

Common Merganser *Mergus Merganser*



CREDIT



HELEN GERE CRUICKSHANK

This fresh-water duck is also called the goosander and sheldrake. It often searches for its prey by swimming rapidly with its head half submerged, then when a fish is sighted, it dives in a flash and is fast enough to overtake and capture the fish.

Until he bought his spyglass, Thoreau often found it impossible to identify many of the ducks which he saw on Concord waters. He saw four ducks which he believed were mergansers on March 29, 1853, and wrote in his

JOURNAL:



Would it not be well to carry a spyglass in order to watch these shy birds such as ducks and hawks? In some respects, methinks, it would be better than a gun. The latter brings them nearer dead, but the former alive. You can identify the species better by killing the bird, because it was a dead specimen that was so minutely described, but you can study the habits and appearance best in the living specimen. These ducks first flew north, or somewhat against the wind (was it to get under weigh?), then wheeled, flew nearer me, and went south upstream, where I saw them afterward.

The selections which follow were all written after Thoreau purchased his spyglass. Though he sold his gun before he went to live in the Walden Pond cabin, he examined dead birds whenever he had an opportunity. With what rejoicing he carried home, on April 6, 1855, a freshly killed Common Merganser which he found!

The female Common Merganser has a white, not a red throat, as Thoreau wrote on March 23, 1859. Her entire head and neck, except for the sharply defined white of the upper throat, are red. Without doubt this in one of those inexplicable errors which authors sometimes make, for on April 7, 1855, Thoreau wrote of seeing distinctly the reddish brown or sorrel on the neck of a female merganser and again on April 16, 1855, he watched a flock of mergansers and wrote:



With my glass I see by their reddish heads that all of one party – the main body – are females. You see little more than their heads at a distance and not much white but on their throats, perchance.

Common Mergansers nest either on the ground or in holes in trees. Young hatched in tree nests stay there two or three days. Then the female, on the ground, calls to them and they drop, unassisted, to the ground. They are then led to the water where they swim and dive with speed and ease.

Thoreau's records of this species remained the earliest (February 27, 1860) and the latest (April 19, 1858) spring records in Concord at the time *Birds of Concord* was published in 1948. Abundant in Thoreau's time, it declined until the 1930s when it began an increase which continues to the present time.


1854

November 30, Thursday: First concession granted by Said Pasha, son of Mohammed Ali, to Ferdinand de Lesseps for the digging, and use for a period of 99 years, of a "[Suez Canal](#)" through the sands of Sinai.

EGYPT

In the afternoon [Henry Thoreau](#) sailed down the Concord River.




Nov. 30. P.M. — Sail down river.
No ice, but strong cold wind; river slightly over meadows. Was that large diver which was on the edge of the shore and scooted away down-stream as usual, throwing the water about for a quarter of a mile, then diving, some time afterward flying up-stream over our head, the goosander [**Common Merganser**  **Mergus merganser**] or red-breasted merganser? It was large, with, I should say, a white breast, long reddish bill, bright-red or pink on sides or beneath, reddish-brown crest, white speculum, upper part of throat dark, lower white with breast.

1855



April 6 [1855]. It clears up at 8 P.M. warm and pleasant, leaving flitting clouds and a little wind, and I go up the Assabet in my boat. The blackbirds have now begun to frequent the water's edge in the meadow, the ice being sufficiently out. The April waters, smooth and commonly high, before many flowers (none yet) or any leafing, while the landscape is still russet and frogs are just awakening, is [*sic*] peculiar. It began yesterday. A very few white maple stamens stand out already loosely enough to blow in the wind, and some alder catkins look almost ready to shed pollen. On the hillsides I smell the dried leaves and hear a few flies buzzing over them. The banks of the river are alive with song sparrows and tree sparrows. They now sing in advance of vegetation, as the flowers will blossom, — those slight tinkling, twittering sounds called the singing of birds; they have come to enliven the bare twigs before the buds show any signs of starting. I see a large wood tortoise just crawled out upon the bank, with three oval, low, bug-like leeches on its sternum.

