

Water Birds of the Middle Delaware Valley

BY HENRY W. FOWLER.

AT the time of the publication of Mr Stone's "Birds of Eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey," the Club was much in need of definite information regarding the water birds of the Delaware valley. Knowledge of this nature seems still to be a desideratum, and as the writer has for some ten years past paid considerable attention to the water birds of the river north of Philadelphia—from Holmesburg to Bistol—the following list, embodying his observations, is offered as a contribution to a subject already too long neglected

Records published in the above-mentioned work are omitted, but those scattered through the pages of the Club's Proceedings since 1894 are included, as well as much important data furnished by Mr. Richard F. Miller, Mr. Thos. D. Keim, Mr. L. V. Morris, of Bristol, and reliable gunners whom I have interviewed. Mr. Miller's observations relate chiefly to Bridesburg and Richmond, and covering as they do some seven years, are of particular interest.

The Delaware valley, from the northern environs of Philadelphia to Trenton, has long been the resort of many gunners. Though not so famous as the celebrated Chesapeake flats about Havre de Grace, it has in past years supplied not only various sportsmen but also the market with water fowls of various sorts. At present the birds do not congregate in such numbers as formerly, according to reports, but large flocks of ducks and geese are still seen frequently, and many other species are by no means rare

The river in this region is generally wide, with low swamp and meadow land stretching for long distances along either shore. It is seldom that the banks at any point rise much above the water, the elevation of about fifty-eight feet at Florence

being the highest point. Below Trenton, on the Jersey shore, there is a long, low expanse of meadow and swampy land, skirted by a high embankment which is mostly well wooded and rises abruptly to form a large plateau. Low islands, bars and shallows are also numerous and these, as usual, are very attractive to migrant water birds. In fact, all the natural conditions prevailing along this part of the river are admirably adapted to a variety of bird life, although the proximity to a great city must naturally have its effect upon the abundance of the more wary species.

The principal tributaries flowing into this part of the river are on the Pennsylvania side, the Neshaminy, Poquessing, Pennypack and Frankford creeks, and on the New Jersey side, Crosswick's, the Raneocas and Pensauken; the estuaries of which form a harbor for many birds which do not prefer the more open water

The river is tidal as far as Trenton, covering the whole section under consideration, and the tide-water extends some distance up the tributaries, especially on the Jersey side.

Of the birds in the following list only a few are known to breed along this part of the river, namely, the Least Bittern, Green Heron, Night Heron, King Rail, Virginia Rail and Spotted Sandpiper. It is probable that the American Bittern and Sora Rail may be added to the list, though I have no personal knowledge to that effect

The Great Blue Heron has a nesting colony in the vicinity of Glassboro, N. J., and possibly another nearer, while the Killdeer and Bartramian Sandpiper nest in the uplands or interior not very far back from the river. The Wood Duck was unquestionably a resident species in former years.

With the exception of the above species the notes in the following list will be understood to refer only to the winter months or the seasons of migration:

Colymbus holboëlli. Holboëll's Grebe.

Although I have never taken this bird on the Delaware myself it has been seen at rare intervals according to local gunners, and one was shot by Mr. John Reese at Riverton, N. J., February 12, 1894.

Colymbus auritus Horned Grebe.

Common on the Delaware during the fall and winter. Generally shy and seldom ascending creeks beyond tide-water.

Podilymbus podiceps. Pied-billed Grebe.

A number were observed on the Delaware during November, 1895. It is most frequently seen on the Rancocas, Pennypack and Neshaminy creeks and is shot at by gunners whenever an opportunity is offered. The mill pond at Bristol is also a favorite resort for these birds. Mr. Miller states that all the "Hell Divers" seen by him, that were shot on the river, proved to be this species; though he thinks it likely that the former species is often killed as it is confused with this by gunners.

Gavia imber. Loon.

