CHARLES DIXON

BRITISH SEA BIRDS

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
GULLS AND TERNS

The Gull Family – Changes of Plumage – Characteristics – Great Black-backed Gull – Lesser Black-backed Gull – Herring Gull – Common Gull – Kittiwake – Black-headed Gull – Skuas – Great Skua – Richardson's Skua – Terns – Sandwich Tern – Common Tern – Arctic Tern – Roseate Tern – Lesser Tern – Black Tern

Amongst the many natural objects that confront the visitor to the sea, there are none more readily detected than birds. The wide waters of the ocean and its varied coast-line of cliff or sand, shingle or mud-flat, are the haunts of many birds of specialised type. Many of these birds are only found on or near the sea; they are as inseparably associated with it as the beautiful shells and seaweeds and anemones themselves. Some of these birds are common and widely distributed; others are scarce or local in their habitat; some frequent the shore, others the water; whilst many are equally at home on both. Again, many of them are migratory, or of wandering habits; some but summer visitors, others winter refugees. It matters little, however, what the season may be, for many interesting birds are sure to be met with by the sea; the wide waters and wet tide-swept shores are a perennial feeding place, and a safe and congenial refuge.

Of all the birds that haunt the sea and the shore, those of the Gull family are the best known. From whichever direction the sea is reached, almost invariably the first indication of its vicinity is a Gull, sailing along, it may be, in easy, careless flight, or wheeling and gliding high in air above the waste of restless waters. The Gull and its kindred then are inseparably associated in the minds of most people with the sea, and with them, therefore, it certainly seems most appropriate to commence our study of marine bird-life.

The Gull family is divided by many systematists into three fairly well-defined groups or sub-families, viz., the typical Gulls or Larinæ, the Skuas or Stercorariinæ, and the Terns or Sterninæ. The Skuas, however, are included with the typical Gulls by many naturalists, a proceeding for which much may be said, thus reducing the three sub-families to two. In their distribution the Gulls and Terns may almost be regarded as cosmopolitan, but the Skuas are chiefly boreal in their dispersal, four of the half dozen known species breeding in the Arctic Regions, and two others dwelling in the higher latitudes of the Southern Hemisphere. Some of the species are very widely distributed; the dispersal of others is just as remarkably restricted. For instance, the Glaucous Gull has a circumpolar habitat, and the Black-headed Gull ranges from the Faröe Islands to Japan; but, on the other hand, Larus fuliginosus is said to be peculiar to the Galapagos Islands and Larus bulleri to New Zealand. Three out of the four species of Arctic Skuas are circumpolar in their distribution; the fourth may possibly be so.

In adult plumage the Gulls are not remarkable for any great diversity of colour. French gray predominates upon the upper parts; the under parts are white, often suffused with a delicate rosy tint; the primaries are usually dark gray, brown, or black, in many species spotted and tipped with white. Some species assume (by a change of colour and not by a moult) a sooty-brown or black head or hood during the breeding season; Ross's Gull dons a black narrow collar at that period. The wings are ample, long, and pointed; the tail is even, except in Ross's Gull in which it is wedge-shaped, and in Sabine's Gull in which it is forked. The legs are comparatively short, and the feet are webbed.

Gulls moult twice in the year. When first hatched young Gulls are covered with down. Young, in first plumage of the Black-headed group of Gulls, have the feathers of the mantle, the scapulars, and the innermost secondaries, brown with pale margins; the crown, nape, and ear-coverts brown; and the tail with a broad sub-terminal band of the same colour. The second plumage – assumed as soon as the foregoing is completed – retains brown marks of immaturity on the scapulars and innermost secondaries; the wing-coverts are streaked with brown, and the tail still retains its brown sub-terminal band. This plumage is carried until the following spring, when the brown hood – assumed for the first time – is mottled with white; the tail-band is more or less broken; whilst the scapulars and innermost secondaries assume the colour peculiar to the adult. For several years the white markings on the primaries gradually increase in extent until the bird arrives at perfect maturity. The larger Gulls – of which the Herring Gull may be taken as a typical species – mature much more slowly, the perfectly adult plumage not being assumed until the bird is four years old. The plumage succeeding the downy stage is brown on the upper parts, each feather with a pale margin, and white on the under parts streaked with brown. After each succeeding moult in spring and autumn, the traces of immaturity grow less, the wing-coverts and tail retaining them longest. The white spots on the primaries are the latest signs of complete maturity. The colour of the feet, bill, iris, and irides, slowly changes until that characteristic of the adult is assumed.

Gulls, popularly speaking, are inseparably associated with the sea, yet the haunts of many species, especially during the breeding season, are by no means exclusively marine ones. Almost every kind of coast is frequented by these birds – rocky headlands, precipitous downs, sandy dunes, mud-flats or slob-lands, and marshes; whilst every harbour round the shore of our islands is periodically visited. Gulls are not very pronounced migrants. They wander about a good deal during the non-breeding season, and many Arctic species draw southwards during winter, but all the indigenous British forms are residents on and off the coasts throughout the year. With these few words of introduction we will now proceed to give a more detailed account of the strictly British species.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL

This, the largest of the Gulls, and scientifically known as *Larus marinus*, is one of the least common British species, most locally distributed during the breeding season. It is not known to breed anywhere on the east coast of England, and but very locally on the south coast, in Dorset. It becomes more numerous in the wilder districts, in Cornwall, the Scilly Islands, and Lundy, and thence locally along the Welsh coast and in the Solway district. In Scotland it becomes more common, especially among the islands of the west coast, including St. Kilda, and on the north coast to the Orkneys and Shetlands. It is also widely distributed in Ireland, but there, as everywhere else, extremely local, and nowhere, comparatively speaking, numerous. During the non-breeding season it wanders more, and is then seen at many places along the coast. I have seen as many as fifty of these fine birds in Tor Bay, after heavy gales from the eastward. Montagu asserts that this Gull is locally known as a “Cob,” but the term is of pretty general application to the larger Gulls, and, so far as I can learn, has no distinctive significance. In St. Kilda, where I had many opportunities of studying the habits of this Gull, it is regarded with hatred by the natives, owing to its depredations amongst the eggs of the other sea-fowl. In this island it is universally known by the name of “Farspach.” No Gull is more wary, and yet on occasion none are bolder and more daring. I have seen a bird of this species tear to pieces a Puffin I had shot as it floated upon the sea, and that in spite of several shots I had at it with a rifle. It is a sad robber of the other and more weakly Gulls, not only pillaging their nests at every opportunity, but chasing them, and making them relinquish bits of food they may chance to pick up within view. Like the Raven and the Crow, it seems fully conscious of its marauding misdeeds, and correspondingly artful, as if always instinctively fearing that treatment it metes out so lavishly to creatures more helpless than itself.

The Great Black-backed Gull is one of the least gregarious of the family, and the large gatherings of this species that are sometimes witnessed are chiefly due to such accidental causes as an unwonted supply of food, or a continued spell of boisterous weather, which often drives Gulls in thousands into sheltered bays and estuaries. This Gull is generally met with beating about in a solitary manner; less frequently three or four may be seen together; whilst even in the breeding season, when most Gulls congregate into colonies whose size seems only to be regulated by the accommodation presented, it is certainly the least sociable of all the British species. It is a great nomad during the non-breeding season, often wandering far from land, resting and sleeping on the sea. On the other hand, it is one of the least frequent visitors of the Gull-tribe to inland districts, and, as its specific name of *marinus* indicates, is closely attached to the sea. The usual call-note of this fine Gull is a loud, whining, oft-repeated *ag-ag-ag*. Notwithstanding the purity of its plumage, and the magnificence of its presence, the Great Black-backed Gull is almost as unclean in its habits as the Raven or the Vulture. No kind of carrion is refused, either lying on the shore or floating on the sea – weakly, death-stricken lambs or wounded birds, eggs or chicks left unguarded by their owners, fish basking or sleeping near the surface, offal cast from the fishing boats or quays, animal refuse of all kinds, form the prey of this Gull.

