble down together. It lays from three to five eggs; white, and powdered with a few sanguine or pale spots.



THE FLAMINGO.

THE flamingo is the tallest, largest, and most beautiful bird of the crane kind. The body, which is of a vivid scarlet, is about the size of that of a swan; but the legs and neck are of such extraordinary length, that, when it stands erect, it is upwards of six feet high. Its magnitude, its beauty, and the peculiar delicacy of its flesh when young, have afforded so many incitements for its destruction, that it has long abandoned the shores frequented by man, and taken refuge where he seldom intrudes. The female lays about two eggs. The flamingos chiefly delight in the vicinity of salt-water lakes and swampy islands. They are chiefly found in America, and some parts of Africa.



THE AVOSETTA.

THE avosetta is about the size of a pigeon, and has extreme long legs; but the most extraordinary part of its figure is the bill, which turns up like a hook, in an opposite direction to that of the hawk or the parrot; this is of a black colour, flat, sharp, and flexible at the end. These birds commonly breed in the fens of Lincolnshire, and on Romney marsh, in Kent. In winter they assemble in flocks of six or seven about the mouths of large muddy rivers, in search of worms and insects, which they scoop out of the mud with their recurved bills. Their feet seem calculated for swimming, but, as they are never observed to take the water, it is probable that they are furnished with a web merely to prevent their sinking in the mud.



THE SNIPE.

THE breast and belly of the snipe are of a dull white colour; the back is covered with long plumage, variegated with black and reddish brown; a line of reddish white runs along the middle of the head; and the beak is about two inches and a half long. Though the snipe is generally a bird of passage, it sometimes remains here during the whole year, and it certainly breeds in the northern parts of Scotland. It frequents marshy places, where it builds an artless nest among reeds and rushes, and lays four or five eggs of a dirty olive colour, marked with dusky spots. The flesh is exceedingly good, sweet, and tender; it feeds in drains of water-springs, and other fenny places, on worms and other insects, and on the fat unctuous humour that it sucks out of the earth. They breed in the lower lands of Switzerland.



THE RUFF.

THE ruff has a plumage of various colours; but it is principally distinguished by a remarkable circle of long feathers surrounding the neck, from which it obtains its name. In the moulting season these feathers drop off, and do not appear again till the ensuing spring. These are birds of passage, arriving in this country early in the spring, and disappearing about Michaelmas. Soon after their arrival, the males assemble on some dry bank near a pool of water, and each occupies a small track which he perambulates till the grass is worn away. There they wait till they are joined by the females; the appearance of which always occasions a battle, as the males at first are considerably the most numerous. The female of this bird is called the reeve, and is destitute of the ruff on the neck.



THE WATER-HEN.

THE water-hen is larger than the plover. The breast is of a lead colour, and the belly inclines to grey or ash colour; the back is all over blackish. They feed upon watery grass and roots, and upon the small insects which adhere to them. They grow fat, and their flesh is esteemed for its taste next to that of the teal. They build their nests upon low trees and shrubs by the water side. The eggs are white, with a tincture of green, and dashed with brown spots. The young ones swim the moment they leave the egg, pursue their parents, and imitate all their manners. They rear, in this manner, two or three broods in a season; and when the young are grown up, they drive them off to shift for themselves. There are few countries where these birds are not to be found.



THE GREAT-CRESTED GREBE.

THIS bird is the largest of the grebes, weighing about two pounds and a half, and measuring twenty-one inches in length. The head, in adult males, is furnished with a great quantity of feathers, which form a kind of ruff, surrounding the upper part of the neck. The upper parts of the plumage are of a sooty brown, and the under parts of a glossy or silvery white. They are common in the fens and lakes in various parts of England, where they breed and rear their young. The female conceals her nest among the flags and reeds which grow in the water, upon which it is said to float, and that she hatches her eggs amidst the moisture that oozes through it.



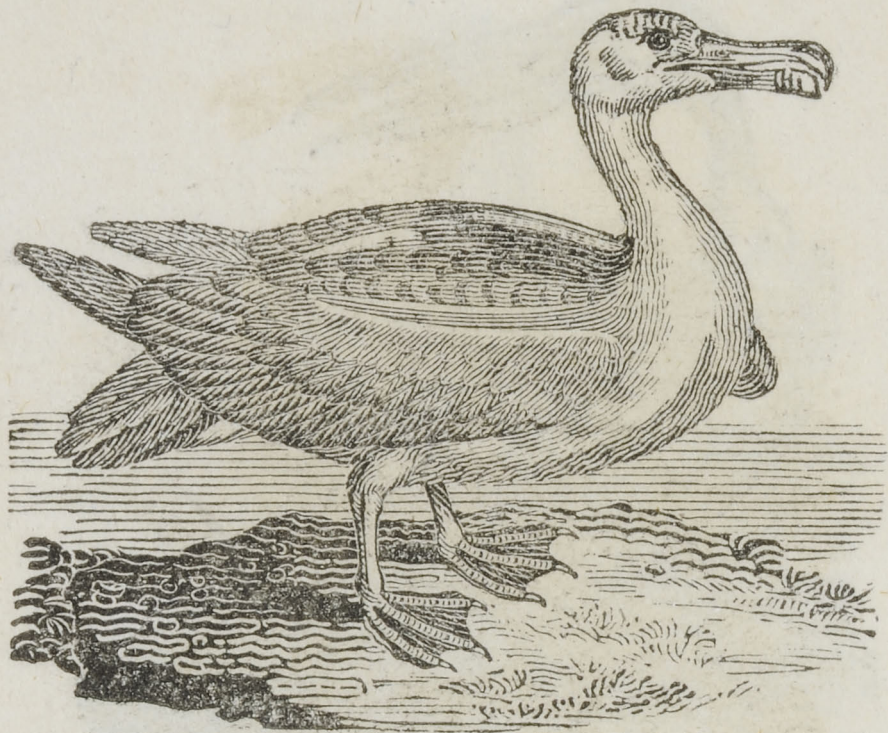
THE LITTLE GREBE.