This species has frequently been seen on the Delaware, during November especially, but they are shy and usually keep well out in the channel. A number of years ago several were seen together at the mouth of the Pennypack creek, though they are usually solitary. One killed on the river at Frankford in the fall of 1902 (Miller).

Gavia lumme Red-throated Loon.

Apparently more abundant than the preceding. At times as many as a dozen are seen together. Not long ago one was reported as taken in a fish-net.

Urva lomvia. Bunnich's Murre.

Mr. J. H. Reed has observed a large flock of these birds on the Delaware opposite Beverly, N. J., December 15 and 16, 1896 (see *Auk*, 1897, p. 202). The rather imperfect accounts or descriptions submitted to me by gunners point to the occurrence of individuals occasionally during the winter, and I have one in my collection killed at Byberry, January 11, 1901.

Stercorarius pomarinus Pomarine Jaeger.

A rare straggler, one specimen secured by Mr. Chas. Vansiver opposite Andalusia, October, 1898, now in the D. V. O. C. collection at the Academy of Natural Sciences.

Larus argentatus Herring Gull.

Common winter resident. They seldom wander far from the main course of the river, only occasionally following the smaller creeks for short distances. Mr. W. L. Whitaker secured one

October, 1893, on a mill dam at Cedar Grove, Philadelphia, five miles from the Delaware.

Mr. Miller states that one was observed by his brother at Sandiford, Philadelphia, February 28, flying very low. He also furnishes the following dates, based on his observations at Frankford:

Arrival. October 19, 1898; September 19, 1901; November 13, 1902; October 24, 1903.

Departure. June 2, 1897; April 3, 1899, April 16, 1900, May 5, 1901, May 3, 1902, May 2, 1903.

Larus delawarensis Ring-billed Gull

Rarely observed Mr. S. N. Rhoads observed them from the Market Street Ferry, at Philadelphia, between the 17 and 27 of February, 1895, but they appeared much more abundant after the ice had broken up. The same remarks apply to the Herring Gull.

Larus atricilla. Laughing Gull.

Most abundant during the spring and fall, seldom wandering any distance from the river. During the late spring they hover about the shad and herring fishermen. At this time they have been seen attempting to devour freshly-killed herring, which examination proved to be the adult Alewife (*Pomolobus pseudoharengus*). Possibly they also attempt to devour other dead fish, such as the Catfish (*Ameiurus catus*) and Perch (*Morone americana*), which are occasionally observed floating on the water. I have not observed them devouring living fishes. Two were taken at Bristol, October 23, 1895, and one at Fish House, N. J., fall of 1901 (*Miller*).

Sterna sp.

Mr. Miller also reports a tern of some species observed by a reliable gunner, but it was not secured.

Phalacrocorax dilophus. Double-crested Cormorant.

This bird has been frequently seen during migrations about Burlington Island, where two specimens were captured.

Merganser americanus American Merganser.

Abundant and locally known as Irish Canvas-back. Also seen in small creeks. I have seen them along the Pennypack, hugging the shelter of coves and shallow pools protected by

high grass or rushes. They have also been seen in large flocks on the Rancocas flats, many of them adult males. Frequent at Bristol. Often killed behind the dyke which extends from Petty's Island toward the New Jersey shore at Delair.

Merganser serrator. Red-breasted Merganser.

Not observed by myself, but included on the authority of gunners at Bristol. Reported also by Mr. Miller as killed near Frankford.

Lophodytes cucullatus Hooded Merganser.

According to most of the gunners, this species has not been seen for many years. Three specimens were, however, killed at Bristol.

Anas boschas. Mallard.

Two observed during November, 1895, at Holmesburg. Killed occasionally at Bristol.

Anas obscura. Black Duck.

Five seen during November, 1895, on the river, and a number also observed later about the mouth of the Pennypack creek. Killed at Bristol (*Keim*) Many killed behind Petty's Island and the dyke. (*Miller.*) Two were also observed by Mr. Miller at Bristol, May 27, 1903, flying down the river.

