

THE COURTSHIP OF THE COMMON SCOTER.

BY
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At the approach of the breeding-season it is the habit of most of the ducks to form little parties for the purpose of courtship display. In all cases these are composed of a group of males surrounding a single female and going through a series of postures which, however grotesque to our eyes, are obviously enjoyed by the performers and presumably appreciated by the admiring female. But, while all such displays have certain features in common, the rules of conduct followed by the drakes, as well as the vigour of their antics, are seen to vary greatly when one species is compared with another.

Some ducks, such as the Tufted, are so undemonstrative as to seem almost cold-blooded, the drakes doing little more than convoy the duck in a loose squadron formation with their heads stiffly elevated.

Others, like the Mallard, appear to find so much pleasure in their formal and leisurely "showing off" that at times they are liable to drift away from the duck, as though to enjoy the rigour of the game apart from the distracting influence of the prize.

The Common Scoter (*Oidemia n. nigra*), on the other hand, possibly as a result of his seafaring life, is so hearty in his courting methods that they may almost be described as boisterous. Of this duck, J. G. Millais, in his *British Diving Ducks* (Vol. II., p. 61) says, "I do not know of any account of, nor have I seen, the courtship of this duck." The following notes, made in the spring of this year while watching a group of Common Scoters on the Kentish coast, may therefore be worth offering to readers of *British Birds*.

April 9th, 1926.—Except that it is broken by occasional ten-minute pauses for rest and titillation, the performance is continuous while my vigil lasts. Suitors fall out now and then during its progress, but their places are soon filled by passers-by who drop in and take a hand. At any given moment there are usually seven drakes surrounding the single duck. At first inspection, if the sea is at all rough, it is easy to overlook the female bird, for she is brown in colour and sits low on the water, while the males are conspicuously black and are, in every sense, making the most of themselves.

The direction of movement of the whole party is never constant for long, but its general trend, while I watch, is towards the west and parallel to the shore line. Whether

this results from an intention on the part of the duck to move that way, or whether it is effected by the set of the tide, I am unable to determine ; but, in any case, as she is the nucleus of the group its digressions will conform to her movements, be they voluntary or otherwise.

She swims with the van of her escort around her and the remainder tailing out behind. She often makes low swift rushes which may be intended to simulate acts of repulsion or attempts at escape, but are in either case mere feints. There is one handsome drake, bigger and blacker than his comrades, and it seems to me that she keeps with and even follows him, reserving her half-hearted attacks and furtive dabs for the rest of her suite. At times she rises and flies away, when all the company follows ; but her flight lasts only a short distance before she plumps down and is once more the centre of the turmoil which gives her so distracting a sense of her importance. She pretends to be embarrassed, turns this way and that, swims low, is self-effacing and modest—in a word, the complete feminine.

The demonstrations of the individual drakes are such as to carry them past her one by one, and presently she finds herself, as a result of this movement, at the tail of the group instead of leading it. Pretending to accept this as a chance of escape, she turns about and swims away, as though saying " I've had enough of this rowdy gang." Then they all turn about and go after her and she is caught up and once more penned in. She then usually turns again and so resumes the original line of travel.

The drakes go through many of the motions that are common to all ducks when displaying ; more particularly frequent upstandings and head shakings. There are also attitudes that are assumed by the whole party on occasion, or at any rate there is one such, when the whole company of drakes elevate their necks to the fullest extent (keeping the head horizontal) and maintain that position for some time—just as the Tufted drakes do when displaying. While making this concerted, though rather tame demonstration, there is a chorus consisting of a constantly repeated metallic note which to my dull ear sounds like "Crek." As I hear this only in squalls, and as these seem to coincide with the general erect-neck posture, I take it to be a sort of day-light serenade.

While doing this the drakes all carry their stiff tails at the proper Scoter angle of 30° to the horizontal, which makes this bird always so easy to identify. But they can make more play with the tail than that, for every now and then a drake

will fan out his tail and suddenly raise it over his back at a seemingly impossible angle ; though, when he does this, I cannot detect any elevation of the stern and hollowing of the back, such as is shown by the displaying Mallard.