THIS is the least of the grebe tribe, weighing only about six or seven ounces. The head is thickly clothed with a downy kind of feathers, which it can puff up to a great size, or depress at pleasure. The neck, breast, and all the upper parts of the plumage, are of a brown or chesnut colour, tinged with red. It seldom quits the water or ventures beyond the sedgy margin of the lake where it has taken up its abode. It is an excellent diver, and can remain a long while under water in pursuit of its prey, or to shun danger. The female lays from four to six eggs of a dull white colour, and is said to cover them with the surrounding leaves when she stirs abroad. This species is an inhabitant of both Europe and America.



THE PELICAN.

THE pelican is in bigness nearly equal to the swan; the colour of the body is white, inclining to a pink hue; the beak is straight and long, with a sharp hook at the end; the gullet or skin of the lower mandible is so capable of distension that it may be dilated so as to contain fish to a great weight, and, some say, fifteen quarts of water. The legs are black, and the four toes palmated. It is a very indolent, inactive, and inelegant bird, that often sits whole days and nights on rocks or branches of trees, motionless and in a melancholy posture, till the resistless stimulus of hunger spurs it away. It is a native of Africa, and its flesh is coarse and ill-tasted. It is easily tamed, and does not seem to suffer much from the difference between its native climate and ours.



THE ALBATROSS.

THE albatross is one of the largest and most formidable of all the tribes of aquatic fowl. It abounds in the Southern Ocean, particularly about the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn. The body is large; and the wings, when extended, measure ten feet from tip to tip. The bill, which is six inches long, is yellowish, and terminates in a crooked point. The top of the head is of a bright brown, the back is darker, and the belly is white. It preys when on the wing, and devours not only a large quantity of fish, but also such water-fowl as it is able to take by surprise. Perhaps no bird is capable of supporting itself so long on the bosom of the air as the albatross. It seldom approaches the land, except during the season of incubation; but continues hovering night and day on the wing, apparently without fatigue.



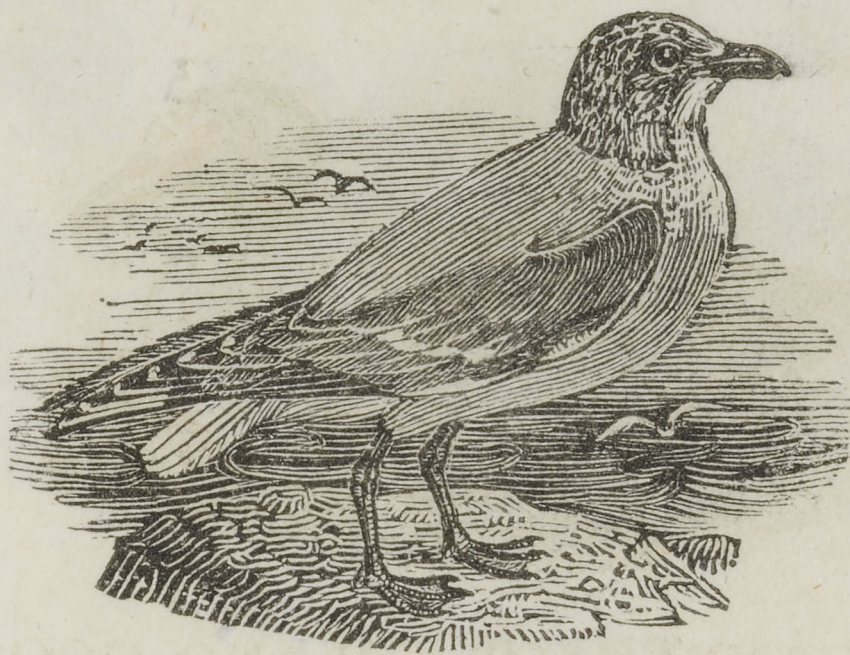
THE CORMORANT.

THE cormorant is upwards of three feet long, and four feet in the expansion of the wings. The coverts of the wings and the back are of a deep green, edged with black, and glossed with blue; the quill feathers and the tail are dusky, and the breast and belly are black. Its figure is clumsy, and seems to indicate sluggishness; yet few birds are so powerfully predaceous. It devours fishes in astonishing numbers, and its digestion is so rapid, that its appetite seems always craving, yet never satisfied. They build their nests on the highest parts of the cliffs that overhang the sea; and the female usually lays three or four eggs, about the size of those of the goose, and of a pale green colour.



THE GANNET, OR SOLAND GOOSE.

THIS bird is of the size of the tame goose, but its wings are much longer. From the corner of the mouth proceeds a narrow slip of black bare skin, extending to the hind part of the head; and beneath this is a dilatible pouch, like that of the pelican, capable of containing five or six entire herrings, which in the breeding season it carries at once to its mate or its young. The colour is chiefly white. These birds are extremely numerous in some of the Hebrides, the Skelig islands in Ireland, and the Ferro between Scotland and Norway. But it is in the Bass island in the Frith of Forth that they are seen in the greatest numbers. They lay only one egg at a time; and never more than three in a season should they be robbed of their first and second. The young are reckoned very delicate food, and therefore are sold at a high rate. The soland goose is a bird of passage.