Chaulelasmus streperus? Gadwall

This is reported from Bristol on the authority of Mr. Morris, but I have never seen it from this region and various gunners whom I have questioned do not seem to know it. It is probably unusual.

Mareca americana Baldpate.

Not many observed. Taken at Bristol. Common, according to Mr. Miller, in late fall and early winter in small flocks.

Nettion carolinensis. Green-winged Teal.

Scarce, only taken occasionally. Has been shot at Bristol. Mr. Miller reports it as rather rare, he has seen but one or two.

Querquedula discors Blue-winged Teal.

Not abundant. Generally seen on the marshes. One in my collection taken at Bristol, April 14, 1896, now in the collection of the Academy. It is also reported by Mr. Morris. Mr. Miller regards it as rather common, mostly seen in September.

Dafila acuta. Pintail.

A large flock seen on the Delaware during November, 1895. At times they almost completely cover the Rancocas flats. Also shot at Bristol. Many shot behind Petty's Island and the dyke. (Miller)

Spatula clypeata. Shoveller.

Reported on the authority of gunners as rare. Has been taken at Bristol.

Anas sponsa. Wood Duck

Common near Bristol in the fall of 1895, where a number were taken. According to reliable authority, prior to 1860 many were killed on the river above Richmond. They frequently occurred on the Pennypack till 1895, but subsequently have been seldom seen. Mr. Miller states that but few are shot in his neighborhood. He saw one at Volunteertown, May 28, 1901, which flew from a wood. One was also seen at Fish House, N. J., May 21, and a search made for the nest without success. A pair was reported to have bred near Parry, Burlington Co., N. J., in a wood along the Pensauken creek, in the spring of 1897. The observer stated that the young, eight or nine in number, were reared in an old flickers' cavity about thirty feet up in a dead tree. Another gunner stated that a pair bred on one of the islands in the Delaware, near Trenton. (Miller) In June, 1896, Mr. Hazen Brown several times saw a Wood Duck on the Pennypack creek near Melmar, which from its actions must have been breeding in the vicinity. (S. Brown.)

Aythya americana. Redhead.

Many killed opposite Holmesburg during the early eighties but their occurrence in any numbers has not been noted since. Has been taken in past years at Bristol (Morris).

Aythya vallisneria. Canvas-back.

Reported with and at the same time as the preceding but very rare now. Two were shot at the mouth of Pennypack creek at that time. Has also been shot at Bristol (Morris).

Aythya marila. Greater Scaup.

Confused by gunners with the following, but is apparently taken occasionally.

Aythya affinis. Lesser Scaup.

Probably more common than the last.

Aythya collaris Ring Neck Duck.

Rare; has been shot at Bristol (*Morris*).

Clangula clangula americana. Golden-eye.

Rather common; a few killed every year; generally occurs in pairs. Mr. Miller regards it as common in winter in small flocks. Several have been shot at Fish House, N. J.

Charitonetta albeola. Buffle-head.

A few observed each year, equally as abundant as the preceding. Quite common winter visitant according to Mr. Miller's experience.

Oidemia sp. Scoter.

Scoters are reported from Bristol by Mr. Morris, but the identity of the species is in doubt. It is probable that they occur on the river during or after heavy storms, and gunners have several times reported such birds though I have never personally seen them.

Harelda hyemalis Old Squaw.

A flock seen November 26, 1895, flying over the marsh at Bristol. A number were killed at Holmesburg several years before.

Erismatura jamaicensis. Ruddy Duck.

About 1887 and 1888 they were abundant opposite Holmesburg, one gunner killing as many as one hundred in a single day. At that time they appeared on the river in great numbers and no flight of any account has been seen since. Is taken at Bristol.

