THE
FISH-EATING BIRDS
OF
NORFOLK.

By T. E. GUNN, F.L.S.

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THE general formation of the county of Norfolk, its extensive coast-line, projecting so far into the German Ocean; the low-lying marshes of the eastern division, with its numerous rivers and broads, covering a vast area of water, is especially favourable to the production of a host of aquatic inhabitants in almost every variety and form. The foregoing character has been so often applied to this district, that it seems almost unnecessary in these brief remarks on the "Fish-eating Birds" to repeat it by way of introduction. In the limited space at my disposal I cannot enter into any lengthened details on this most interesting subject, therefore will content myself by glancing at the various species that feed almost exclusively on fish, noting a few particulars chiefly of those that are usually observed in ordinary excursions to our famed waterways and Broad district.

Commencing with the Raptores, we have but two species that are true fish-eaters, and these are both migrants, who only show themselves for a short period of the year. These are the white-tailed or sea-eagle, and the osprey or fishing-eagle. Both species breed in Scotland. Immature birds of the former occasionally make their appearance late in autumn and winter, usually in the neighbourhood of the Broad and decoys. To the latter they are somewhat destructive, as they sometimes vary their fish diet by a raid on the ducks. A specimen was killed in November last. It had been repeatedly seen on the marshes on either banks of the river Yare at Buckenham for some days previous to its capture. Nudd, the old marshman, killed three one season, some twenty-five years since, on Hickling Broad. The young sea-eagle is sometimes erroneously reported in newspaper paragraphs as the golden eagle. The principal distinctive characters of the two species can, however, be seen at a glance. The leg of the golden eagle is covered with feathers down to the base of the toes, that of the sea-eagle being quite naked. The osprey is generally a spring migrant, and, I believe, an exclusive fish-eater; when found on Breydon regaling itself with mullet and flounders, and in inland waters upon perch, roach, roud, and tench principally—not objecting, however, to other fish. The foot of the osprey is peculiarly constructed to favour its mode of life; the semicircular curvature and sharpness of its strong claws, and the roughness of the soles of its feet, are so well

adapted for securing and holding its slippery prey. The fish is secured by grasping its foot across the body, the inner and outer toes being placed at right angles with the middle and hind toes, and, digging in its claws, firmly secures its prey, while it leisurely proceeds with its meal by tearing out pieces from the best parts with its strong and deeply-hooked beak. Its thigh feathers, unlike those of other Raptorial birds, are small and closely arranged; indeed, all its plumage is compact and of a waterproof nature, and is thus equally serviceable to its aquatic pursuits.

The kingfisher is the most brilliant-coloured of our native birds. In glancing at the sober tints generally of our British birds, one almost wonders that our dull climate could produce a real native invested in such bright clothing. Ladies are attracted by the brilliant-tinted plumage of this bird-gem, and show their appreciation and taste by wearing it as an ornament in their hats and dress. For this and other decorative purposes great numbers are destroyed. I trust, however, that fashion will alter before it has any dangerous effect on the life destiny of this lovely species. The kingfisher is not an uncommon species, being found on most of our rivers, streams, broads, and pools. Frequently during a morning's row on the Wensum, above Norwich, I have seen four or five kingfishers at different favourable spots along the bank or perched on rails, and watched its low and horizontal mode of flight, rendering it easily distinguishable from that of any other bird. When fishing in Weston's-reach one morning, still and quiet, I noticed a kingfisher sitting on the end of a dead bough of an old tree that overhung the water. Its head was bent downwards, and apparently it was intent in watching the little fish playing near the surface. It almost startled me by the suddenness with which it dropped from its perch, stone-like, on to its victim, going quite under water. It emerged almost instantly, and resumed its old position on the dead bough, where it proceeded with its meal, holding the fish in its beak in the middle of the body, and dashing its head again and again violently on its perch until life was apparently extinct, the bird then swallowing it, head foremost. A singular incident in which an unfortunate kingfisher met with its death came under my notice on the 16th February. It was picked up dead on the bank of a stream in this neighbourhood. In attempting to swallow one of its finny captures, a "miller's thumb," or river bullhead, one of the projecting spines of its gill-covers being extended, caught under the tongue of the bird, which, being unable to extricate the unpleasant morsel, fell a victim to its own rapacity. Another unfortunate bird was picked up dead under the telegraph wires on the railway line at Lakenham in the preceding summer, it having gashed its throat by flying against the wire. I have myself repeatedly picked up various species of birds that have come by their death in a similar manner. This, however, occurs more