You can hear all day, from time to time, in any part of the village, the sound of a gun fired at ducks. Yesterday I was wishing that I could find a dead duck floating on the water, as I had found muskrats, and a hare, and now I see something bright and reflecting the light from the edge of the alders, five or six rods off. Can it be a duck? I can hardly believe my eyes. I am near enough to see its green head and neck. I am delighted to find a perfect specimen of the *Mergus merganser*, or goosander [**Common Merganser**  *Mergus merganser*], undoubtedly shot yesterday by the Fast-Day sportsmen, and I take a small flattened shot from its wing, — flattened against the wing-bone apparently. The wing is broken, and it is shot through the head.¹ It is a perfectly fresh and very beautiful bird, and as I raise it, I get sight of its long, slender vermillion bill (color of red sealing-wax) and its clean, bright-orange legs and feet, and then of its perfectly smooth and spotlessly pure white breast and belly tinged with a faint salmon (or tinged with a delicate buff inclining to salmon).

This, according to [Wilson](#),² is one of the mergansers, or fisher ducks, of which there are nine or ten species and we have four in America. It is the largest of these four; feeds almost entirely on fin and shell fish; called water pheasant, sheldrake, fisherman diver, dun diver, sparkling fowl, harle, etc., as well as goosander. Go in April, return in November. Jardine has found seven trout in one female. [Nuttall](#)³ says they breed in the Russian Empire and are seen in Mississippi and Missouri in winter. He found a young brood in Pennsylvania. Yarrell⁴ says they are called also saw-bill and jack-saw; are sometimes sold in London market. Nest, according to [Selby](#),⁵ on ground; according to others, in a hollow tree also. Found on the continent of Europe, northern Asia, and even in Japan(?). Some breed in the Orkneys and thereabouts. My bird is 25 7/8 inches long and 35 in alar extent;

1. The chief wound was in a wing, which was broken. I afterward took three small shot from it, which were flattened against the bill's base and perhaps (?) the quills' shafts.

2. [Alexander Wilson](#), AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY, BY WILSON; WITH NOTES, BY JARDINE: TO WHICH IS ADDED, A SYNOPSIS OF AMERICAN BIRDS; INCLUDING THOSE DESCRIBED BY BONAPARTE, AUDUBON, NUTTALL, AND RICHARDSON, BY [T.M. \[Thomas Mayo\] Brewer](#). WITH 29 PAGES OF STEEL PLATES OF NEARLY 400 BIRDS. 8vo. New York: H.S. Samuels, 1852.

AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGY

3. Professor [Thomas Nuttall](#), A MANUAL OF THE ORNITHOLOGY OF THE UNITED STATES AND OF CANADA, Cambridge: Hilliard and Brown; Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1832-1834.

NUTTALL'S LAND BIRDS

NUTTALL'S WATER BIRDS

4. William Yarrell, A HISTORY OF BRITISH BIRDS, 3 volumes, London: J. Van Voorst, 1843.

5. [Prideaux John Selby](#), ILLUSTRATIONS OF BRITISH ORNITHOLOGY, Volume II, Water Birds (Edinburgh: W.H. Lizars, 1833).

VOLUME II, WATER BIRDS

from point of wing to end of primaries, 11 inches.

It is a great diver and does not mind the cold. It appears admirably fitted for diving and swimming. Its body is flat, and its tail short, flat, compact, and wedge-shaped; its eyes peer out a slight slit or semicircle in the skin of the head; and its legs are flat and thin in one direction, and the toes shut up compactly so as to create the least friction when drawing them forward, but their broad webs spread them three and a half inches when they take a stroke. The web is extended three eighths of an inch beyond the inner toe of each foot. There are very conspicuous black teeth-like serrations along the edges of its bill, and this also is roughened so that it may hold its prey securely.