The usual breeding place of this Gull is the top of an isolated rock stack, a little distance from the mainland; less frequently it selects a range of high cliffs overhanging the sea. A small island in a mountain loch is sometimes selected, and occasionally this may be some considerable distance inland. In a few chosen spots the birds nest in such close, if somewhat scattered proximity, that we might call it a colony, but the rule is for odd and more or less isolated pairs to be met with, and often at considerable distances apart. The fact that this Gull may be found nesting in one chosen spot year by year, warrants the supposition that it may pair for life. The usually scanty nest is made in a hollow amongst the short turf, or heath, or on the flat ledge of a precipice. Sometimes the eggs are laid in a bare hollow amongst the rocks. It is formed of grass, dry sea-weed, twigs, and stalks of marine plants, and occasionally a tuft of wool or a few odd feathers are placed in the lining. The eggs are usually three in number, but sometimes only two, or even one. They are grayish-brown, or brown sometimes tinged with olive in ground colour, spotted with dark umber-brown and brownish-gray. This Gull is a very light sitter, but is bold and clamorous when disturbed from the nest.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL

Very similar in appearance, but much smaller in size – it is only about half the weight – this pretty Gull, the *Larus fuscus* of Linnæus, is one of the most familiar birds of the coast, especially in the more northerly portions of the British Islands. It is a more trustful species than its larger ally, admits man to approach it with less show of fear or wariness, and may often be seen on the meadows and ploughed fields near the sea, seeking for its food as familiarly as a Rook or a Daw. Singularly enough, the east and south coasts of England are not resorted to by this Gull for breeding purposes. It is not known to breed south of the coast of Northumberland, or east of that of Devonshire; and this is all the more remarkable, seeing that one of its most important colonies in our area is situated upon the Farne Islands. It breeds locally from Cornwall to the Solway, but further northwards becomes more generally dispersed, right up to the Orkneys and the Shetlands. In Ireland, again, this Gull is a very local breeder, and is only known to nest in one or two localities. During the non-breeding season it wanders far from home, and may then be met with on and off most of the British coasts: young and immature birds do not resort much to the nesting colonies, but roam widely at all seasons. It is a very remarkable fact that adult Gulls of this species are so rarely seen near Heligoland, as the species breeds commonly on the Baltic and Scandinavian coasts, and yet its average appearance at the island is about once in ten years! The Heligolandish name for this Gull is very appropriate, signifying “little mantle wearer,” and refers to the dark slate-gray mantle. Unlike its larger ally the present species is

very gregarious, and socially inclined at all seasons, mixing freely not only with its own kind, but with the Herring Gull and the smaller forms, such as the Kittiwake, and the Common Gull. These latter birds, however, must too often prefer its room to its company, for it repeatedly robs them of their prey, and is, Gull-like, ever ready to profit by the labours of its weaker congeners. Like the preceding species it is almost omnivorous in its tastes, and will as readily make a meal from stranded garbage on the shore, as from the living fish it deftly swoops upon as they swim near the surface. On the Lincolnshire coasts it visits the flight nets, in company with the Hooded Crows, and preys upon any birds that may be entangled in them. It is also a persistent follower of ships, attending the trawlers, and feeding upon the refuse fish cast overboard when the trawl net is emptied. It swims lightly enough even on a rough sea, riding like a cork on the wave-crests, and sleeps upon the water, when roaming far from land. Flocks of this Gull may often be seen standing upon the mud-flats or level sandy reaches, preening their plumage, and waiting, it may be, for a turn of the tide that may bring some particular food of which they are in quest. It will be remarked that these larger Gulls, especially, often run for a short distance before taking flight, and that when alighting they frequently keep their long wings unfolded and erect for a moment or two before finally closing them. Great numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and other species collect in Tor Bay during the herring and sprat seasons, and at these times they will wait and watch about the harbours and quays in fluttering hosts for the odd fish and offal. The note of this Gull very closely resembles that of the Herring Gull, so closely, in fact, that no symbol can denote the difference. It may be syllabled as *klĭ-ou-klĭ-ou*, and during the breeding season is very persistently uttered. Owing to its relatively longer wings, this Gull looks more graceful in the air than its larger and heavier congener: its flight is remarkably easy and buoyant, and on occasion rapid.

The usual breeding places of the Lesser Black-backed Gull are low rocky islands – these larger Gulls always prefer an island, covered with coarse marine grass, sea campion, and the like – but in some localities a rock stack, an island in an inland lake, on grassy downs, in mosses, and flows. This Gull usually breeds in colonies, and some of these are very large. One of the most extensive, within the present writer's experience, is situated on the Farne Islands. The entire group of islands may be regarded as one vast colony of Lesser Black-backed Gulls, if we except a few of the outlying rocks, where the Cormorants breed. It is more than likely that this Gull pairs for life, seeing that it resorts to the same nesting places, year by year, for time out of mind. The nest, even in the same colony, varies a good deal in size and general completeness. Some birds are content merely to line a hollow in the rocks with a little dry grass; others are more bulky yet slovenly structures, rude heaps of turf, heather stems, sea campions, or dry grass and sea-weed, the lining being composed of finer grasses, many of them often semi-green. Occasionally a feather or two are seen, but these may be due more to accident than to design. Few sights in the bird-world are prettier than a colony of disturbed Gulls during the breeding season. As their haunts are invaded, the frightened birds rise in fluttering thousands, drifting to and fro like a snowstorm, in which each flake is a startled bird. The noisy din, the rush of wings, the swooping, soaring, fluttering Gulls, the ground strewn with nests – all combine to form a picture in the mind that time can never efface! The eggs of this Gull are usually three in number, sometimes as many as four. They vary to an almost incredible degree. The ground colour varies from pale green to dark olive-brown and gray, spotted, blotched, or streaked with dark liver-brown, pale brown and gray. Vast numbers of the eggs of this Gull are collected for food, especially at the Farne Islands. The birds do not appear to suffer in any way by this systematic pillage, for they are always allowed to rear a brood from a second clutch at the Farnes, and most rigorously protected whilst doing so.

HERRING-GULL

Of all the gulls that frequent the British coasts, this, the well-known *Larus argentatus* (*i. e.* "silver-winged"), is certainly the most common and widely dispersed. It is no exaggeration to say

that the Herring-Gull may be met with on every part of the British coasts, from the Orkney and Shetland Islands on the north, to Cornwall and the Scilly Islands in the south; from the Blasquets in the wild west of Ireland, to the mouth of the Thames and the Bass Rock in the east. It is the Gull *par excellence* associated in the popular mind with the sea shore – the "Sea Gull" of the visitor to marine resorts, ubiquitous, well-known from the Land's End to John-o'-Groat's. For its size, it is certainly the tamest and least suspecting Gull found on British waters. It may be readily recognised, when adult, by the pale grey colour of its mantle, but the young and immature birds are less easily identified. During the non-breeding season it wanders far and wide like the rest of its kind, and is a very frequent visitor to the fields, not only adjoining the sea, but at some distance inland. Whilst tilling operations are in progress, especially in spring, it passes regularly from the coast to the fields, following the plough, or collecting upon the newly-manured pastures, in quest of food. Wild, stormy weather, I have repeatedly noticed, will also drive this Gull landwards sooner, perhaps, than any other species. Like its congeners, it is practically omnivorous. Carrion is sought after as readily as living fish and other marine creatures. I have also known this species regularly to visit a slaughter-house near the coast, to feed upon the offal thrown upon the pastures for manure; and I have repeatedly watched the pure-plumaged birds fighting with the Rooks and Crows for a share of the feast. This Gull will also feed on grain, grubs, and worms, is a constant follower of vessels, and congregates in unusual numbers at fishing harbours during the sprat and herring seasons. In its flight it is graceful in the extreme, and it may often be seen soaring at a vast altitude like a Vulture. Writing on the flight of this Gull, Gätke (in his fascinating work, *Heligoland, as an Ornithological Observatory*) says: "Not only are these Gulls able to soar in a calm atmosphere in a direction straight forwards, or sideways, on calmly outspread wings, but, as has been more fully discussed in the case of Buzzards, they can also, in a manner similar to theirs, soar upwards to any desirable altitude. The Gulls are able to perform their soaring movements on the same plane in all phases of the weather, during the most violent storm, as well as in a perfect calm, progressing forwards or sideways at the most variable rates of velocity; now darting along with the swiftness of an arrow, now merely gliding, as it were, at the slowest pace imaginable. In the latter case, indeed, we are frequently, even against our will, forced to the conclusion that these birds must have at their command some unknown means or mechanism which prevents their sinking; for neither is the surface-area of their wings large enough, nor are these organs sufficiently concave in form, to allow of their supporting the bird after the manner of a parachute." I can endorse these remarks fully from my own observations (Conf. *Idle Hours with Nature*, pp. 261, 262). That these flights are accompanied with any vibratory movements of the feathers is erroneous, as I have had many opportunities of satisfying myself, especially when observing the flight of the Fulmar at St. Kilda, the birds then not being more than six feet away from me, when I am positive every individual feather was in perfect rest.

But to return from this digression to the general habits of the Herring Gull. The breeding season of this Gull is in May and June. Owing to its remarkable aptitude for accommodating itself to the various peculiarities of the coast, it is certainly the most widely dispersed Gull of the British species during the season of reproduction. Perhaps its favourite breeding place is a low rocky island, but failing this it is equally at home upon a range of sea cliffs, a stack of rocks, or less frequently an island in a loch, or, as at Foulshaw Moss in Westmoreland, a marsh. The nest is made on a ledge or in a hollow or chink of the cliffs; in a sheltered hollow of the grassy downs: or amongst the thick growth of sea campion, thrift, and other marine plants that often grow so luxuriantly in the bird's haunts. I have remarked that the nest is usually larger when built on a cliff than when on the ground, and in some cases is almost dispensed with. It is composed of turf, dry sea-weed, coarse grass, and stalks of various marine plants, lined with finer grass often gathered green. The eggs are two or three in number, varying in ground colour from pale bluish-green through yellowish-brown to olive-brown, and the spots are small and few and dark brown, pale brown, and gray. This Gull will lay a second lot of eggs if the first clutch be taken, as they often are, for culinary purposes. When the nesting places

are intruded upon by human visitors, the Gulls, as usual, become very noisy, the birds whose eggs are most directly threatened being filled with the greatest clamour. I have often remarked that Gulls whose nests were safe in inaccessible parts of the cliffs have remained quietly sitting on them, while their less fortunate neighbours have been filled with noisy alarm, as they watched the fate of their eggs from the air above. The note is very similar to that of the preceding species.