Branta canadensis. Canada Goose

Seen every year during the spring and fall migrations flying high over head. A flock of fifty were seen at Bristol during the last week of November, 1895, and it is occasionally shot there by gunners. Mr. Miller states that his brother observed a flock of twenty-six, on April 16, 1903, resting on a farm at Sandiford, Philadelphia, which only took wing upon the approach of gunners. The earliest dates on his record are March 25, 1898; February 12, 1902, April 16, 1903, on September 20, 1900, two were seen flying south.

Branta bernicla. Brant.

Five seen flying over the river near Holmesburg during a

rough storm in 1885. It has also been shot at Bristol. Mr. Miller reports two seen on the meadows in the fall of 1894 and 1895.

Botaurus lentiginosus. American Bittern

Common. Five specimens were obtained at Holmesburg in 1894 and 1895. One was shot in a small cedar tree where it was in the habit of roosting. The dates range from April 2 to May 6 in spring and November 2, 1894, in the fall. Another was taken near Philadelphia, June 29, 1894. Mr. Miller regards them as rare in his neighborhood. He saw one May 13, 1899, and on March 30, 1902, one was seen at Delair, Camden county, N. J.

Ardetta exilis. Least Bittern.

Frequent about Holmesburg, where it is easily flushed from the marshes. Specimens in my collection were taken August 22 and September 2, 1895, and September 3, 1896, one of these was well up the Pennypack Creek beyond tide-water in woodland.

Mr. Miller states that an incomplete nest was found May 28, 1903, at Richmond, in a marsh, and on June 6 of the same year, a completed nest. Still another nest was found at the mouth of Pensauken creek, N. J. Earliest date of arrival, April 24, 1899.

Ardea herodias. Great Blue Heron.

Common at Bristol in the spring, as many as a dozen are often seen at one time above the mill pond. They are found all along the river throughout the summer, but apparently do not nest in this section. Mr. Miller has observed it on the New Jersey side of the river from May to August, and reports one killed near Torresdale.

Garzetta egretta. White Egret.

In former years seen almost every August about Holmesburg where one at least was shot.

Florida caerulea. Little Blue Heron.

Two in the white plumage taken at Bristol, August 25, 1899. In this year, and also in 1902, it was particularly plentiful during August. Mr. Miller also reports a flock of eleven seen by a gunner near Raverton, N. J., in September, 1900. Other

records will be found in the paper by Wm B. Evans, CASSINIA, for 1902, p. 15.

Butorides virescens. Green Heron.

Very common, particularly in fall. Breeds. Earliest date of arrival in Mr Miller's record, April 29, 1902, latest date of departure, October 8, 1898. I have taken them at Holmesburg as late as September 26, 1896, while one was shot at Bristol, November 26, 1895, and another as early as April 16, 1897.

Nycticorax nycticorax naxvius. Night Heron.

Common, seeking the retired shelter of tall trees during the day, especially tulip trees, often quite a distance from the water. Mr Miller finds them most plentiful in fall, and has observed a pair along the Pennypack creek at Holmesburg for seven years, but never found a nest. His earliest date of arrival, April 3, 1899

Rallus elegans. King Rail.

Seen occasionally on the marshes about Holmesburg in summer. A nest was found, June 3, 1902, at Bridesburg, by Richard F Miller. More plentiful in fall. On February 3, 1895, a male bird was shot a quarter of a mile below Bristol by W. Wilson, of Frankford, and a female in the same spot February 17. The ground was covered with snow at the time. The birds were examined and identified by Mr. W. L. Whitaker.

Rallus virginianus. Virginia Rail.

Is shot by gunners between August and November at Bristol and Holmesburg, but is not nearly as abundant as the next. Mr. Miller found two nests of this species at Richmond in June, 1903, and considers that the rail nests and young rails in black, downy plumage, reported several times by gunners, probably belong to this species. One was found dead at Eddington, Bucks Co, Pa, August 27, 1900, which was killed by striking a telegraph wire.

Porzana carolina. Carolina Rail.

Abundant transient, shot in numbers in autumn. Earliest date of arrival in Mr Miller's record May 8, 1897.