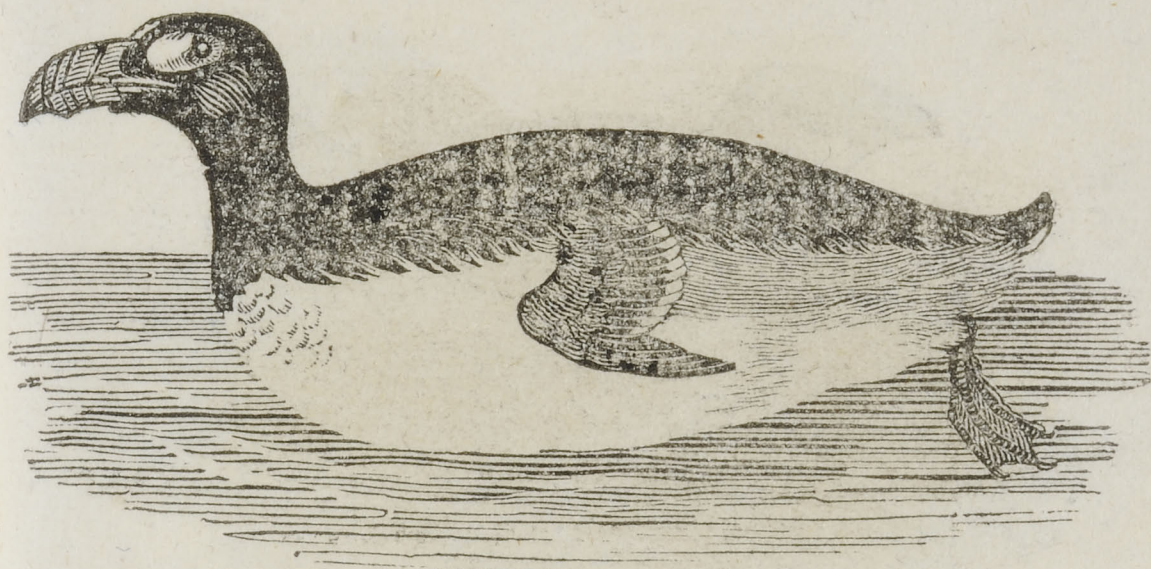
THE GULL.

THE bill of the gull is long, straight, and incurvated at the extremity; the tongue is slightly cloven; the body is light, and covered with thick plumage; the wings are large; and the legs are short. These birds, which are almost incessantly on the wing, feed upon fish, and are extremely clamorous along the shores which they frequent. The British islands, particularly the northern parts of them, furnish several species. The common gull, the most numerous of the kind, breeds on the ledges of cliffs that overhang the sea, and, during the winter season, frequents almost every part of our shores where the boldness of the cliff presents a favourable situation. Like other rapacious birds, it lays but few eggs; which circumstance, added to the numbers continually destroyed for subsistence, has considerably thinned the breed in many places.



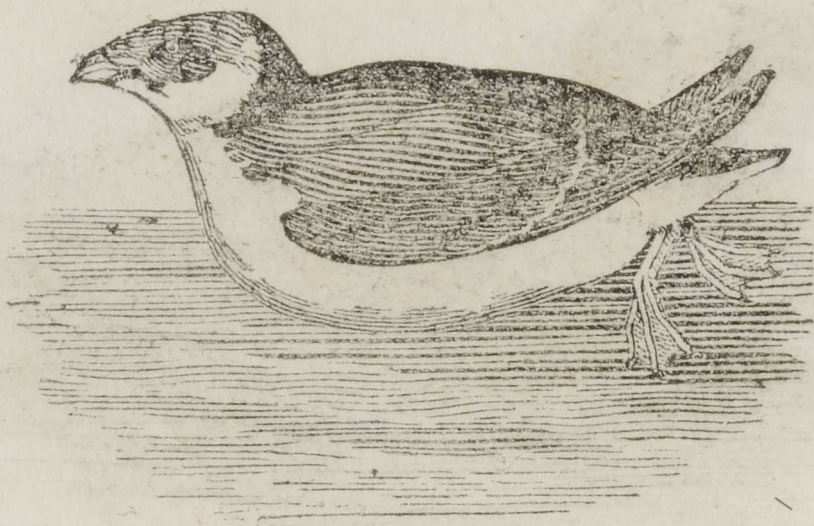
THE PETREL.

THE petrel is not larger than the swallow ; and its colour is entirely black, except the coverts of the tail, the tail itself, and the vent feathers, which are white. Its legs are long and slender. They are not often seen in fair weather, for which reason the sailors call them storm finches, and think they presage a storm when they come about a ship. In a storm they will hover close under a ship's stern, in the wake of the ship, where the water is smoother, and there, as they fly gently, they pat the water alternately with their feet, as if they walked upon it, though they are still upon the wing ; hence the seamen call them petrels, in allusion to St. Peter's walking upon the lake of Gennesaret. In the Faro islands, the body of the petrel is prepared to answer the purpose of a candle, a wick being drawn from the mouth to the tail, where it is lighted, and the flame is fed by the oily viscera of the body.