COMMON GULL

This pretty Gull, the *Larus canus* of Linnæus, is, during the summer months especially, one of the most locally distributed of the British species. The Common Gull formerly bred in Lancashire, but at the present time is not known to do so anywhere in England. From the Solway northwards, it becomes tolerably common as a breeding species, right up to the Shetlands, in many inland localities, as well as on the coast. It is also a somewhat local bird in Ireland. The Common Gull, or "Blue Maa," as it is locally known, is about half the size of the Herring Gull, with a mantle, in the adult, almost as dark as that of the Lesser Black-backed Gull. During the non-breeding season this Gull is fairly well distributed along the coast, and then visits localities where it is never seen in summer. It is a decided shore species, rarely wandering far out to sea, and is one of the first Gulls driven inland by stormy weather. Although popularly believed to be so inseparably associated with the sea, the Gulls, and especially the smaller kinds such as the one now under notice, often resort to fields even at some distance from the water. The Common Gull seems as much at home inland as on the shore. I have seen it on the high moorlands, and in Scotland flying about many a loch pool, or land-locked sea arm; it is equally at home on the ploughed lands and the pastures, yet its plumage seems strangely out of place in such localities, and the incongruity is further intensified should the startled birds take refuge in a neighbouring tree, as they sometimes do. There is nothing specially remarkable about the flight of this Gull; it is performed in the slow and deliberate manner of all these birds, and is equally wonderful in many of its characteristics. The food of this Gull is composed indiscriminately of marine and terrestrial creatures. The bird will follow the plough, or search the pastures for grubs, insects, and worms; it searches the shore for any stranded creature to its omnivorous taste; it hunts the wide waste of waters in quest of fish, and follows vessels to pick up any refuse that may be thrown from them. This Gull is to a great extent nocturnal in autumn and winter. Its note is a harsh and persistently uttered *yak-yak-yak*, most frequently heard when its breeding places are invaded by man or predaceous animals. The Common Gull is a thoroughly gregarious and social bird, often congregating in large flocks, and mingling with other species.

By the end of April most of the adult Common Gulls have left all our southern coasts and retired northwards to their breeding places. As these are visited yearly in succession, it is not improbable that this Gull pairs for life. Its nest colonies are situated both inland and on the coast. An island in a mountain lake, the marshy shore of a loch, the flat table-like summit of a rock stack, or the rolling grassy downs near the open sea, in little populated districts, may be chosen; but so far as my experience with this Gull extends, I have found the favourite site to be rocky islands in quiet secluded sea-lochs. These colonies of Common Gulls vary a good deal in size; and in some districts, perhaps where suitable sites are scarce, the bird breeds in scattered pairs only. The eggs are laid during the last half of May and the first half of June; only one brood is reared in the season, but if the first eggs are taken they are generally replaced. The nest of this Gull varies much in size; some structures are mere hollows lined with a tuft or two of grass; others are more elaborate, composed of heather stems, pieces of turf, sea-weed, and stalks of marine plants, lined with finer grass, often gathered green. They are built indiscriminately amongst the long herbage, in hollows and crevices of rocks, or on ledges of the bare cliffs. In Norway the eggs of this Gull have been taken from the deserted nest of a Hooded Crow, in a pine tree, but no instances of a similar character have occurred, so far as is known, in our islands. The Common Gull usually lays three eggs, but instances of four are not rare.

They run from olive-brown to buffish-brown in ground colour, spotted and often streaked with darker brown and brownish-gray. The eggs of this Gull are extremely good eating. One often wonders why they are not gathered for the table, just as much as those of the Lapwing.

KITTIWAKE

This charming Gull, the *Larus tridactylus* of scientists, so named from its entirely absent or rudimentary hind toe, is one of the best known, as it is one of the most widely distributed, British species. These remarks are however most applicable to the non-breeding season; for during the nesting time it is rather more local, owing to the conditions under which its young are reared. The Kittiwake very closely resembles the Common Gull in general appearance, but the mantle is paler, the legs and feet are dark brown, and the primaries, or longest feathers of the wings, have broad black tips: it is also a perceptibly smaller bird, the smallest in fact of the typically marine Gulls. Of all the British Gulls the Kittiwake is certainly the most maritime in its habits, and is never known to visit inland districts, unless driven from the coast by storms of exceptional violence. Save in the breeding season it may be met with on all the low-lying coasts, visiting harbours, bays, and fishing villages, and imbuing many a littoral scene with life. The Kittiwake is a much more oceanic bird than the Common Gull, and often wanders immense distances from land in quest of food. It is said that birds of this species have been known to follow vessels across the North Atlantic, but this seems almost incredible – not because the bird is physically unable to perform the feat, but because we can scarcely believe any bird would wander of its own free-will so far from the local centre of its habitat. One of the most striking characteristics of the Kittiwake is its peculiar cry, heard to the best advantage at the nesting places. This note, from which the colloquial name of the species is derived, resembles the syllables *kitty-a-ake*, requiring but little play upon the imagination to render as *get-a-way-ah-get-away*. It is only during the breeding season that this cry is heard to perfection, and after that is over the bird becomes a singularly silent one. The flight of this Gull is light and buoyant, but powerful and often long sustained. The bird may often be observed fishing at no great distance from shore, flying to and fro every now and then, poising and hovering previous to pouncing down upon a fish or other floating object. It is also an adept swimmer, and very frequently sleeps whilst sitting on the waves. The Kittiwake is perhaps more exclusively a fish-feeder than any other British Gull. It seldom searches for food on shore, and does not exhibit those omnivorous tastes that characterise so many of its congeners. It is a persistent follower of fish shoals, especially herrings and sprats, and will remain in the company of fishing fleets for weeks together. A scrap of food thrown from a ship will speedily be seized by one of these birds; whilst a few crustaceans and other marine creatures are taken from time to time.

The Kittiwake is a rather late breeder. It most probably pairs for life, as the same nesting places are resorted to each season. Of all the Gulls none breed in more inaccessible situations. The nests are almost always built upon a beetling ocean cliff, against which the waves are for ever beating in ceaseless strife. Except during the three months or so of the breeding season, this Gull is seldom seen at its nesting sites. In April or May the birds collect at their various stations, never quite to leave them again until the young are able to fly. It is a very gregarious bird, and some of these “gulleries” are very extensive, containing many thousands of pairs. In some localities, however, where the accommodation is either limited or unsuitable, but a few birds congregate to form a colony. The nests, often made as close together as they can be wedged, are built upon the ledges, shelves, and prominences of the rocks. Favourite spots are where the cliffs overhang, or at the entrance of a cave or hollow in the precipice. They are made at varying heights on the cliff, tier above tier, the lowest often within a few feet of high-water mark, but the most crowded places are usually about midway up from the sea. The nests are large and well made, many of them apparently the accumulation of years, composed externally of turf and roots, with much of the soil attached, and caked together. Upon this foundation a further nest of sea-weed and the stalks of various plants is formed, finally lined with finer and dry grass, and

sometimes a few feathers. The nests and the cliffs in their vicinity are thickly whitewashed with the droppings of the birds. The eggs are two or three in number, rarely four, and vary from greenish-blue, through pale buff and buffish-brown to brownish-olive, blotched and spotted with reddish-brown, paler brown, and gray. No words of mine can adequately describe the beauty and animation of a colony of Kittiwakes. Their cries are deafening, and when the frightened birds flutter from the cliffs, and pass to and fro in thousands like a living snowstorm, the effect, whether seen from the water or from the cliffs above is charming in the extreme. It is sad to think that such a spot should too often become a scene of slaughter. But such is the case; the poor birds breeding too late fully to profit by the protection afforded by law. Vast numbers of this pretty gentle Gull are killed yearly, for the sake of their plumage. Even when the breeding places are left, the poor birds are shot in thousands out at sea. The Kittiwake is the most trustful perhaps of the Gulls, and a flock will remain hovering round a boat until almost decimated by the gunners. The young Kittiwake is widely known along the coast under the name of "Tarrock."