The breast *appeared* quite dry when I raised it from the water.

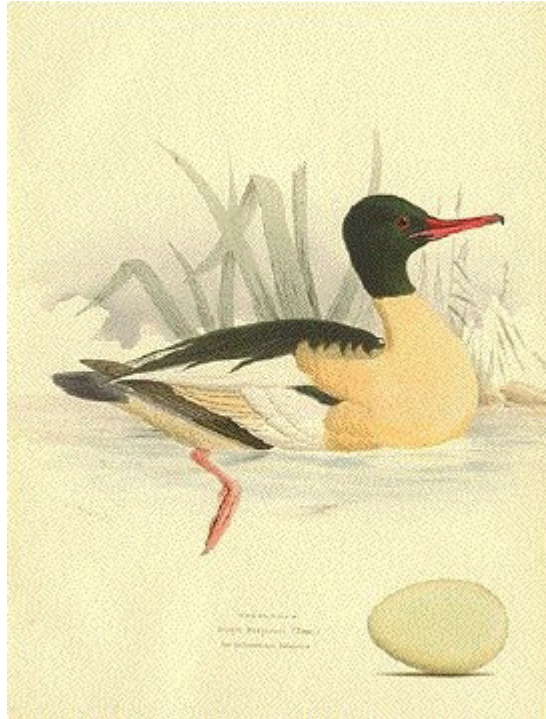
The head and neck are, as [Wilson](#) says, black glossed with green, but the lower part of the neck pure white, and these colors bound on each other so abruptly that one appears to be sewed on to the other.

It is a perfect wedge from the middle of its body to the end of its tail, and it is only three and a quarter inches deep from back to breast at the thickest part, while the greatest breadth horizontally (at the root of the legs) is five and a half inches. In these respects it reminds me of an otter, which however I have never seen.

I suspect that I have seen near a hundred of these birds this spring, but I never got so near one before. In Yarrell's plate the depth of the male goosander is to its length (*i.e.* from tip of tail to most forward part of breast) as thirty-seven to one hundred and three, or the depth is more than one third. This length in Yarrell's bird, calling the distance from the point of the wing to the end of the primaries eleven inches, is about fourteen and a half inches of which my three and a quarter is not one fourth. In [Nuttall](#)'s plate the proportion is thirty-two to ninety-one, also more than one third. I think they have not represented the bird flat enough.

Yarrell says it is the largest of the British mergansers; is a winter visitor, though a few breed in the north of Britain; are rare in the southern countries. But, according to Yarrell, a Mr. Low in his Natural History of Orkney says they breed there, and, after breeding, the sexes separate; and Y. quotes Selby as saying that their nest is near the edge of the water, of grass, roots, etc., lined with down, sometimes among stones, in long grass, under bushes, or in a stump or hollow tree. Y. continues, egg "a uniform buff white," two and a half inches long. Sometimes carry their young on their backs in the water. It is common in Sweden and, according to the traveller Acerbi, in Lapland they give it a hollow tree to build in and then steal its eggs. The mother, he adds, carries her young to the water in her bill. Y. says it is well known in Russia and is found in Germany, Holland, France, Switzerland, Provence, and Italy. Has been seen near the Caucasus (and is found in Japan, according to one

authority). Also in North America, Hudson's Bay, Greenland, and Iceland.



Prideaux John Selby's Goosander



APRIL 7. [1855] In my walk in the afternoon of to-day, I saw from Conantum, say fifty rods distant, two sheldrakes, male and probably female, sailing on A. Wheeler's cranberry meadow. I saw only the white of the male at first, but my glass revealed the female. The male is easily seen a great distance on the water, being a large white mark. But they will let you come only within some sixty rods ordinarily. I observed that they were uneasy at sight of me and began to sail away in different directions. I could plainly see that vermillion bill of the male and his orange legs when he flew (but he appeared all white above), and the reddish brown or sorrel of the neck of the female, and, when she lifted herself in the water, as it were preparatory to flight, her white breast and belly. She had a grayish look on the sides. Soon they approached each other again and seemed to be conferring, and then they rose and went off, at first low, downstream, soon upstream a hundred feet over the pond, the female leading, the male following close behind, the black at the end of his curved wings very conspicuous. I suspect that about all the conspicuous white ducks I see are goosanders.