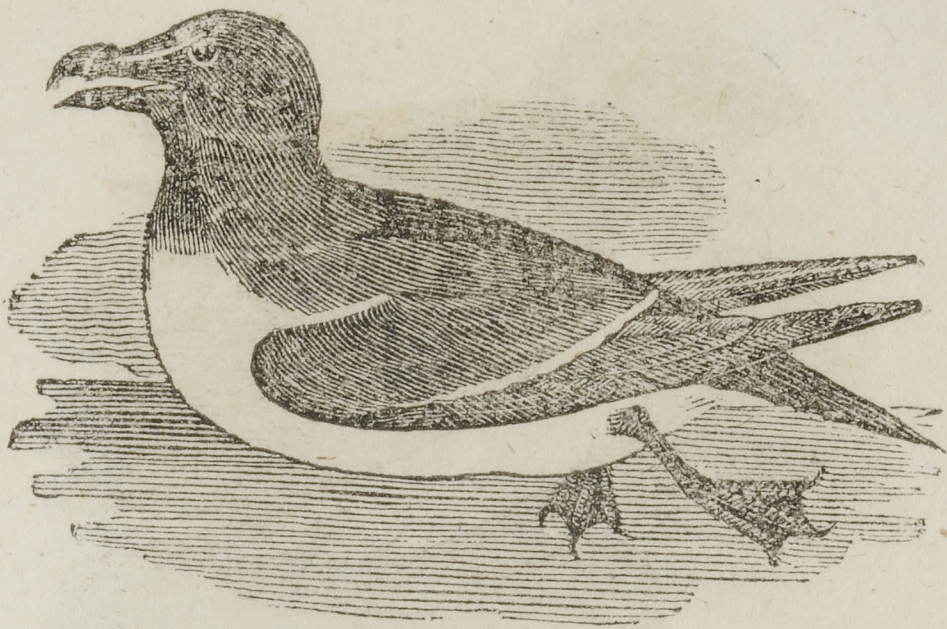
THE PENGUIN.

THE seal makes hardly a greater remove from the quadruped than the penguin from the fowl to ally itself to the fish. It has the head of a fowl, with a strong straight bill, but its wings are properly fins; they are totally useless for flight, though they amazingly facilitate its progress in the water. While it swims, its whole body is immersed in the water, the head and neck only being visible. The thick short feathers with which it is clothed resemble scales in their compactness and almost in their texture. Of this singular animal, there are nine species described by naturalists. They are all inhabitants of the Southern Ocean, and are the peaceable possessors of those dreary and desolate regions of ice and snow to which the enterprise of man cannot extend his dominion. The female lays but one egg, which is larger than that of the goose; and sometimes several lay their eggs in the same hole, and sit on them by turns.



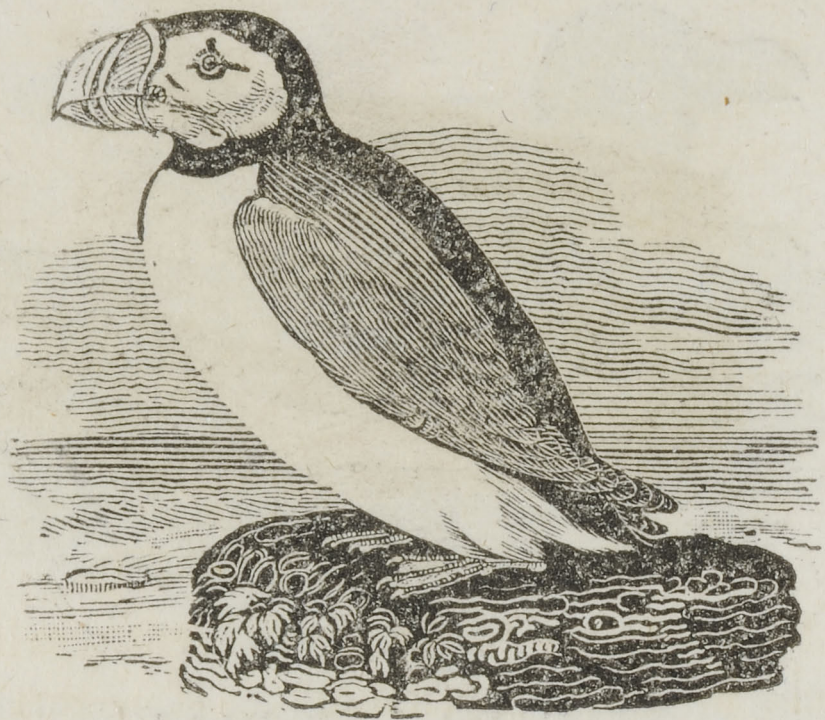
THE AUK.

THIS bird is about eighteen inches long, and the expansion of its wings twenty-seven. The bill is pretty long, black, and sharp at the edges. The head, throat, and upper side of the body, are black; the under side of the body is white. It chiefly differs from the penguin in size and colour. Though the auk has wings so small that they are useless for flight, and can do little more than help it to run upon the water, it is a bird of passage. It breeds in the isle of St. Kilda, which it visits in the beginning of May, and leaves in the middle of June. Its residence for the rest of the year is unknown, which is not a little extraordinary of a bird whose voyage must be so slow and so awkward. But seamen, instead of describing them at sea, remark that they are certain indications of land, as they are never met with beyond soundings. The auk lays but one egg; but it is very large in proportion to the bird. It builds no nest, but deposits it on the edge of a rock.