BLACK-HEADED GULL

In most inland districts frequented by this Gull (the *Larus ridibundus* of Linnæus) it is known as the "Peewit," the "Peewit Gull," or the "Laughing Gull." It is not only one of the most widely distributed but one of the best known of our sea birds. And yet to describe the Black-headed Gull as a "sea" bird in the sense we have hitherto used the term is, to say the least, somewhat misleading. This species belongs to a small group which might more appropriately be termed "marsh" Gulls. It is almost as much seen in certain inland localities as it is in marine ones; whilst in many of its habits it bears a close resemblance to the Rook – feeding on the pastures, following the plough, and perching regularly in trees. During spring and summer many of these Gulls resort to inland haunts to breed – as for instance at Scoulton Mere in Norfolk, Twigmoor in Lincolnshire, and Aqualate Mere in Staffordshire – and from these centres visit the surrounding country for miles, in quest of food. Slob-lands and low muddy coasts are favourite haunts of this Gull, but during the non-breeding season it may be met with on almost all parts of the coast. In winter it often wanders up the larger tidal rivers for miles; and the Gulls that visited the Thames in such abundance during recent winters, were principally of this species, doubtless from Norfolk and Essex. Many of these Gulls appear to pass our southern coasts, especially in spring, and I have remarked them again in great plenty during the sprat season in late autumn. I may in addition state that this migration has been observed along the coast of South Devon, the nearest breeding station being near Poole in Dorset. The birds linger about Tor Bay in spring until, in many cases, the full breeding plumage – the sooty-brown head – is assumed.

Owing to the great diversity of its haunts the Black-headed Gull is almost omnivorous in its diet. Inland it feeds on grubs – especially wire-worms – insects, worms, fresh-water fish, and newly sown grain, as I have often ascertained by dissection; on the sea coast it subsists on fish, crustaceans, and various odds and ends obtained about harbours or vessels. It seeks its food both whilst swimming about the water, fluttering above it, or when walking on the shore. This Gull is much more Tern-like in its habits than the larger species we have already dealt with. Of its services to the agriculturist there can be no question; it is just as useful on the land as the Rook, without that bird's few little pilfering ways.

The Black-headed Gull is an inland breeding species, and resorts to marshes, wet moors, and meres, at varying distances from the sea. Sometimes these breeding-places are in fairly well-timbered districts, and often surrounded by trees and bushes. This Gull, too, is remarkably gregarious during the breeding season, and some of its colonies are very extensive, consisting of many thousands of pairs. The "gulleries" are visited for nesting purposes in March or April, and as the birds return to the same spots year after year, they probably pair for life. Nesting begins in April. Most of the nests are made upon the ground in rush tufts, in hassocks of coarse grass and sedge, amongst reeds in

shallow water, on masses of the previous year's decayed aquatic vegetation, or on the flat, spongy, moss-covered ground. Odd nests are occasionally made in the trees and bushes, or even on boat-houses. Many of the nests can only be described as mere rounded hollows in the cushions of grass or sedge; the more elaborate structures are usually in the wettest situations, and these latter are often added to as incubation advances, either to replace the wear and tear from the incessant wash of the water, or to provide a sufficiently large platform on which the young may rest. The nests are made of bits of reed and rush, coarse grass, flags, and scraps of moss, lined with finer materials of similar description. The eggs of this Gull are usually three in number, sometimes four. They are subject to much variation, ranging from rich brown to pale bluish-green in ground colour, spotted, blotched, blurred, and streaked with several shades of brown and gray. Large numbers of these eggs are gathered for culinary purposes, the crop being systematically taken, and the birds always allowed eventually to sit upon their final clutch. Many of these eggs are passed off for those of the Peewit by unscrupulous dealers, notably in Leadenhall market. Few scenes in the bird world are prettier than a colony of Black-headed Gulls. When disturbed at their nests the birds rise in fluttering crowds, drifting noisily to and fro, anxious for the safety of their eggs or helpless young. As is the invariable rule with birds that continue to replace their taken eggs, but one brood is reared in the season.

THE SKUAS

These birds may be readily distinguished, even when on the wing, by the cuneiform or wedge-shaped tail, and by the dark upper plumage. The bill is also much stouter and hooked at the point, whilst the claws are sharp and curved. Skuas are only exceptionally seen by the ordinary visitor to the sea-side. In the first place, they only breed in our islands in the extreme north or west of Scotland, and in the second place they are decidedly oceanic in their habits, after the nesting season is passed. Occasionally Skuas may be seen on migration, especially in autumn, and along our eastern and southern seaboard; occasionally they are driven shorewards by protracted stormy weather, and under these circumstances have frequently been known to visit inland localities. Odd birds are generally seen, perhaps a party of half a dozen, but on very exceptional occasions large flocks make their appearance – witness the thousands of Pomarine Skuas that visited the coast of Yorkshire during the autumns of the years 1879 and 1880.

The Skuas are birds of remarkably powerful flight, displaying marvellous command over themselves in the air, turning and twisting with great speed. These birds are the Raptors of the sea; a terror to the Gulls and Terns; merciless robbers of the hard-won spoil of more weakly species; destroyers even of the eggs and helpless young of other sea birds. All the four species of northern Skuas are visitors to the British Seas, but only two of them are indigenous to our islands. The first of these to be noticed here is the Great Skua, *Stercorarius catarrhactes*, one of the most local of British birds during the breeding season, as its only known nesting places in our area are on Unst and Foula, two small islands of the Shetland Group. Except during the breeding season, the Great Skua is mostly oceanic in its habitat, wandering long distances from land in quest of prey, attending vessels and fishing fleets, only drawing landwards by stress of weather or unusual abundance of food. This Skua is practically omnivorous. During its summer sojourn near and on the land it repeatedly raids the colonies of other sea fowl, to prey upon exposed eggs or unguarded young; it captures the smaller Gulls, notably the Kittiwake: it also picks up any stranded fish or other carrion; and is constantly on the watch to chase any Gull or Tern that catches a fish, following the poor bird with fatal persistency until, terror stricken, it disgorges its food, which is promptly seized by the voracious Skua. The call note of this Skua is very similar to that of the Lesser Black-backed Gull, but when under the excitement of chasing other birds, or of seeking to guard its own domain, the bird utters a loud cry which is likened by many observers to the word *skua* or *skui*.

The Great Skua resorts to its breeding grounds in April, and the eggs are laid in May. As it returns yearly to the same places, it very possibly pairs for life. The nests are made upon the ground of the high moorlands, amongst the heath and grass, and are mere hollows in the moss, sometimes lined with a little dry grass. The eggs of this Skua are two in number, and vary from pale buff to dark olive-brown in ground colour, sparingly spotted and speckled with dark brown and grayish-brown. These eggs are large in size, and very closely resemble those of the Herring Gull. But one brood is reared in the year, and by the end of August the young birds and their parents desert the nesting colony, and adopt their pelagic habits. Few birds are so courageous in defence of their nests as the Skua. Even such predaceous creatures as Eagles, Ravens, and dogs are driven off; whilst human intruders are screamed at and approached within a few feet, the birds wrathfully extending their legs as if they would strike, and skimming to and fro in rage. Many tales of this bird's daring at its nesting places are current in Shetland, where it is known almost universally as the "Bonxie."

Our second species is Richardson's Skua, the *Stercorarius richardsoni* of some systematists, the *S. crepidatus* of others. Although not quite so local as the preceding species, its breeding area is remarkably restricted, so far as the British Islands are concerned. It breeds on the Hebrides, in Caithness and Sutherlandshire, and on the Orkneys and Shetlands. Richardson's Skua is a more gregarious species than its larger relative, but its habits generally are much the same. It is, for its size, equally daring and rapacious; is also remarkable for its powers of flight; but differs from the Great Skua in being more gregarious. Richardson's Skua is for the most part a summer migrant to the British Islands, and numbers of birds pass along our coasts in spring to their northern breeding-grounds. It is only during the seasons of passage that the visitor to our southern coasts may hope to fall in with this bird, and even then it does not approach the land much. Like the other Skuas, the present species is a relentless robber of the Gulls and Terns, chasing them up and down until they disgorge their fish, and repeating the process at every opportunity. Eggs, young birds, and carrion, are also eaten. It is said to capture weakly birds, but I do not think it is so much addicted to this Hawk-like habit as the preceding species. During summer insects and ground fruits are eaten, whilst it has been known to take worms and molluscs. The note of this Skua is described either as a plaintive *mee* or *kyow*, and when in chase of a bird it has been likened to the syllable *yah*, oft repeated.

Richardson's Skua reaches its breeding-grounds in the British Islands early in May. Its haunts at this season are open moors, at no great distance from the sea. Although social at its breeding-places, it can scarcely be described as gregarious, and the nests are usually scattered up and down the moorland area. This Skua appears to pair annually, and the nest, always made upon the ground, is merely a hollow, carelessly lined with a little dry herbage, and sometimes nothing but a shallow cavity in the moss. The eggs, normally, are two, but sometimes three have been found, and occasionally but one. They range from olive to brown in ground colour, spotted and speckled with darker brown and grayish brown. Incubation is performed by the female, and lasts about a month. At its breeding-places Richardson's Skua is very demonstrative, and often reveals the situation of the nest by its anxious movements above the intruder's head. After the young are reared the moors are deserted, and for the remainder of the year this Skua is decidedly pelagic in its habits and haunts.