I skinned my duck yesterday and stuffed it to-day. It is wonderful that a man, having undertaken such an enterprise, ever persevered in it to the end, and equally wonderful that he succeeded. To skin a bird, drawing backward, wrong side out, over the legs and wings down to the base of the mandibles! Who would expect to see a smooth feather again? This skin was very tender on the breast. I should have done better had I stuffed it at once or turned it back before the skin became stiff. Look out not to cut the ear and eyelid.

But what a pot-bellied thing is a stuffed bird compared even with the fresh dead one I found! It looks no longer like an otter, like a swift diver, but a mere waddling duck. How perfectly the vent of a bird is covered! There is no mark externally.



MARCH 1. [1856] It is remarkable that though I have not been able to find any open place in the river

almost all winter, except under the further stone bridge and at Loring's Brook, –this winter so remarkable for ice and snow,– Coombs should (as he says) have killed two sheldrakes at the falls by the factory, a place which I had forgotten, some four or six weeks ago. Singular that this hardy bird should have found this small opening, which I had forgotten, while the ice everywhere else was from one to two feet thick, and the snow sixteen inches on a level. If there is a crack amid the rocks of some waterfall, this bright diver is sure to know it. Ask the sheldrake whether the rivers are completely sealed up.

The sheldrake has a peculiar long clipper look, often moving rapidly straight forward over the water. It sinks to very various depths in the water sometimes, as when apparently alarmed, showing only its head and neck and the upper part of its back, and at others, when at ease, floating buoyantly on the surface as if it had taken in more air, showing all its white breast and the white along its sides. Sometimes it lifts itself up on the surface and flaps its wings revealing its whole rosaceous breast and its lower parts, and looking in form like a penguin. When I first saw them fly upstream I suspected that they had gone to Fair Haven Pond and would alight under the lee of the Cliff. So, creeping slowly down through the woods four or five rods, I was enabled to get a fair sight of them, and finally we sat exposed on the rocks within twenty-five rods. They appear not to observe a person so high above them.

It was a pretty sight to see a pair of them tacking about, always within a foot or two of each other and heading the same way, now on this short tack, now on that, the male taking the lead, sinking deep and looking every way. When the whole twelve had come together they would soon break up again, and were continually changing their ground, though not diving, now sailing slowly this way a dozen rods, and now that, and now coming in near the shore. Then they would all go to preening themselves, thrusting their bills into their backs and keeping up such a brisk motion that you could not get a fair sight of one's head. From time to time you heard a slight titter, not of alarm, but perhaps a breeding-note, for they were evidently selecting their mates. I saw one scratch its ear or head with its foot. Then it was surprising to see how, briskly sailing off one side, they went to diving, as if they had suddenly come across a school of minnows. A whole company would disappear at once, never rising high as before. Now for nearly a minute there is not a feather to be seen, and the next minute you see a party of half a dozen there, chasing one another and making the water fly far and wide.

When returning, we saw, near the outlet of the pond, seven or eight sheldrakes standing still in a line on the edge of the ice, and others swimming close by. They evidently love to stand on the ice for a change.