THE RAZOR-BILL.

THE wings of this species are more furnished with feathers, and longer in proportion to the size of the bird than those of the last. The bill is black, strong, curved toward the point, and sharply edged; the upper part of the head, neck, back, rump, and tail, are of a soft glossy black, and look something like velvet. About the beginning of May they take possession of the highest impending rocks, where they congregate in great numbers, sitting closely together, row above row, and there deposit on the bare rock, one large egg of a greenish white colour, irregularly marked with dark spots. And though the eggs have no nest or bedding to rest upon, they are not rolled off into the sea by gales of wind. They are supposed to be fixed to the spot upon which they are first laid by a glutinous substance with which the shell is covered.



THE PUFFIN, OR COULTERNEB.

WORDS cannot easily describe the form of the bill of the puffin, it differs so greatly from that of any other bird. Those who have seen the coulter of a plough may form some idea of the beak of this odd-looking animal. It is flat; but very different from that of the duck, its edge being upwards. It is of a triangular figure, and ends in a sharp point. It is of two colours; ash coloured near the base, and red toward the point. The eyes are fenced with a protuberant skin of a livid colour; and they are grey or ash coloured. The parent birds are very attentive to their young, which they will defend courageously, and will suffer themselves to be taken rather than desert them. They are to be met with on almost all the rocky cliffs of Great Britain in immense quantities.



THE GOOSEANDER.

THIS bird belongs to the goose genus, with which it agrees in most particulars. It seems to form the shade between the penguin and the goose kind; having a round bill, like the one; and unembarrassed legs, like the other. In the shape of the head, neck, and body, it resembles them both. But it may be distinguished from all others by its bill, which is round, hooked at the point, and toothed, both upper and under chap, like a saw. Its colours are various and beautiful. However, its manners and appetites entirely resemble those of the diver. It is said to build its nest upon trees, like the heron and the cormorant. It frequents our rivers and lakes, especially in severe winters; but during the summer retires far northward, for the purpose of breeding, and is never seen even in the more southern parts of this island. It feeds entirely on fish, which communicates a rankness to its flesh,



THE SWAN.

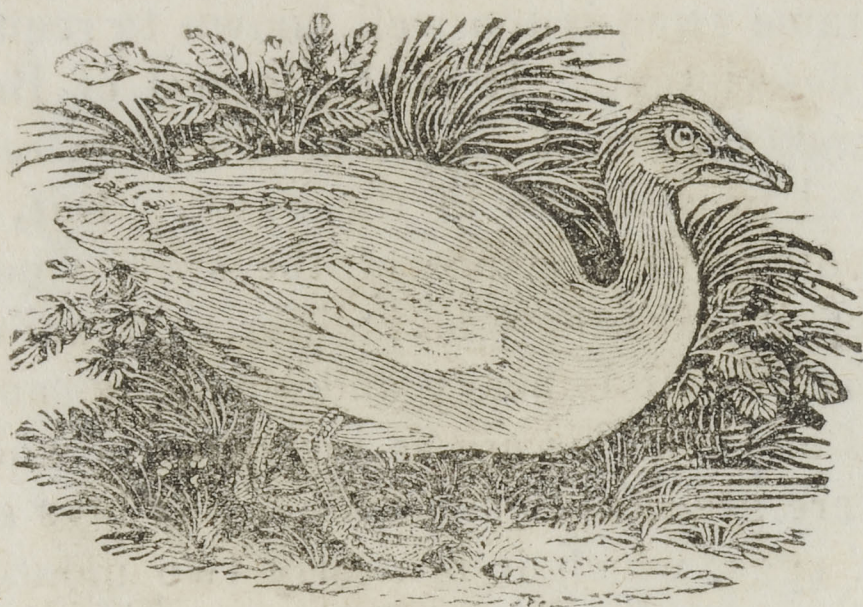
OF this elegant bird there are two varieties, the wild and the tame. The former is a native of the hyperborean regions, and only migrates into our temperate latitudes when compelled by the severity of the cold. It frequents the lakes and forests of Lapland, in common with other aquatic fowl, during the summer months; and there also it rears its young.

The wild swan is much less than the tame. It is of an ash colour along the back and on the tips of the wings; the eyes are bare and yellow, and the legs are dusky. Its cry is very loud, and may be heard at a great distance. In the new settlements of Cumberland county in New Holland, black swans are seen as common as the white with us.

The tame swan is too well known to require a minute description. It is the largest of British birds, and the most majestic when exercising its natural propensities in the water. But, notwithstanding the elegance of the swan when in the water, it makes only an indifferent figure upon land; for its gait is heavy and waddling, and its attitudes and motions are as inelegant in walking as they are graceful in swimming. It lays seven or eight eggs, which it is nearly two months in hatching. It subsists chiefly on aquatic plants and roots, but sometimes devours insects.

The swan was considered as very delicate meat among the ancients, by whom the goose, however, was reprobated as wholly indigestible. Thus even tastes are not exempted from the vicissitudes of revolution. The goose is become a high favourite with modern epicures, while the swan is seldom served up except for the purpose of magnificence or ostentation.

Swans were formerly held in great esteem in England. At present they are but little valued for the delicacy of their flesh; but numbers are still preserved for their beauty. Many may be seen on the Thames, where they are esteemed royal property, and it is accounted felony to steal their eggs. Willoughby seems to think the swan may live three hundred years, but although this appears very doubtful, if not absolutely incredible, it is universally allowed that it reaches the age of one hundred.