We now pass to the Terns. These pretty graceful birds – widely known as "Sea Swallows" – differ in many respects from the Gulls and Skuas. They most closely resemble the former in general appearance, but may be easily distinguished by their slender form, small size, and forked tail. Of the dozen species that have been regarded as "British," no less than five breed within the limits of our islands. The Terns are far more locally distributed than the Gulls. Many miles of coast may be traversed without one ever seeing a Tern. They are all migratory birds with us, visiting Britain in summer to breed, and retiring south again in autumn. It is only during the season of passage, therefore, that they are at all widely dispersed, for the remainder of their sojourn on our coasts is spent at or in the near vicinity of their breeding-stations. The five indigenous British species follow.

SANDWICH TERN

This fine species – the *Sterna cantiaca* of Gmelin, and the *S. sandvicensis* of Latham – is not only the largest of the indigenous British Terns, but one of the rarest. It was formerly much more widely dispersed along our coasts, but persecution has thinned its numbers, and the seaside holiday-maker has banished it from many of its old-time haunts. Special interest attaches to this bird, because it is one of the very few species that have been first made known to science from examples obtained in the British Islands. It was first discovered in 1784, at Sandwich, on the coast of Kent, and described by Latham three years later. Alas! no longer does this beautiful Tern breed in its early haunts on the Kentish coast; it has disappeared from there, as it has from many another locality, without hope of return. The most important breeding-place of this Tern, and certainly the most accessible to the majority of observers, is situated on the famous Farne Islands; even here the bird is much less common than it used to be. There are small colonies on Walney Island, in Cumberland, in the Solway district, on Loch Lomond, in the Firth of Tay, and on the coast of Elgin. Its only known breeding-station in Ireland is in Co. Mayo.

The Sandwich Tern reaches the British coasts in April or early in May. But little is seen of this species whilst on passage, for it evidently keeps some distance from shore as a rule, or passes quickly and unobserved. The smaller Terns, for instance, are commonly seen on the coast of South Devonshire in Spring and Autumn, but I cannot recall a single strong migration of the present species in that locality. This Tern is seldom or never seen at any distance from the sea. Most of its waking time is spent in the air, flying about with easy, graceful motion, in quest of its finny prey. The Sandwich Tern, however, is nothing near so graceful looking on the wing as its smaller relatives, the heavier body, broader wings, and much less acutely forked tail giving it a heavier, more cumbersome appearance. Most of its food is obtained whilst it hovers above the sea. The way in which all the Terns feed is very pretty. They poise and hover above their finny victims, and every now and then dart downwards like a stone into the water and capture a fish, fluttering up again, or remaining for a moment to swallow their capture. A flock of Terns (of any species) fishing is one of the prettiest sights imaginable. In addition to small fish the Sandwich Tern devours crustaceans of various kinds, whilst its young are fed largely upon sand-lice and beetles. The Terns are much cleaner feeders than the Gulls, and I have never known them touch carrion or refuse. I have, however, seen them pounce down upon scraps of food thrown from a vessel. The usual call-note of the Sandwich Tern is a somewhat shrill scream.

This Tern probably pairs for life, and returns regularly every season to its old-accustomed haunts to breed. These are by preference low, rocky, or sandy islands, covered with marine herbage, varied with barer patches, and with beaches of rough shingle. Similar conditions are sought on the mainland, in a secluded spot on the coast, but an island is always preferred. The Sandwich Tern is gregarious, but its colonies, with one exception, in our islands are nowhere very extensive. This one exception is at the Farne Islands, where it has been computed the birds number upwards of a thousand pairs. As the nesting-places are visited very regularly year by year this Tern probably pairs for life. I have noticed, however, that the birds shift their actual breeding ground from time to time, using several spots in succession. One year they will nest here, another year there, on the same small island perhaps, but sometimes removing *en masse* to another one of the group. The nests are always placed upon the ground, either amongst the sand shingle and drifted *debris*, a short distance from high water mark, or amongst the sea campion, thrift, and coarse grass further inland; sometimes a bare mound on the highest part of the island is selected. Many nests are made within a small area, sometimes so close together as to render walking amongst them without treading on their contents a difficult matter. The nests are slight enough, mere hollows lined with a few bits of withered herbage, and in some cases even this simple provision is neglected. The eggs, which are laid from about the middle of May to the middle of June, are generally two in number, but sometimes three. These vary from creamy-white to

rich buff in ground colour, handsomely blotched and spotted with various shades of brown and gray. During the hot June days the eggs seem to require little incubation, but there are always plenty of birds about the spot, ready to rise fluttering and screaming into the air when their breeding grounds are invaded by man. But one brood is reared in the season, yet if the first clutches of eggs be lost they will be replaced.

COMMON TERN

This Tern, known as the *Sterna hirundo* of Linnæus, by most British ornithologists, although there can be little doubt that the great Swedish naturalist applied the term indiscriminately to this and the Arctic Tern, is one of the best known British species, especially round the English and Welsh coasts. It becomes rarer in Scotland, where it is largely replaced by the Arctic Tern. The Common Tern, distinguished by its white underparts from the Arctic Tern, is migratory and arrives on the British coasts towards the end of April, retiring south in Autumn. Its favourite haunts during the summer are the various groups of low rocky islands, and the more secluded portions of the coast where sandbanks and shingle occur. Save on passage, this Tern is seldom seen far from the vicinity of its nest colony. The flight of the Common Tern is exceedingly buoyant and graceful, the long slender wings and acutely forked tail assisting greatly in the general effect. Like the Swallows the tarsus of the Terns is remarkably short, so that on the ground the birds seem awkward, and rarely attempt to walk far; on the sea, however, they are quite at home and swim well. There are few prettier sights along the shore than a flock of Terns busy in quest of food. Where the beach is rocky, and the water somewhat deep inshore, the birds may be watched with ease. In a serried throng they flutter to and fro; ever and anon a bird falls down like a fragment of white glittering marble into the sea with a loud splash, and in a moment rises again with its finny prey. Bird after bird keeps dropping so; now and then a bird remains swimming on the water; now and then two birds chase each other in rapid flight. And so for miles the Terns will continue to follow the shoal until hunger is satisfied, or the fish retire to greater depths. The food of this species is chiefly composed of small fish, but insects and crustaceans are also devoured. The note of the Common Tern is a shrill *krick* or *kree-ick*, most frequently uttered when the bird is flying alarmed over its invaded nesting place.

The Common Tern is rather a late breeder, its eggs not being laid until the end of May or early in June. It breeds in companies of varying size, the suitability of the site being in some measure a determining cause. This Tern is equally capricious in the site selected for the nests; sometimes one spot is chosen, sometimes another; but there can be little doubt that the bird pairs for life, and evinces considerable attachment for its accustomed haunts. I have found almost invariably that the Common Tern habitually lays its eggs farther from the water than the Arctic Tern, and always prefers to conceal them amongst vegetation of some kind. Islands are always preferred to the mainland, doubtless because of their greater safety. We cannot class this bird as an elaborate nest builder, a mere hollow, scantily lined with a little withered grass or weeds, being the only provision. The two or three eggs vary from buff to grayish-brown in ground colour, blotched and spotted with several shades of rich brown and gray. But one brood is reared, and as soon as the young are strong upon the wing, the nesting places are deserted, and the movement south begins.

Terns migrate leisurely in autumn, often remaining a day or so here and there, on and off the coast, and are then seen in localities which they never frequent during summer.

THE ARCTIC TERN

This Tern, widely known to systematists as the *Sterna arctica* of Temminck, was unaccountably confused with the preceding species, until the German naturalist, Naumann, appears first to have pointed out their specific distinctness. The Arctic Tern is *par excellence* the Tern of our northern

coasts, say from the Farne Islands and Lancashire onwards to the Orkneys and the Shetlands. I am not aware that it breeds anywhere on the English coast between Spurn and the Scilly Islands, but there are a few scattered colonies on the west coast of England and Wales. This pretty Tern may be distinguished from its near ally, the Common Tern (which it closely resembles in size and general appearance), by its grayer under parts and perceptibly longer outermost tail feathers. Like all its congeners, the Arctic Tern is a summer migrant to the British seas and coasts, arriving from the south late in April or early in May. It prefers very similar haunts to those of the preceding species – low rocky islands with sandy or shingly beaches, and with a fair amount of grass and other marine vegetation upon them. It is equally gregarious in its habits, breeding in colonies, and returning regularly to certain districts to rear its young. Its slenderer form, and proportionately longer wings and tail, make it even more elegant looking in the air than its congener. It catches its food in the same Hawk-like or Gannet-like manner, pouncing down into the water and seizing the tiny fish as they swim near the surface. No Tern dives, and it is certainly exceptional for the bird completely to immerse itself; usually it flutters on the surface for a moment, then rises again. Small fish and crustaceans form the principal food of this species. Its note is very similar to that of the preceding Tern – a shrill and monotonous *krick*, often prolonged into two syllables.