1858



MARCH 28. [1858] From Wheeler's plowed field on the top of Fair Haven Hill, I look toward Fair Haven Pond, now quite smooth. There is not a duck nor a gull to be seen on it. I can hardly believe that it was so alive with them yesterday. Apparently they improve this warm and pleasant day, with little or no wind, to continue their journey northward. The strong and cold north-west wind of about a week past has probably detained them. Knowing that the meadows and ponds were swarming with ducks yesterday, you go forth this particularly pleasant and still day to see them at your leisure, but find that they are all gone. No doubt there are some left, and many more will soon come with the April rains. It is a wild life that is associated with stormy and blustering weather. When the invalid comes forth on his cane, and misses improve the pleasant air to look for signs of vegetation, that wild life has withdrawn itself.




March 29. Monday. Hear a phoebe early in the morning over the street. Considerable frost this morning, and some ice formed on the river. The white maple stamens are very apparent now on one tree, though they do not project beyond the buds.


P. M. -To Ball's Hill.

Nearly as warm and pleasant as yesterday.

I see what I suppose is the female rusty grackle; black body with green reflections and purplish-brown head and neck, but I notice no light iris. By a pool southeast of Nathan Barrett's, see five or six painted turtles in the sun, - probably some were out yesterday, - and afterward, along a ditch just east of the pine hill near the river, a great many more, as many as twenty within a rod. I must have disturbed this afternoon one hundred at least. They have crawled out on to the grass on the sunny side of the ditches where there is a sheltering bank. I notice the scales of one all turning up on the edges. It is evident that great numbers lie buried in the mud of such ditches


and mud-holes in the winter, for they have not yet been crawling over the meadows. Some have very broad yellow lines on the back; others are almost uniformly dark above. They hurry and tumble into the water at your approach, but several soon rise to the surface and just put their heads out to reconnoitre. Each trifling weed or clod is a serious impediment in their path, catching their flippers and causing them to tumble back. They never lightly skip over it. But then they have patience and perseverance, and plenty of time. The narrow edges of the ditches are almost paved in some places with their black and muddy backs. They seem to come out into the sun about the time the phoebe is heard over the water.

At the first pool I also scared up a snipe [**Common Snipe**  *Gallinago gallinago*]. It rises with a single *cra-ack* and goes off with its zigzag flight, with its bill presented to the earth, ready to charge bayonnets [*sic*] against the inhabitants of the mud.

As I sit two thirds the way up the sunny side of the pine hill, looking over the meadows, which are now almost completely bare, the crows, by their swift flight and scolding, reveal to me some large bird of prey hovering over the river. I perceive by its markings and size that it cannot be a hen-hawk [**Rough-legged Hawk**  *Buteo lagopus*], and now it settles on the topmost branch of a white maple, bending it down. Its great armed and feathered legs dangle helplessly in the air for a moment, as if feeling for the perch, while its body is tipping this way and that. It sits there facing me some forty or fifty rods off, pluming itself but keeping a good lookout. At this distance and in this light, it appears to have a rusty-brown head and breast and is white beneath, with rusty leg-feathers and a tail black beneath. When it flies again it is principally black varied with white, regular light spots on its tail and wings beneath, but chiefly a conspicuous white space on the forward part of the back; also some of the upper side of the tail or tail-coverts is white. It has broad, ragged, buzzard-like wings, and from the white of its back, as well as the shape and shortness of its wings and its not having a gull-like body, I think it must be an eagle. It lets itself down with its legs somewhat helplessly dangling, as if feeling for something on the bare meadow, and then gradually flies away, soaring and circling higher and higher until lost in the downy clouds. This lofty soaring is at least a grand recreation, as if it were nourishing sublime ideas. I should like to know why it soars higher and higher so, whether its thoughts are really turned to earth, for it seems to be more nobly as well as highly employed than the laborers ditching in the meadow beneath or any others of my fellow-townsmen.

Hearing a quivering note of alarm from some bird, I look up and see a male hen-harrier, the neatly built hawk, sweeping over the hill.

While I was looking at the eagle (?), I saw, on the hillside far across the meadow by Holbrook's clearing, what I at first took for a red flag or handkerchief carried along on a pole, just above the woods. It was a fire in the woods, and I saw the top of the flashing flames above the tree-tops. The woods are in a state of tinder, and the smoker and sportsman and the burner must be careful now.