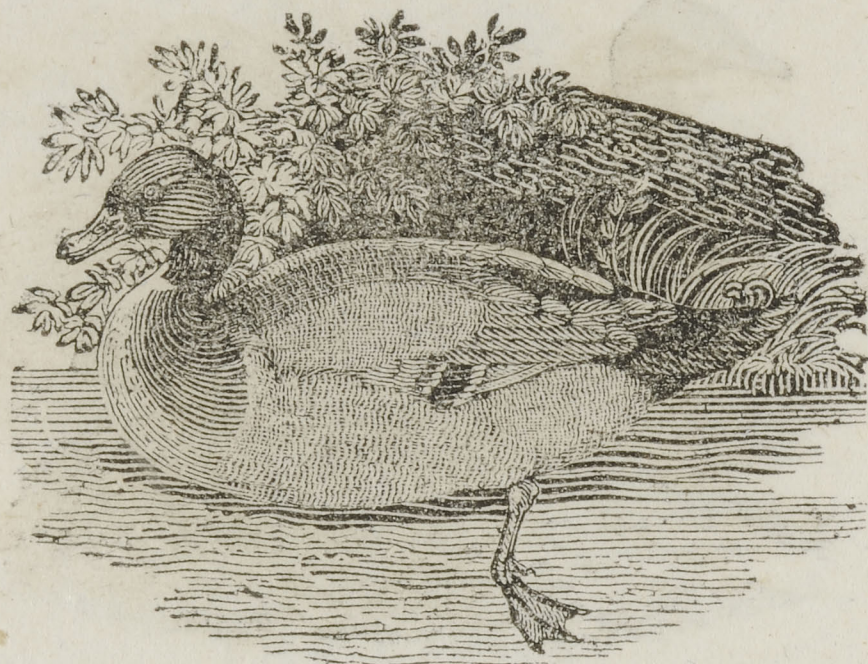
THE GOOSE.

THE tame goose is subject to many varieties. It is common almost in every country, and is valued not only for its flesh, but for the well-known usefulness of its quills and feathers. The flesh of the tame goose is reckoned very delicate eating; and the bird is no less valued in some places, particularly in the Lincolnshire fens, for its feathers. In that county, a single proprietor will sometimes possess a thousand old geese, which, in one season, will increase sevenfold. The breeding birds are kept in wicker pens, disposed in three rows, one above another, and each has its separate apartment. A goose-herd attends the flock, and drives them twice a-day to water. They are plucked at Lady-day for their feathers and quills, and four times more between that and Michaelmas for their feathers only. The goose will, with good treatment, produce two, though commonly she has only one hatch in a year.



THE WILD GOOSE.

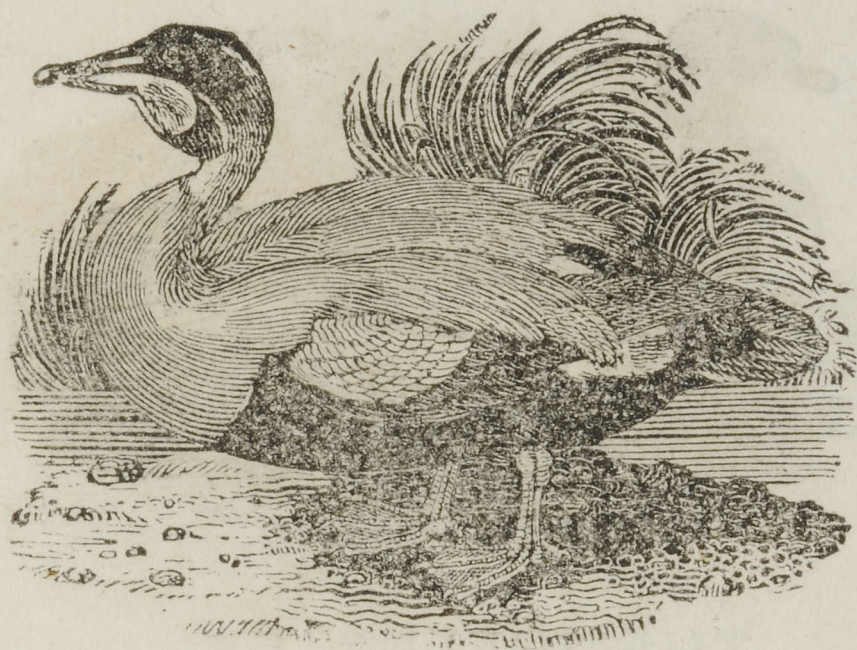
THE wild goose usually weighs about ten pounds. The whole upper part is of an ash colour; the breast and belly are of a dirty white; the bill is narrow at the base, and black at the tip; and the legs are of a saffron colour, with black claws. They breed in the north of Europe, and descend in the beginning of winter into the more temperate regions. If they alight by day, it is in a ranged line, like the cranes, and seems more for rest than for refreshment. After an hour or two, one of them with a long loud note sounds the march, to which they all punctually obey, and pursue their journey with renewed alacrity. Their flight is very regularly arranged. They go in a line abreast, or in two lines joining in an angle in the middle. They haunt the borders of lakes and rivers, and those situations which are remote from the abodes of man.



THE DUCK.