The nesting season of this Tern begins in June, and fresh eggs may be found throughout that month. Rocky islands seem everywhere to be preferred for nesting places, and the same habit of changing the exact hatching ground prevails in this as in the preceding species. The Farne Islands are, or used to be, a great breeding station of the Arctic Tern, and there I have taken great numbers of its eggs. The bird probably pairs for life. It differs somewhat in its nesting arrangements from the Common Tern, inasmuch that it never makes any nest. No lining of any kind is placed in the hollow which contains the eggs, and this hollow is generally selected ready made. Another peculiarity is that the eggs are far more generally laid nearer to the water; and this applies not only to the Farne Islands, but to every breeding place of this Tern that I have visited. The two or three eggs are laid in any little depression in the coarse sand or shingle on the line of drift, or amongst small pebbles, or even on the bare ground or rock. These eggs vary from buff to olive, and even pale bluish-green in ground colour, heavily blotched and spotted, especially at the larger end, with dark brown, paler brown, and gray. They are decidedly smaller than those of the Common Tern, more elongated in shape, and are much more olive in general colour. When disturbed from their eggs the Arctic Terns become very noisy, and rise in fluttering crowds above the sacred spot, continuing to fly to and fro, screaming anxiously until the intruder retires.

ROSEATE TERN

It is with some hesitation that I include this species, the *Sterna dougalli* of Montagu, in the present work, because if it really does visit our coasts now to breed, it is so exceedingly rare and local, that any ordinary observer of bird life by the sea could scarcely hope to meet with it. It is interesting to remark that the Roseate Tern was first made known to science from a skin that was sent to Montagu, from the Cumbrae Islands, in the Firth of Clyde. It was subsequently found breeding on the Farne Islands by Selby; it formerly bred on the Scilly Islands, as well as on Foulney and Walney; but so far as I can ascertain there is no direct evidence that it breeds at any of these places now. It may be distinguished from the Common Tern by its rosy under plumage; but as this is very apt to fade, a still more infallible distinction, according to Mr. Saunders, is the white inner margin to the primaries.

The Roseate Tern is a very late migrant, not reaching its breeding places until towards the end of May. In its flight and habits generally, it very closely resembles those of the preceding species; but its note is hoarser than that of the Common Tern. The favourite breeding grounds of this Tern appear to be low rocky islets and – so far as our islands are concerned – it is partial to nesting among a larger colony of Arctic or Common Terns. It does not appear to make any nest, but deposits its

two or three eggs on the bare ground, usually in a little hollow amongst the shingle. These eggs very closely resemble those of the Common Tern; so closely in fact that no reliable means of distinguishing them can be given.

LESSER TERN

This species (*Sterna minuta*) is by far the smallest of the Terns that visit the British coasts in summer to breed. It cannot be said to be anywhere common, and its breeding stations are few and far between. Curiously enough, it is not known to breed on that great resort of British sea fowl, the Farne Islands. There can be no doubt that this Tern is slowly becoming rarer, and in view of this fact I do not feel justified in assisting its extermination, by naming a single locality known to me where it now breeds. The bird-loving reader will, I am sure, appreciate this reticence. Small colonies of this pretty Tern are situated here and there round the British coasts, and in one or two more inland localities. The partiality of the Lesser Tern for the coast of the mainland, rather than for islands, as a nesting ground, contributes largely to the decrease in its numbers. It arrives on our coasts in May, and is readily distinguished from all its congeners by its small size. In its habits it is certainly gregarious, but nowhere are its gatherings as extensive as in the other common British species. Like its congeners it is eminently a bird of the air, flying up and down in restless uncertain flight, living almost entirely on the wing during the daytime, only seeking the sands or the sea to sleep or to rest. It may be watched flying along the coast, a short distance from land, in a slow irregular way, every now and then poising for a second, and then dropping into the water with a tiny splash to seize a fish or a crustacean. Its note is not quite so harsh as that of the larger species, and may be described as a shrill *pirr*, most frequently uttered when its breeding places are invaded. Its food is composed of small fish, insects, sand-lice, and crustaceans, most of which is secured whilst the bird is on the wing.

The Lesser Tern begins breeding in June. Like all the other species it returns unfailingly to certain spots along the coast each summer, and may, therefore, be presumed to pair for life. Its favourite breeding-grounds are extensive stretches of sand, varied with slips and banks of coarser shingle. It makes no nest, not even so much as scratching a hollow for its eggs, but lays them on the bare ground. It is most interesting to remark that this Tern never lays its eggs on the fine sand, but always on the bits of rough beach – where the ground is strewn with little stones, broken shells, and other *débris* of the shore – where their colour harmonises so closely with surrounding objects that discovery is difficult. The eggs are from two to four in number – I have on two separate occasions taken clutches of the latter – but three may be given as the average. They vary from buff to grayish-brown in colour, blotched and spotted with various shades of darker brown and gray. During the hottest hours of the day the female sits but little upon them, and it is remarkable how quickly these shore birds will rise from their nests at the first sign of impending danger – the alarm doubtless being given by the male bird from the air above. It is a most exceptional thing to see a conspicuously coloured bird rise from its nest in a bare situation; the eggs are generally coloured protectively, and resemble the objects around them; the presence of the showily attired parent would inevitably lead to their discovery. Early in autumn, when the young are strong upon the wing, the return journey to the winter home on the African coast begins, and it is during these migration journeys that the bird is, perhaps, most commonly observed along the British seaboard.

BLACK TERN

Allusion may here, perhaps, be permitted to the *Sterna nigra* or *Hydrochelidon nigra* of ornithologists. The Black Tern formerly bred commonly in our marshes and fens, but has long ceased to do so. The “Car Swallow,” as it used to be widely called in the fens, belongs to the group known as Marsh Terns – birds that rarely frequent the sea coast at all, so that its absence from our avi-fauna,

although greatly to be deplored, could scarcely be remarked by the observer of marine species alone. The White-winged Black Tern and the Whiskered Tern complete this division, known as “Marsh Terns.” Both these latter are occasional wanderers to the British Islands.

CHAPTER II.
PLOVERS AND SANDPIPERS

Characteristics and Affinities – Changes of Plumage – Structural Characters – Oyster-catcher – Ringed Plover – Kentish Plover – Golden Plover – Gray Plover – Lapwing – Turnstone – Phalaropes – Gray Phalarope – Red-necked Phalarope – Curlew – Whimbrel – Godwits – Black-tailed Godwit – Bar-tailed Godwit – Redshank – Sanderling – Knot – Curlew Sandpiper – Dunlin – Purple Sandpiper – Other Species

In the present chapter we commence the study of an entirely different class of birds. The Gulls are for the most part seen flying in the air or swimming upon the sea, but the Plovers and the Sandpipers spend the greater part of their time on the ground. Again, Gulls, when adult, are remarkably showy birds, but the Plovers and allied species are just as inconspicuous. Many of the haunts frequented by Gulls are utterly unsuited to the Plovers and Sandpipers. These principally delight in low sandy coasts, mud-flats, slob-lands, and salt marshes. Rocks and ranges of cliff have no attraction for these little feathered runners of the shore; they obtain their food on the shallow margin of the sea, on the sand and shingle, the mud and the ooze, or at low water among the weed-draped stones. They are emphatically beach birds. Such parts of the coast that have little or no beach uncovered at high water, on which they may rest whilst the tide is turning, or at low water on which they can seek for food, are but little frequented by these Limicoline birds. Consequently we find them much more abundant on the flat eastern coasts of England, and some parts of the southern coasts, with their miles of sand and mud and wide estuaries, than on the much more rock-bound north and west.

The Plovers, with their allied forms, the Sandpipers and Snipes, and between which no very pronounced distinction is known to exist, constitute a well-defined group of birds, perhaps on the one hand most closely allied to the Gulls, and on the other hand to the Bustards. There are more than two hundred species in this group, distributed over most parts of the world. The Limicolæ (under which term we include the Plovers, Sandpipers, and their allies) present considerable diversity in the colour of their plumage, and in a great many species this colour varies to an astonishing degree with the season. The most brilliant hues are assumed just prior to the breeding season; the winter plumage is much less conspicuous. To a great extent this colour is protective, the brighter plumage of summer in many species harmonising with the inland haunts the birds then frequent: the duller hues characteristic of winter assimilating with the barer ground – the sands and mud-flats. It is worthy of remark that the species which do not present this great diversity in their seasonable change of plumage – such as the Snipes and Woodcocks – confine themselves to haunts clothed with vegetation all the year round; or – as in the case of the Ringed Plovers – to bare sands and shingles. In their moulting the Limicolæ are most interesting. It is impossible to enter very fully into the details of this function in the present volume, nor is it necessary, for the purpose of this study of marine bird-life, to do so. A few of the most salient facts, however, may be mentioned. The young of all Limicoline birds are hatched covered with down, and are able to run soon after their breaking from the shell. They consequently spend little time in the nest, after they are hatched. This down varies considerably not only in the pattern of the colour, but in the colour itself. Some of these chicks, or young in down, are beautifully striped or spotted; others are sprinkled or dusted with darker or lighter tints than the general colour. In all, however, the colours are eminently protective ones, and harmonise so closely with the hues of surrounding objects that discovery is difficult; more especially so as the chicks possess the habit of

