

Mergansers diving to feed in the turbid water of the tidal River Teign, Devon, during November and December, 1962. The numbers varied from seven to twenty-four birds, comprising adult males and females (some of which were obviously paired) with a few recognisable immatures. They formed, if undisturbed by boatmen, into fairly compact flocks, and swam and dived in the same direction, although odd birds did so a few seconds before or after the main party had disappeared below the surface. We were able to make forty-three accurate stop-watch timings of their communal diving. These showed that the majority were below the surface within three to four seconds. The exceptions were the odd birds previously mentioned (approximately 20%); even including these, all were completely submerged within eight seconds. The average time below the surface was 17.4 secs., maximum period 29 secs. and minimum 13 secs. During one feeding period which included ten consecutive dives the dive-pauses averaged 7.3 secs. and were of the following duration: 2, 7, 10, 12, 10, 7, 3, 10, 5 secs.

On four separate occasions we observed three adult males and one female emerging with fish in their bills which were immediately swallowed. Otherwise, judging from the swallowing movements noted from other birds surfacing, ingestion had taken place whilst the sawbills were still submerged. Not once did we witness a Red-breasted Merganser on the surface with head partly submerged whilst searching for fish, and this method of feeding may be of little use when feeding in turbid waters.

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Gulls "parasitising" ducks and other birds

THE note on Goosanders "parasitised" by Black-headed Gulls (*13th Annual Report* : 172-3. 1962) records a form of behaviour that I have regarded as quite normal for a very long time. The Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* is certainly the worst offender and perhaps the first to have developed the habit in this country. On 9th September, 1950 at Aldenham Reservoir, Hertfordshire, I saw three gulls attacking two Herons *Ardea cinerea* that were carrying fish. On 14th October of the same year at some gravel pits near Radlett, Hertfordshire, five gulls were mobbing a Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, but I could not see if this was for the purpose of causing it to drop food. At Tring Reservoirs, Hertfordshire, on 15th November, 1953 two Black-headed Gulls attacked a Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* whenever it surfaced with fish. On 22nd November at Radlett, two gulls were parasitising a party of Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*, and one actually alighted on the back of a duck and snatched something from the bill (see Sage, 1955). At Aldenham Reservoir, on 5th December, 1954 I again saw Tufted Duck being subjected to the same treatment. So far as Goosander *Mergus merganser* are concerned, Boyd (1944) mentions a flock of 40 being attended by Black-headed Gulls, and also a Smew *Mergus albellus*. During January-February of 1959, 1960 and 1961 numbers of Goosander were present at Tring Reservoirs and these were invariably attended by Black-headed Gulls. I first noticed an interesting extension of this habit at Thundridge, Hertfordshire, on 28th November, 1959 when these gulls were attending a flock of Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus*, which were attacked by one or more gulls whenever they picked up food. I have since seen this particular

association frequently in many different parts of the country. Both Boyd (*op. cit.*) and Glegg (1944) mention Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* as another victim of this behaviour, and the former also mentions the Little Grebe *Podiceps ruficollis*.

The only record I have for the Common Gull *Larus canus* is from Hilfield Park Reservoir, Hertfordshire, where on 26th February, 1961 three adults were attending a flock of about 40 Wigeon *Anas penelope*. The ducks were bringing up Canadian Pondweed *Elodea canadensis* and on several occasions this was snatched by the gulls. Generally it was dropped again later, but several times I saw it swallowed by a gull. Boyd (*op. cit.*) mentions this species parasitising Great Crested Grebes.

I also have one record of Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus* indulging in this habit. On 3rd December, 1961 at Hunstanton, Norfolk, a number of adults and immatures were attending a scattered flock of about 150 Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* and 37 Eider *Somateria mollissima* a short distance offshore, and I once saw a gull alight on the back of a surfacing Eider.

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References

- BOYD, A. W. 1944. Attacks on diving birds by Black-headed Gulls. *Brit. Birds* 38 : 14-5.
GLEGG, W. E. 1944. Predatory habits of Black-headed Gulls. *Brit. Birds* 38 : 57.
SAGE, B. L. 1955. Black-headed Gull alighting on the back of Tufted Duck. *Brit. Birds* 48 : 177.

The calls and displays of African and Indian Pygmy Geese

LITTLE is recorded about the sounds made by Pygmy Geese and the situations in which they may be made. Both the African and Indian species *Nettapus auritus* and *N. coromandelianus* have now lived for several years at Slimbridge and I have had many incidental opportunities of hearing their calls. The following notes summarise my records, though I do not claim to have made a complete inventory of the utterances of either species.

African Pygmy Goose. Delacour in *The Waterfowl of the World*, vol. III, p. 114 (1959), describes the voice of the male as "a soft, twittering whistle". This general description applies to at least four different utterances used in different situations. In displaying to its mate on land the male holds its bill well down its breast as it utters a musical "chip, chip, chirrup, chiroo" which could be described as a song. When the male is excited it utters an explosive "chip, chip, chip" or "chip, chip, chirrup" with the neck extended, the head raised and the bill shaken up and down. This is used in greeting the female on returning from chasing off an intruding male and as a flight call after disturbance. A quiet, less demonstrative version of this call serves as an anxiety note.

When cornered, a single male often makes a hissing sound, though usually it threatens silently by just opening its bill.

The female responds to the "song" of the male with a sharper twittering whistle while bobbing her head up and down excitedly. A male returning from successfully repelling an intruder is greeted similarly. A subdued version of this twittering whistle occurs as an anxiety call. Sometimes this is uttered slowly (e.g. when a gull was flying over) and is then rather similar to the