frequently during the autumn migratory period. Another kingfisher, more fortunate, was caught alive in the following singular manner: a friend, in rowing through a dyke leading to Heigham Sounds one morning, some few years since, saw a small bird fluttering on the top of a reed some distance in front of him, and on coming up to it discovered a kingfisher, which had imprisoned itself in a very novel manner—the upper mandible of its beak had become split up for some distance, probably by a stray shot, and the bird in flying close to the reeds had struck its splintered beak in the top of one, which held it fast in spite of its violent struggles to escape. My friend released the bird, when it flew off, and was soon out of sight. The food of the kingfisher consists almost entirely of small fish; and in the many dissections I have made I have sometimes found various aquatic insects. In severe weather, when their food-producing sources are all frozen up, our little pet is very hard pressed for sustenance, and a continuance of severe frosts brings great numbers of them to an untimely end. In the severe winter of 1864 I recorded, in the natural history journals published at the time, that during the course of three weeks upwards of forty kingfishers had been picked up in the neighbourhood of Norwich, starved out, some dead and others falling easy victims to the prowling gunners. This destruction again occurred in 1874, and is repeated whenever severe frost prevails for any length of time. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the kingfisher still survives in such numbers as to gladden the heart of the enthusiastic angler and lover of nature's beauties. I trust it may long remain among us. In April the kingfisher builds or repairs its nest, which it will resort to year after year if undisturbed. It is entirely composed of fish-bones and fishy refuse, and therefore emits rather an unpleasant odour in its immediate neighbourhood. The nest is usually placed in a hole in the river's bank, the disused retreat of a water-rat often serving the purpose. The bird lays seven or eight round, white, and shiny eggs, which have a beautiful pinkish tinge when fresh laid. Whenever a kingfisher's nest has been broken into, a vast collection of fish-bones and cast-up fishy matter are invariably found. I have known an instance of this bird making its nest in a hole in a gravel-pit quite a mile from any water, and there hatching its young. The parents were thus obliged to carry food a long distance, and made numerous journeys in order to satisfy their progeny before they were able to shift for themselves. Another instance in which I found young birds at a great distance from water occurred a few years ago. This brood was in a wood in which was situate a sand-pit, in the side of which were several holes. In one of these the birds were hatched—quite a mile from any water. When discovered they were only able to flit a yard or two, so that they were easily captured by hand.

In leaving my little pet, I must make a long skip down the list of British birds before I come to other examples of fish-eaters, which I find in the "waders," so named from their wading, or walking, in water in search of their food. This class of bird is usually distinguished by its length of leg, neck, and bill, which are in greater proportion to the size of its body, enabling it to search for and seize upon its prey with greater facility. Of this class the heron, or, as it is locally called, "hearnshaw," or "hanser," is a familiar example, and is seen almost daily in any part of our Broad or river districts. The ordinary observer may see it either engaged in fishing, or, if suspicious of danger, in an attentive attitude, with outstretched neck. If its suspicions are realised, the bird will stretch out its long, broad wings, and will soon be out of sight and danger. Herons breed in colonies, after the manner of rooks, such colonies being called "heronies." Several of these exist in Norfolk and Suffolk; a few are situated around Norwich. The nearest are at Earham and Cossey. The nest of this bird is composed of a large mass of sticks, and is placed on the top branches of lofty trees. It is an early breeder, and builds or repairs its nest early in February. Its eggs, four or five in number, are about the size of those of the ordinary domestic fowl, and of a greenish blue colour. The young, when hatched, are peculiar-looking objects, with long straggling down sticking over their heads and backs, as if in a fright. I have repeatedly picked up young birds from the ground under their nests, they having been blown down by a strong gale of wind. Sometimes the entire nest, with its contents, has met with a similar fate. On one occasion, however, I found a young heron apparently uninjured, and in taking its life by pressing its breast and back together (as I wanted it for a scientific purpose) I found it not unlike an india-rubber ball. The bird was of an elastic nature, and very tenacious of life. I likewise found one in an interesting stage, half hatched, with part of the egg-shell sticking to it. A wounded bird is very dangerous to approach, and so is one in captivity; its long, sharp-pointed beak is thrust out momentarily, and with accurate aim in the direction of any offending object. I have sometimes reared the nestlings, and kept them in confinement for a while, and any one will find that if he has the time to devote to these fledglings, they would prove most interesting and amusing pets. Their food consists not only of fish or its semblance, but of frogs, insects, birds, &c. In confinement they often indiscriminately bolt pieces of flesh, odd pieces of string, bits of leather and shoe-laces, and other miscellaneous objects. Like other fish-eaters, all foreign substances taken with their food—fur, feathers, bone, &c.—are worked by the action of the stomach into balls or pellets, and ejected from the receptacle where taken in. I exhibited, both at the National and International Fisheries