crouching motionless to the ground when menaced by danger. The first plumage of the young bird in the present order, approaches more or less closely in colour that of the summer plumage of the adult. At the beginning of autumn, however, these bright colours begin to be changed for a dress which resembles the winter plumage of their parents. This is not effected, however, by a moult, but by a change in colour of the feathers, only the very worn and abraded ones being actually replaced. In the spring following, these immature birds moult into summer plumage, similar to that of the adults, although the wing coverts retain their hue, characteristic of summer or the breeding season, until the next autumn, when for the first time these feathers are changed for the gray or brown ones of winter. It should here be remarked that the wing coverts of the adults seem only to be moulted in the autumn, so that this portion of their plumage is always the same colour after the bird reaches the adult stage of its existence. The phenomenon of the alteration of colour in the plumage of birds, and especially in Limicoline species, without moulting or an absolute change of the feathers, is a profoundly interesting one. One of the most remarkable facts in connection with this phenomenon is the restoration of the worn and ragged margins of the feathers in some Limicoline species to a perfect condition without a change or moult of the notched and damaged feather. Schlegel was the first naturalist, apparently, to discover that this wonderful renovation took place, but his statements seem to have been doubted by naturalists. Fortunately Schlegel's opinions have been fully confirmed by Herr Gätke; and the reader interested in the subject is referred to that great naturalist's remarks thereon in his book on the birds of Heligoland.[1] This seasonal change of colour may be produced both by a moult and by actual transition, without cast of feather, even in the same bird: the restoration of ragged feathers and development of colour upon them may also be progressing at the same time. Thus the black markings on the head and neck of the Golden Plover are the result of colour alteration, but the black on the breast is attained by moult. The colour changes in the Sanderling, the Knot, the Dunlin, the Redshank, and numerous other allied birds, are perfectly astonishing: in the Redshank especially so, the profusely barred upper plumage being developed without change of feather, and the feathers reacquiring a pristine freshness and perfectness which seem almost incredible without a complete moult!

Comparatively speaking, the haunts frequented by Limicoline birds during summer, or the season of reproduction, are not, in the strict sense of the term, littoral ones. But few species breed on the actual coast – in our islands they are represented by such birds as the Oyster-catcher and the Ringed Plover; the vast majority rear their young in inland localities, on moors and downs, by the side of rivers, streams, and lakes, in swamps, and so on. As soon, however, as the duties of the year are over great numbers of species resort to the sea coasts, where, in all districts suited to their requirements, they form one of the most characteristic avine features. It is amongst birds of this order that the habit of migration is exceptionally pronounced, some species journeying every year many thousands of miles between their summer haunts, or breeding grounds, and their winter homes, or centres of dispersal. In the present group of birds the wings are generally long and pointed, a form best adapted for prolonged and rapid flight, whilst the legs are usually long – in some species, as, for instance, the Black-winged Stilt, exceptionally so – enabling the birds to wade through shallows and over soft mud and ooze. In some species the feet are semi-webbed, as in the Avocets, in others they are lobed, as in the Phalaropes. The bill varies to an astonishing degree amongst birds of this class, and seems specially modified to meet the varying methods by which food is obtained. Thus we have presented to us the decurved bill of the Curlew type, the recurved bill, characteristic amongst others of the Avocet or the Godwits, the nearly straight bill of such forms as the Oyster-catcher and the Phalarope, hard and chisel-like in the former, and finely pointed in the latter; then, again, the bill in many species is hard and horny, in others it is acutely sensitive, full of delicate nerves, as in the Snipes and many others. The bill of the typical Plovers differs strikingly from that of the Sandpipers and

[1] *Heligoland as an Ornithological Observatory*, p. 151, *et seq.*

Snipes, inasmuch that it tapers from the base to the end of the nasal groove, then swells towards the tip. It is utterly impossible in a work like the present, which only attempts a slight sketch of marine bird-life on British coasts, to deal adequately with the astonishing amount of variation, even in this single organ of Limicoline birds. We will, therefore, now proceed to notice the most characteristic species found on the tideways of our islands, either as resident species, as passing migrants, or as winter visitors. It will, perhaps, be most convenient, as well as most interesting, to deal first with those species that are resident on our coasts, as being the most characteristic forms of this group of shore birds.

OYSTER-CATCHER

During summer, this species (the *Hæmatopus ostralegus* of Linnæus and other systematists) south of the Yorkshire and Lancashire coasts, is decidedly local and rare; but north of those localities it becomes one of the most common and characteristic birds of the shore, even extending to the Shetlands, the wildest of the Hebrides and St. Kilda. It is of interest to remark that in some parts of Scotland the Oyster-catcher drops its marine habits, and frequents the banks of rivers and lochs. There is, perhaps, no more conspicuous, no more handsome, no more noisy bird along the coast, than the Oyster-catcher. It is worthily named “Sea Pie,” its strongly contrasted black and white plumage recalling at once the Magpie of the inland fields and woods. The favourite haunts of this species are long stretches of low, rocky coast, relieved here and there by patches of shingle and long reaches of sand, broken with quiet bays, creeks, and lochs, where a large amount of beach is exposed at low water. One may generally find an Oyster-catcher about rocky islands; it is also very partial to resting on these, between the tides. Few birds look daintier or prettier than the present species, as it stands motionless on some weed-grown rock, its pied plumage, rich orange-coloured bill, and flesh-pink legs, coming out boldly against the olive-green masses of algæ. It is not often, however, that we can approach sufficiently close to see such details; as a rule the bird rises piping shrilly into the air, before it is actually seen, and long before unaided vision can distinguish colours distinctly. During summer the Oyster-catcher can scarcely be regarded as gregarious, but in winter, when its numbers are increased by migrants from the north, flocks of varying size may be met with. When flushed, the flight of this bird is very erratic and very rapid, performed by quick and regular strokes of the long-pointed wings; and perhaps it is now that the colours of the bird are seen to best advantage. The call note is heard most frequently and persistently as the bird hurries away in alarm, or careers about the air overhead, anxious for the safety of its eggs or young. This note cannot readily be confused with that of any other bird upon the coast. It may best be described as a loud shrill *heep-heep-heep*. The food of the Oyster-catcher is composed of mussels, whelks, limpets, crustaceans, and small fish, together with various tender buds and shoots of marine plants. Its chisel-shaped bill enables it readily to detach limpets from the rocks, or force open the closed valves of the mussel or the cockle. Oyster-catchers often frequent certain spots on the coast to feed, visiting them as soon as the tide admits, with great regularity. It may here be remarked that this bird wades often through the shallows, but never swims, as far as I know, unless wounded.

The eggs of the Oyster-catcher are laid in May or June, in the north a little later than in the south. The nesting-place is usually a stretch of rough pebbles or a shingly beach in some quiet bay, a low rocky island, or even a stack of rocks. Although Oyster-catchers cannot be said to breed in colonies, like some of the Gulls and Terns, numbers of nests may be found at no great distance apart. The nest is simple in the extreme – a mere hollow, in and round which are neatly arranged flat pebbles and bits of broken shells. As a rule, several mock nests may be found near to the one containing the eggs. These eggs are usually three in number, but sometimes four, pale buff or brownish-buff in ground colour, blotched, spotted, and streaked with blackish-brown and gray. Two distinct types are noticeable: one in which the markings are streaky, and often form a zone; the other in which they are

large, irregular, and distributed over most of the surface. As soon as the nest is approached the ever-watchful birds rise screaming into the air, and should many pairs be breeding in company, the din soon becomes general and deafening. It is under these circumstances alone that the Oyster-catcher permits man to approach it closely; at all other times it is certainly one of the shyest and wariest of birds on the coast.

RINGED PLOVER

With the present species – or resident large race, the *Ægialitis hiaticula major* of Tristram, as we should more correctly describe it – we reach the true Plovers. The Ringed Plover is one of the most widely distributed of our coast birds, frequenting all the flat sandy shores of the British Islands, from the Shetlands, in the north, to the Channel Islands, in the south. And not only does it haunt the coast, but it is found on the banks of rivers and lochs in many inland districts. In many places this species is known as the "Ring Dotterel"; in others its local name is the "Sand Lark." The favourite haunts of the Ringed Plover are the sandy portions of the beach; but in autumn and winter this bird frequently visits mud-flats. The Ringed Plover is about the size of a Thrush, and may be easily recognised by its broad white collar, black breast and cheeks, brown upper parts, and snow-white under parts. Its actions on the shore are most engaging, tripping here and there along the margin of the waves, over the wet sand and shingle, darting this way and that as some tempting morsel of food is discovered. If in autumn or winter, this Plover will generally be met with in flocks of varying size; if in summer in scattered pairs or parties composed of the birds breeding in the immediate neighbourhood. Ringed Plovers are most attached to certain haunts, and seem to frequent them year by year, notwithstanding continued persecution and disturbance. It is the same when they are feeding. If alarmed they usually rise in a compact bunch, fly out to sea a little way, then return inshore, perhaps passing two or three times up and down before finally alighting. Again and again may this action be repeated, although the flock has a tendency to break up if flushed many times in quick succession, and odd birds will fall out, or remain skulking amongst the shingle. A dense flock or bunch of Ringed Plovers is a pretty sight. The birds fly quickly, and wheel and turn with astonishing precision, now close to the waves, then up in the air above the horizon, often persistently uttering their shrill call note, which resembles the syllables *too-it* rapidly repeated. Occasionally a fair sprinkling of Sanderlings and Dunlins may be observed in the flocks of this species. If seriously alarmed the entire flock will mount up high, and go off to a distant part of the coast, or even divide into several smaller ones, each retiring to a different spot; but almost invariably they return, and reform into a single company on the old familiar sands, within a hour or so of their scattered departure. The food of this pretty little Plover consists of the smaller creatures of the shore, such as minute sand-worms, shrimps, sand-hoppers, tiny molluscs, and insects. That this species occasionally eats vegetable substances I have assured myself by repeated dissection.