I do not see a duck [**Common Merganser**  *Mergus merganser*] on the Great Meadows to-day, as I did not upstream yesterday. It is remarkable how suddenly and completely those that were here two days ago have left us. It is true the water has gone down still more on the meadows. I infer that waterfowl travel in pleasant [*sic*] weather.

With many men their fine manners are a lie all over, a skim-coat or finish of falsehood. They are not brave enough to do without this sort of armor, which they wear night and day.

The trees in swamps are streaming with gossamer at least thirty feet up, and probably were yesterday.

I see at Gourgas's hedge many tree sparrows and fox-colored sparrows. The latter are singing very loud and sweetly. Somewhat like *ar, tea*, — *twe'-twe, twe'-twe*, or *ar te, ter twe'-twe, twe'-twe*, variously. They are quite tame.



MARCH 30. [1858] To my boat at Cardinal Shore and thence to Lee's Cliff. Landing at Bittern Cliff, I went round through the woods to get sight of ducks on the pond. Creeping down through the woods, I reached the rocks, and saw fifteen or twenty sheldrakes scattered about. The full-plumaged males, conspicuously black and white and often swimming in pairs, appeared to be the most wary, keeping furthest out. Others, with much less white and duller black, were very busily fishing just north of the inlet of the pond, where there is about three feet of water, and others still playing and preening themselves. These ducks, whose tame representatives are so sluggish and deliberate in their motions, were full of activity. A party of these ducks fishing and playing is a very lively scene. On one side, for instance, you will see a party of eight or ten busily diving and most of the time under water, not rising high when they come up, and soon plunging again. The whole surface will be in

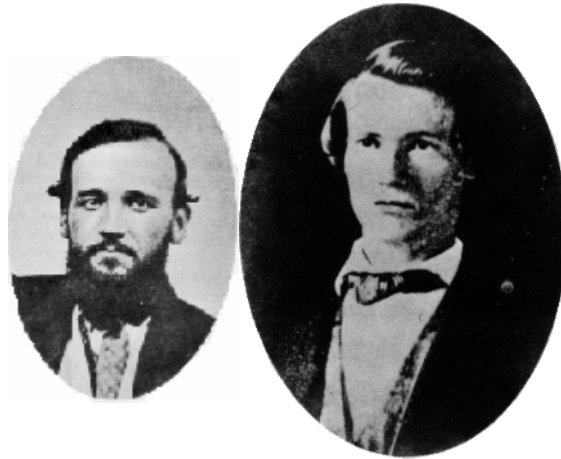
commotion there, though no ducks may be seen. I saw one come up with a large fish, whereupon all the rest, as they successively came to the surface, gave chase to it, while it held its prey over the water in its bill, and they pursued with a great rush and clatter a dozen or more rods over the surface, making a great furrow in the water, but, there being some trees in the way, I could not see the issue. I saw seven or eight all dive together as with one consent, remaining under half a minute or more. On another side you see a party which seem to be playing and pluming themselves. They will run and dive and come up and dive again every three or four feet, occasionally one pursuing another; will flutter in the water, making it fly, or erect themselves at full length on the surface like a penguin, and flap their wings. This party makes an incessant noise. Again you will see some steadily tacking this way or that in the middle of the pond, and often they rest there asleep with their heads in their backs. They readily cross the pond, swimming from this side to that.



MARCH 23. [1859] As we sit there, we see coming, swift and straight, northeast along the river valley, not seeing us and therefore not changing his course, a male goosander, so near that the green reflections of his head and neck are plainly visible. He looks like a paddle-wheel steamer, so oddly painted up, black and white and green, and moves along swift and straight like one. Ere long the same returns with his mate, the red-throated, the male taking the lead.

1860

➡ March 16, Friday: [Aaron D. Stevens](#) and Albert Hazlett were hanged.