Porzana novboracensis. Yellow Rail.

One obtained by W. L. Baily at Palmyra, N. J., October 13, 1886, and two in my collection taken September 16 and 25,

1895 at Holmesburg. It has also been flushed at the latter locality in November.

Gallinula galeata Florida Gallinule.

Besides the records in Mr Stone's list, it is reported from Bristol by Mr. Morris.

Fulica americana. Coot.

Reported by gunners as formerly abundant but less common at present. Has been taken at Bristol by Mr. Morris. One was also caught by Mr S. N. Rhoads along the river above Bristol, October 1, 1895. Mr. Ernest Schluter shot two at League Island, Phila., as late as November 2, 1897.

Phalaropus lobatus. Northern Phalarope

One was killed along the Delaware river in the spring of 1892 and mounted by C. A. Voelker, who exhibited it before the Club. Exact location not ascertained.

Philohela minor. Woodcock.

Two taken during the last week of November, 1895, and one November 3, 1897, several also in July, 1896, at Holmesburg. Formerly common but now becoming scarce. Mr Miller has found them during the breeding season in suitable localities at Sandiford, Philadelphia and West Palmyra, N. J., but never found a nest. His earliest spring record is March 15, 1898, at Rowlandville.

Gallinago delicata Wilson's Snipe.

Transient. Not nearly so common as formerly, specimens taken August, 1895 and September, 1894. Observed at Bristol, April 13, 1902 (Kern). Mr. Miller states that his earliest spring record is March 3, 1902, and latest fall record, October 24, 1903. He has observed it at Torresdale as late as April 18, 1899.

Helodromas solitarius. Solitary Sandpiper.

Regular and common migrant mostly seen inland on the smaller streams. I have taken them at Holmesburg as early as July. Mr. Miller states that it is common in late April and early in May and in September

Bartramia longicauda. Bartramian Sandpiper.

Seen occasionally in dry, open fields, away from the river. Mr Morris reports them as formerly abundant in late summer at Bristol.

Totanus melanoleucus. Yellow-legs.

Mr. Morris reports these birds as very scarce at present at Bristol and seen only in northeast storms. About 1883 they were plentiful and as many as a dozen were shot in a single morning. Two were seen near the mouth of Pensauken creek by Mr. Stone, May 30, 1897. Mr. Miller reports one seen May 6, 1902, at Bridesburg and one shot May 5, 1901, on the Pensauken creek, N. J. Mr. Ernest Schluter shot one November 9, 1897, at League Island, a remarkably late date.

Oxyechus vociferus. Killdeer Plover.

One taken August 6, 1894, at Holmesburg. Seen occasionally during rainy weather in fall when they seem to prefer soaked or wet grass land. Mr. Miller regards it as a common summer resident and furnishes the following dates: Arrivals, May 8, 1897; March 12, 1898; April 15, 1899, April 16, 1900; April 23, 1902; February 28, 1903. Departures, November 7, 1898; October 21, 1903. He states further that a pair bred at Sandiford, Philadelphia, in 1903, and at Bridesburg another pair succeeded in raising a brood of three, but the whole family was subsequently shot by gunners.

Charadrius dominicus. Golden Plover.

Mr. Morris reports one from Butcher's Point about 1895 and they were plentiful at Bristol about 1870. I have never observed the species.

Actodromas minutilla. Least Sandpiper.

Rare. Several seen August 16, 1897, at Greenwich Point, Philadelphia, and a flock of twenty-five or thirty on August 7, 1898, at Bridesburg.

Actitis macularia. Spotted Sandpiper.

Common summer resident. Breeds. Have recorded it from April 27 to October 13. Mr. Miller gives the following dates of migration: Arrivals, April 24, 1897; April 18, 1898; April 29, 1899; April 30, 1900, and 1901; April 25, 1902; May 8, 1903. Departures, August 26, 1897; August 12, 1898; August 20, 1900; September 1, 1903.