Although the Ringed Plover appears only to rear one brood in the year, its laying season is prolonged from the middle of April to the beginning of June. Early in April the winter flocks begin to disband, and the birds to disperse over their breeding places. Many pairs may be found breeding on one large stretch of sand in a suitable district. Some individuals seek an inland site for their eggs, on the bank of a stream or lake, but the majority prefer the sands of the sea-shore. Occasionally the nest has been discovered remote from water. This Plover makes no nest. The eggs sometimes are laid in a hollow of the sand, but just as frequently on the level surface. The fine sand is always preferred to the shingle, as the eggs best harmonize in appearance with it, their fine markings becoming more conspicuous on the coarser surface. The bird sits lightly: indeed it is most exceptional to see one rise from its eggs, unless the spot had been previously marked. When disturbed, the birds exhibit but little outward manifestation of alarm. They may be seen running to and fro about the sand, but their behaviour is very different from that of the Lesser Terns, which often nest on the same sands. The eggs of the Ringed Plover are always four in number, very pyriform in shape, and invariably

laid with the pointed ends turned inwards. They are large in proportion to the bird, and pale buff or stone colour sparingly spotted and speckled with blackish-brown and ink-gray. During May and June a smaller and darker race of Ringed Plover passes along our coasts, to breed further north; appearing on the return journey during August, September, and October. There is some evidence to suggest that this race breeds sparingly on the coasts of Kent and Sussex.

KENTISH PLOVER

This species, the *Ægialitis cantiana* of ornithologists, is one of the most local of British birds. Stragglers have been obtained here and there along the coast line between Yorkshire and Cornwall, but its only known nesting places are on certain parts of the coasts of Kent and Sussex. It is now nearly a century ago since this Plover was first made known to science by Lewin, who figured it in his *Birds of Great Britain*; and by Latham, who described and named it in the supplement to his great work, the *Index Ornithologicus*, from examples which had been obtained on the Kentish shingles by Mr. Boys of Sandwich. The Kentish Plover bears a superficial resemblance to the Ringed Plover, but may readily be distinguished by the broken pectoral band, represented by a dark patch on each side of the breast, and the reddish-brown nape and crown. Unlike the preceding species, this Plover is a summer migrant only to the British coasts, arriving towards the end of April or early in May, and departing again with its young in August or September. Odd birds, however, have been met with during winter. The Kentish Plover does not differ in its habits in any marked degree from the Ringed Plover, and frequents very similar localities, stretches of sand and shingle. Like that bird, it also gathers into small parties during summer; but in our islands, where its numbers are limited, we more usually find it in isolated pairs on various suitable parts of the shore. It possesses the same restless habits; running about the wet shining sands and shingles close to the breaking waves, in quest of the sand-hoppers, crustaceans, worms, and other small marine creatures on which it feeds. It cannot be regarded as a shy bird, permitting a somewhat close approach, and manifesting little fear or alarm even when its breeding grounds are invaded by man. Its alarm note may be described as a shrill *ptirr*, but the usual call is a clear loud *whit*, which, during the love season, is frequently uttered so quickly as to form a sort of trill, as the cock bird soars and flies round and round above his mate. The Ringed Plover utters a very similar trill during the pairing season.

The Kentish Plover rears but one brood during the summer, and preparations are made for this towards the end of May. It is not improbable that this Plover pairs for life, seeing that the same localities are visited year by year for nesting purposes. It makes no nest, the eggs being laid in a little hollow amongst the coarser sand or the shingle, or on a drift of dry seaweed and other shore *débris*. The eggs are usually three, but occasionally four in number, and are pale or dark buff in ground colour, blotched, scratched, and spotted with blackish-brown and slate-gray. As is the almost invariable custom with birds breeding on bare plains and beaches – and whose eggs are protectively coloured – the Kentish Plover sits lightly, rises from her eggs as soon as danger is discovered, and evinces but little outward anxiety for their safety; although, in some instances, the feigning of lameness has been resorted to, especially when the eggs have been on the point of hatching. The young birds and their parents form a family party during the autumn, and apparently migrate southwards in close company.

With the present species we exhaust the number of Limicoline birds that nest upon the shore in the British Islands. All the other species that make our sands and mud-flats their winter home, or their place of call during their spring and autumn migrations, breed away from the actual beach on marshes and moors and uplands, or do not rear their young at all within our area. Closely associated with most of these birds are the fascinating problems of Migration. We miss the feathered hosts from sand and mud-flat as the spring advances; we note the fleeting appearance of others along the shore bound to far away northern haunts: and then long before the first faint signs of autumn are apparent

these migrant birds begin to return, and imbue the wild lone slob-lands and shingles with life. To and fro with each recurring spring and autumn, the stream of avine life flows and ebbs; by day and by night the feathery tides press on, calling forth wonder from the least observant, filling more thoughtful minds with the complexity and the mystery of it all. We have not space to deal here with this grand avine movement; but, content with this passing allusion to it, pass on to a study of the other feathered dwellers by the sea.

It is rather remarkable how few species of Limicoline birds breed on the British coast-line. Not a single Sandpiper nor Snipe does so, and but two or three Plovers, as we have already seen. So far as summer is concerned, these wading birds cannot be regarded as a very remarkable feature of avine life upon the coast; and it is, doubtless, because they are so little known to the majority of seaside visitors, that they appeal so much less to the popular mind than the more ubiquitous Gulls. But from September onwards to the following spring, Plovers and Sandpipers are the most prominent characteristics of all the more low-lying coasts. We will briefly glance at those species that not only frequent such situations regularly every season, but occur in sufficient numbers to place them beyond the category of abnormal visitors, or storm-driven wanderers from their natural haunts.

GOLDEN PLOVER

This species, the *Charadrius pluvialis* of ornithologists, is, from the regularity of its appearance and its great abundance, known almost everywhere as *the* Plover of the coast. It derives its trivial name from the profusion of golden yellow drop-like spots which adorn its upper plumage, and may always be distinguished from allied species by its barred tail feathers and white axillaries. Large flights of Golden Plover begin to appear on our low-lying coasts in September, and through October and November the number steadily increases. Many of these birds simply pass along our shore-line to haunts in the Mediterranean basin, but many linger thereon through the winter. One of the great haunts of this Plover is along the shores of the Wash – that vast area of mud, and sand, and salt-marsh, which extends for miles in drear monotony, only enlivened and made endurable by the hordes of wild fowl that congregate upon its treacherous surface. Here, at the end of October, or during the first week in November, the migration of the Golden Plover can be observed in all its strength. Day after day, night after night, I have remarked the passage of this bird, in almost one unbroken stream, flock succeeding flock, so quickly as to form a nearly continuous throng. Upon the sands this Plover often associates with Dunlins, Gray Plovers, Lapwings, and other waders. Great numbers are, or used to be, shot or netted in this district, and sent to inland markets, for their flesh is justly esteemed for its delicacy, ranked by some as second only to that of the Woodcock. Golden Plovers feed and move about a good deal at night, especially by moonlight. Their food, during winter at least, consists of sand-worms and hoppers, molluscs, small seeds, and so on. The whistle of this Plover is one of the most attractive sounds of the mud-flats and salt-marshes. It may, under suitable atmospheric conditions, be heard for a long distance across the wastes, and sounds something like *klee-wee*, occasionally prolonged into *klee-ee-wee*. This note is uttered both while the bird is on the ground and in the air. In the pairing season it is run out into a trill. The movements of the Golden Plover during winter are largely regulated by the weather, and I have known it desert a district entirely, or become very restless and unsettled, just previous to a storm.

In spring the sea coasts are deserted, and the Golden Plover retires to its breeding-grounds. These, in our islands, are situated on the upland moors and mountain plateaux. The nest, invariably made upon the ground, is often placed on a hassock of coarse herbage, or on a tuft of cotton grass, and consists merely of a hollow, lined with a few bits of withered grass or dead leaves. The eggs are four in number, buff blotched and spotted with various shades of brown, and more sparingly with gray. They are much richer and yellower in appearance than those of the Lapwing, otherwise closely resemble them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.