Exhibitions, a pictorial group entitled "The Death Struggle," illustrating a singular incident that occurred to a heron, which in striking its prey (an eel), had pierced it through its eyes with the upper mandible of its beak. The victim, in turn, twisted itself so firmly round the bird's throat as to cause suffocation, so that both died in the struggle. There are three other species of heron found in Norfolk, and as these are rare, I will only enumerate their names. They are the squacco heron, purple heron, and night heron.

Two species of stork have been found in this country, viz., black and white, principally distinguished by their respective general colours, as denoted by their names. The white stork has been repeatedly killed, but usually in the spring. The males are much larger than the females. A fine male that came into my hands on the 23rd of May, 1867, was obtained at Burgh, near Yarmouth, and weighed 8 lb. 3 oz., and measured 43 inches in length from the point of its bill to the end of its tail, and over seven feet across its fully-expanded wings from tip to tip. The bill and legs are of a deep red colour; and the female bird weighs some 2 lbs. less. I found in the gullet of the above-mentioned male three sharp-nosed eels, two with their heads reaching into its stomach, and the third coiled up. Its stomach also contained the remains of other eels, all of similar size, and about a foot each in length. The black stork has only been found twice in Norfolk. The last specimen I received was shot at Breydon, on the 27th of June, 1877. It was an adult female, and weighed 7 lbs. 14 oz. The stomach contained seven or eight eels, seven inches each in length; also remains of a water-beetle, *Dytiscus marginalis*, and some dragon-flies.

Both the common bittern and the little bittern are to be met with in Norfolk. The former, uncertain in its visits, is abundant in some seasons, and scarcely to be met with at others. In the winter of 1863-4, I remember as many as seventeen bitterns being shot in this county. It was formerly a common resident here, and in the time of Sir Thomas Browne bred in our fens and Broads; but of later years it has become more scarce, its visits being almost exclusively confined to the winter season. Very few are the instances recorded of its presence in the summer; in fact, so rare has the nesting of the bittern become of recent years in Great Britain, that our standard authors only give three authentic instances of its breeding in this country. In two cases the young had been hatched, and in the third a single egg was obtained at Ranworth. However, on the 30th March, 1868, two fresh-laid eggs were taken from a nest on Upton Broad, near Acle, which immediately came into my possession, so that I had an opportunity of exhibiting them, still unblown, at a meeting of the Norwich Naturalist Society, held on

the 6th April following. I retained the eggs in my collection for several years. The nest was composed of reeds and sticks ; and the eggs are of a uniform pale, brownish colour, somewhat resembling in tint that of the common pheasant, but not having the same glossy surface. A young bird was afterwards obtained alive from the same locality—no doubt the offspring of the same parent birds. The bittern derives its name from its peculiar cry or “boom,” which is said by some to resemble the bellowing of a bull. It frequents the fens and marshlands, subsisting principally on small fish, reptiles, and larger aquatic insects. In the stomachs of some of the birds I have found roach as much as seven and eight inches in length, quite entire ; and in others whole frogs, mice, and even water-rats (voles). In dissecting one killed near Yarmouth on the 28th of December, 1864, I found a perch $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length in its stomach. In other dissections since that date I have taken small pike from them. The little bittern is rather a scarce bird. I have had, however, three fresh-killed examples, all immature. Their food appears to be of a similar nature to that of the foregoing. In the last bird I examined I found that it had swallowed two juvenile jack-pike, each nearly four inches in length.