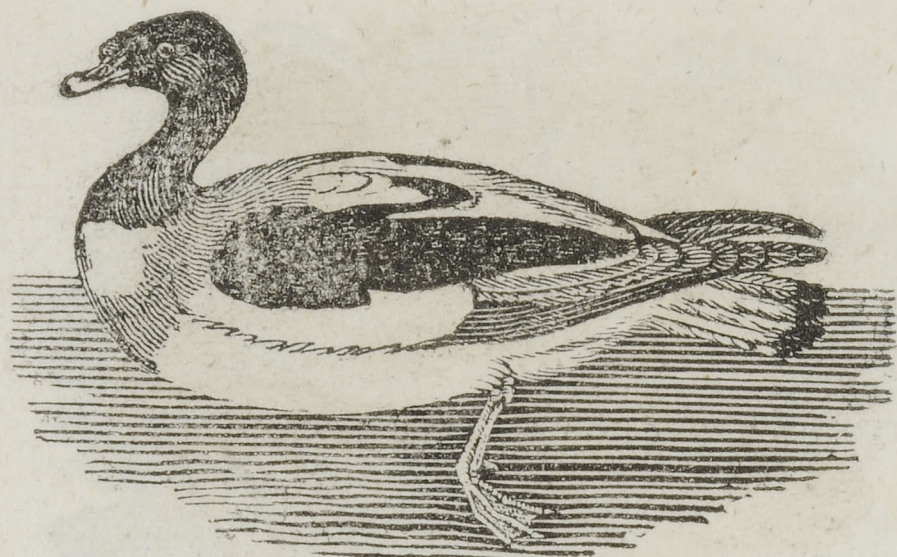
THE common species of tame ducks derive their origin from the mallard, or wild duck, and may be traced to that bird by unerring characters. Though the drakes vary in colour, they all retain the curled feathers of the tail, and both sexes the shape of the bill peculiar to the wild kind. Tame ducks are extremely beneficial to mankind; and, as they subsist on lost corn, worms, snails, and other insects, they are not expensive in keeping. They lay a great number of eggs annually, and may be fattened with ease and expedition.

The principal difference between wild and tame ducks arises from their size, and the nature of those places from which they derive their subsistence. The several varieties of wild ducks associate together in flocks during the winter; fly in pairs during the summer; and rear their young by the sides of waters, and in moist places.



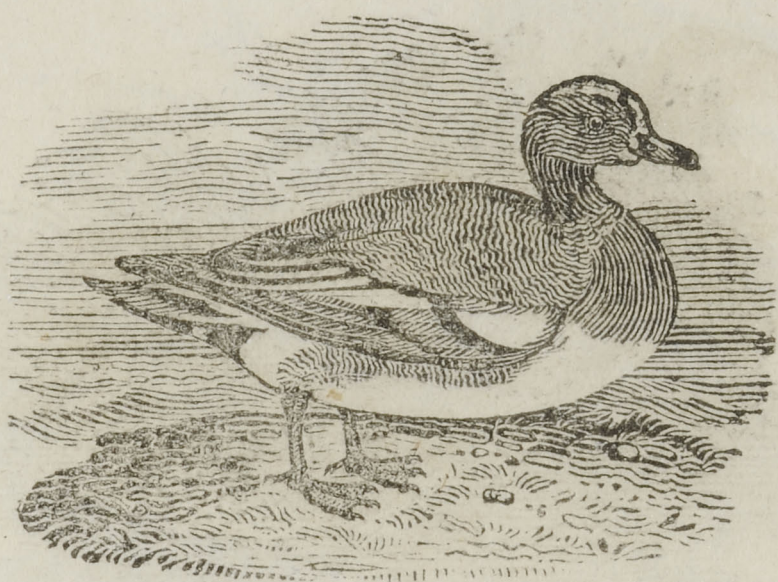
THE EIDER DUCK.

THESE birds are about twice the size of the common duck. The forehead of the drake is velvet black; the upper parts of the body are white. The general colour of the female is a reddish brown. They are celebrated for producing a down of a superior warmth, lightness, and elasticity to every other, and inhabit Hudson's Bay, Greenland, Norway, and the Hebrides. Among stones or plants near the sea-shore, the duck, to form a soft bed for her young, plucks the down from her breast, and lays four or five eggs. It is then that the person whose business it is to collect the down seizes both eggs and nest. The duck a second time plucks her breast, and lays again, when she is again robbed of her treasure. The drake must now supply the down, though a third time she supplies it with eggs. If they are robbed of these, they wholly desert the place.



THE SHELDRAKE.

THE male of this species measures about two feet in length. The bill is red; the head and upper part of the neck are of a glossy dark green; the lower part of the neck, to the breast, is encircled with white; the back, sides of the belly, and tail, are white. The female is less than the male, and her plumage is not so vivid and beautiful. She makes her nest, and rears her young, in holes near the sea-shore. It is chiefly formed of the fine down plucked from her own breast. She lays from twelve to sixteen roundish white eggs, and the incubation lasts about thirty days. When the young are hatched, they are conducted by the parents to the full tide, and are not seen afterward out of tide-mark till they are able to fly. They feed on sea-worms and small fish. This species is dispersed in various parts of the world. They are met with as far north as Iceland in spring, and in Sweden and the Orkney islands in winter.



THE WIDGEON.