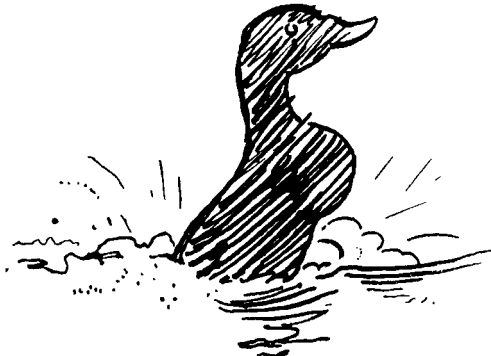
Among the most spectacular forms of display by the drakes are the rushes. These may be divided into three classes : (1) Low rushes. (2) High rushes. (3) Flight rushes.

In the low rush, which is the swiftest, the neck is extended and kept very low.



THE LOW RUSH.

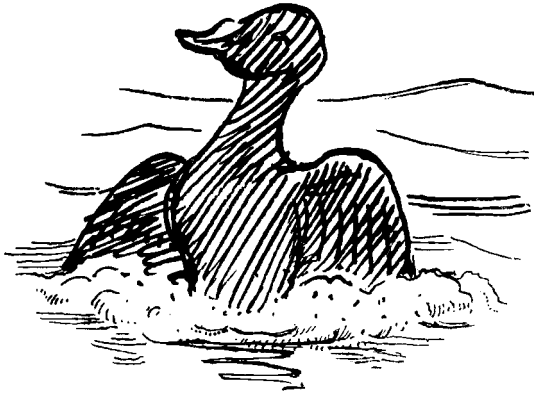
In the high rush, which is much slower, the bird foams past the duck in a half-upright position with his breast protruded.



THE HIGH RUSH.

The flight rush, as I have called it, is perhaps the most conspicuous and is in almost constant use by one or other member of the party. Every few moments one of the drakes

at the rear of the group rises and flies a few yards ahead of the procession—perhaps eight or ten wing-beats—and then alights on the water in front of the duck in a nearly upright position with his wings depressed and half extended: thus creating a great seething splash which the momentum of his flight allows him to carry with him for a distance of several feet after striking the surface. This is in full view of the duck. He then turns back towards her and, assuming a very “chesty” attitude, swims back to join the group.

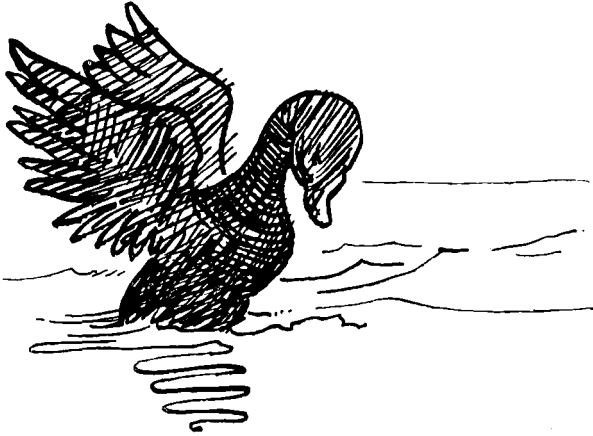


THE FLIGHT RUSH.

As often as not, two drakes will make a flight rush in this manner and make it almost simultaneously, giving the impression of an attempted attack and short pursuit by one of the two. But I think it happens thus, as a paired display, simply because the starting up of one drake serves to pull the action-trigger for another. And it will be noticed that, though the one who appears to be the assailant comes back after the short flight, very erect and seemingly triumphant, the pseudo-fugitive follows him just as erect and just as triumphant. And such chasing as there is is merely formal, for the drakes are not really combative and never attempt to come to grips.

But of all the various forms of display the most effective and curious is performed as follows. A drake pauses, opens his wings deliberately and fully while he remains sitting on the water, elevates them high over his back and then lifts himself nearly upright by about half a dozen strokes of his raised wings. While in that position, the bill is pointed

vertically downwards and the head passed down in front of the breast.



THE OBEISANCE

The duck also displays ; I saw her do a good deal of head-shaking, as well as this elaborate form of head-bowing.

Altogether, for the more constant of her admirers, the turmoil of their courtship must be highly fatiguing. Every now and then by common consent there is an interval for rest and revivment—which latter takes the form of furious nibbling and scratching. Then, with one mind, they fall to again.