The gallows that had turned off John Brown would be made into a portico in front of a private residence in Charlestown, Virginia. Pieces of the leftover timber, after this conversion, would be handed around as mementos as if they were pieces off the True Cross. Because of a relationship Stevens had with [Rebecca B. Spring](#), the bodies of Stevens and Hazlett would be interred on the grounds of the former [Eagleswood](#) social experiment near Perth Amboy, [New Jersey](#).⁶




March 16. 2 P. M.—Thermometer 55; wind slight, west by south. To Abner Buttrick's Hill. The buttercup radical leaves are many of them now a healthy dark green, as if they had acquired new life. I notice that such are particularly downy, and probably that enables them to endure the cold so well, like mulleins.

6. The graves would at least initially be guarded out of a fear either real or imaginary that they would otherwise be desecrated by local people.

Those and thistles and shepherd's-purse, etc., have the form of rosettes on the brown ground. Here is a flock of red-wings. [**Red-winged Blackbird**,  *Agelaius phoeniceus*] I heard one yesterday, and I see a female among these. These are easily distinguished from grackles by the richness and clarity of their notes, as if they were a more developed bird. How handsome as they go by in a checker, each with a bright-scarlet shoulder! They are not so very shy, but mute when we come near. I think here are four or five grackles with them, which remain when the rest fly. They cover the apple trees like a black fruit. The air is full of song sparrows and bluebirds to-day.

The minister asked me yesterday: "What birds are they that make these little tinkling sounds? I haven't seen one." Song sparrows.

C. saw a green fly yesterday.

Saw a flock of sheldrakes [**Common Merganser**,  *Mergus merganser*] a hundred rods off, on the Great Meadows, mostly males with a few females, all intent on fishing. They were coasting along a spit of bare ground that showed itself in the middle of the meadow, sometimes the whole twelve apparently in a straight line at nearly equal distances apart, with each its head under water, rapidly coasting along back and forth, and ever and anon one, having caught something, would be pursued by the others. It is remarkable that they find their finny prey on the middle of the meadow now, and even on the very inmost side, as I afterward saw, though the water is quite low. Of course, as soon as they are seen on the meadows there are fishes there to be caught. I never see them fish thus in the channel. Perhaps the fishes lie up there for warmth already.

I also see two gulls nearly a mile off. One stands still and erect for three quarters of an hour, or till disturbed, on a little bit of floated meadow-crust which rises above the water,—just room for it to stand on,—with its great white breast toward the wind. Then another comes flying past it, and alights on a similar perch, but which does not rise quite to the surface, so that it stands in the water. Thus they will stand for an hour, at least. They are not of handsome form, but look like great wooden images of birds, bluish-slate and white. But when they fly they are quite another creature.

The grass is covered with gossamer to-day, though I notice no floating flocks. This, then, is a phenomenon of the first warm and calm day after the ground is bare.

See larks about, though I have heard of them in the winter.



MARCH 24. [1860] The sheldrakes appear to be the most native to the river, briskly moving along up and down the side of the stream or the meadow, three-fourths immersed and with heads under water, like cutters collecting the revenue of the river bays, or like pirate crafts peculiar to the stream. They come the earliest and seem to be most at home.

The water is so low that all these birds are collected near the Holt. The inhabitants of the village, poultry-fanciers, perchance, though they be, [know not] these active and vigorous wild fowl (the sheldrakes) pursuing

their finny prey ceaselessly within a mile of them, in March and April. Probably from the hen-yard fence with a good glass you can see them at it. They are as much at home on the water as the pickerel is within it. Their serrated bill reminds me of a pickerel's snout. You see a long row of these schooners, black above with a white stripe beneath, rapidly gliding along, and occasionally one rises erect on the surface and flaps its wings, showing its white lower parts. They are the duck most common and most identified with the stream at this season. They appear to get their food wholly within the water.



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