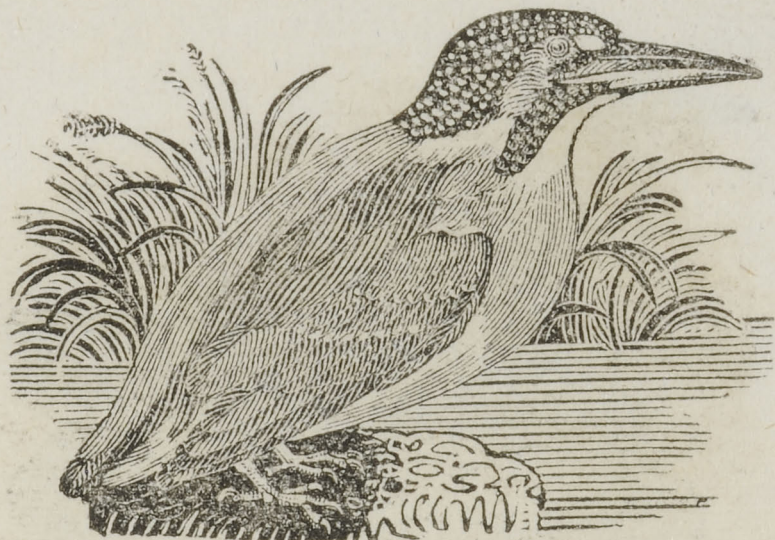
THIS bird weighs nearly a pound and a half. The structure of the head and mouth very much resemble the common wild duck. The crown of the head toward the base of the bill is of a pale pink colour, inclining to a reddish white; the other parts of the head and neck are red; the sides of the body and the upper part of the breast are tinged with a very fair, glossy, and beautiful claret colour, with a few small transverse lines of black. The feathers on the back are brown, the edges more pale; the legs and feet are of a dark lead colour, and the claws are black.

Widgeons are common in Cambridgeshire, the isle of Ely, &c. where the male is called the widgeon, and the female the whewer. They feed upon wild periwinkles, grass, and weeds, which grow at the bottom of rivers and lakes. Their flesh has a very delicious taste, not inferior to that of the teal, or of the wild duck.



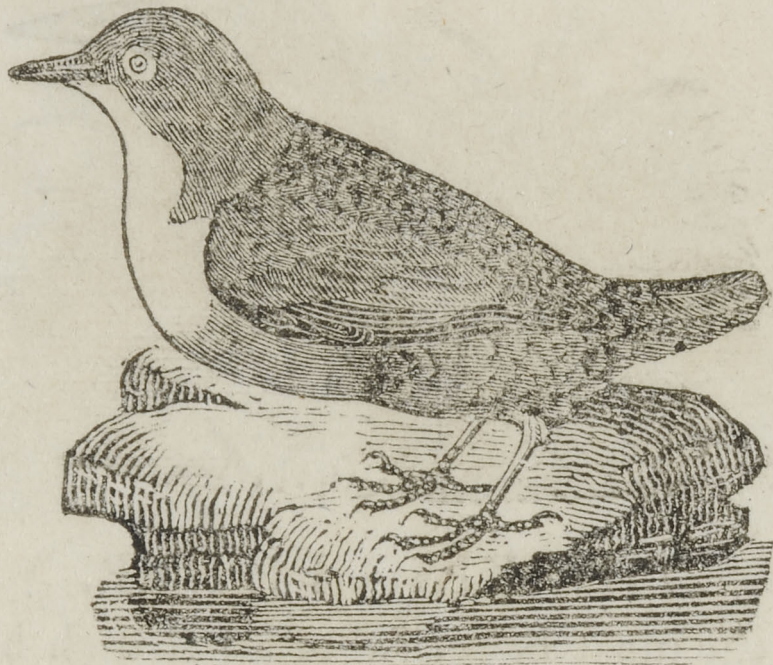
THE TEAL.

THE teal is the least of the duck kind, weighing only twelve ounces. The breast and belly are of a dirty white, inclining to a grey tint, the back and sides under the wings are curiously varied with lines of white and black; the wings are all over brown, and the tail is of the same colour. This bird is common in England during the winter months, and it is still uncertain whether it does not breed here, as it does in France. The female makes her nest of reeds interwoven with grass, and, as it is reported, places it among the rushes, in order that it may rise and fall according to the accidental height of the water. They live commonly upon water plants, as well as upon seeds and small animated beings that swarm in the water. The flesh of the teal is a great delicacy in the winter season.



THE KING FISHER.

THIS is the most beautiful of all British birds. It is seven inches in length, and eleven in breadth. The bill is nearly two inches long, and black. The top of the head and the sides of the body are of a dark green, marked with transverse spots of blue; the tail is of a deep blue, and the other parts of the body are dusky orange, white, and black; the legs are red; the wings are short, but they fly very swiftly. Its habits and manner of living are wholly confined to the water. It preys on the smaller fish, and sits frequently on a branch projecting over the current; there it remains motionless, and often watches whole hours to catch the moment when a little fish springs under its station. It dives perpendicularly into the water, where it continues several seconds, and then brings up the fish, which it carries to land, beats to death, and then swallows. This bird lays about seven eggs of a transparent white colour, in a hole in the bank of the river it frequents.



THE WATER OUZEL.

THE water ouzel, called also the water rail, is in size somewhat less than the blackbird. Its bill is black, and almost straight; the upper parts of the head and neck are of a deep brown; and the rest of the upper parts, the belly, vent, and tail, are black. This bird frequents the banks of springs or brooks, which it never leaves; preferring the limpid streams whose fall is rapid, and whose bed is broken with stones and fragments of rocks. But the most singular trait in its character is that of its possessing the power of walking in quest of its prey on the pebbly bottom of a river with as much ease as if it were on dry land.

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