The spoonbill is a fine-looking bird, with entirely white plumage and a peculiarly-shaped beak, formed, as denoted by its name, similar to a spoon—a most useful implement in scooping up its food, small fish. I have repeatedly found sticklebacks in its gullet and stomach. The spoonbill, many years ago, was a Norfolk resident ; it is now an annual migrant, generally making its appearance in the spring, principally in the month of May. Its general appearance may be summed up thus :—About the size of a common heron, with not quite so long legs (which are black) ; plumage white, with crest of fine long feathers on the top of the head ; long flat bill, assuming the form of a spoon at the end ; this is black, mottled with yellow at the tip ; the gorget is yellow and the eyes are red.

We now come to a peculiar class of birds called grebes. These spend almost all their life on the water, either swimming or diving. There are five British species, the whole of which occur in our county. The two that are most known to those fond of aquatic pursuits are the great-crested grebe, or loon, as he is locally called, and the little grebe, dab-chick, or didopper. The great-crested grebe is somewhat of a local species, and is peculiar to our Norfolk Broads. Although this bird has been so relentlessly persecuted for many years past, both by egg-collectors and plumassiers—the former by robbing its nest of eggs to enrich, not only the collections of local people, but also to send abroad in exchange for those of other birds ; the latter by destroying all the birds they can for the sake of the grebe muffs and trimming so much worn and used by

ladies—the custom, I trust, is now on the decrease. The bird, also, from its natural shyness, and the power it possesses of diving, and keeping under water for a considerable time, is enabled to “hold its own,” so that even at the present time it is not an uncommon resident on most of our Broads, especially those that have been or are partly closed to the public. I trust the day will be far distant when this noble-looking bird fails to form one of the chief ornaments of our famous Broads. The body of the grebe is long, and somewhat boat-shaped, with its flattened legs and loomed feet situated far behind, giving it immense power in its aquatic life. A rather singular trait in the life history of the grebe is the fact that in addition to its food, which consists almost entirely of fish, it swallows an immense quantity of its own feathers, plucked from its breast. These are taken with its food to assist digestion and in cleaning the walls of its stomach, and probably, after serving their purpose, the feathers are recast from that organ after the manner of the Raptorial. The feather re-producing process in the grebe must be enormous to admit of the bird keeping up a good supply to serve this economic purpose. The little grebe is also a familiar object to watermen, and an interesting bird to watch in its aquatic habits, which are similar to the species already alluded to. The other grebes are the red-necked, sclovonian, and eared grebes, and these are all migrants during the autumn and winter.

There are thirteen distinct British species of the terns, ten of which—a large proportion—have been found on the Norfolk coast. The terns, or, as they are familiarly called, sea-swallows, are remarkable for the elegance of their forms, the great length of their wings, the comparatively small size of their bodies, and the quantity of feathers with which they are covered. They are incessantly on the wing, yet sustain their flight with great apparent ease to themselves. The food of most of the species consists, principally, of fish obtained from the surface, or animal matter left by the retiring tide, which these birds seek for at the water’s edge. The terns are all summer and autumn visitors to this country. Two species only now remain to breed in Norfolk, viz., the common and lesser terns. Colonies of these birds locate themselves on the salt marshes of Cley and Blakeney, and although very much reduced in numbers a few years ago, have since the passing of the various bird preservation Acts greatly increased. Mr Gurney, jun., in his “Birds of Norfolk,” states, “The lesser terns are now very numerous at Blakeney, their principal breeding-place.” The common tern makes no particular kind of nest, merely using a depression in the soil, and lays two to three eggs, sometimes four, which are of a uniform yellowish stone colour, spotted and blotched with ash grey and lighter or darker shades of brown,

similar in colour to surrounding objects—a wise provision of nature in affording this singular means for their protection, although it sometimes leads to their destruction in being trodden upon by accident. The old birds are very careful of both eggs and young, making many signs of anger, and even feigning lameness to draw the attention of the intruder from the immediate neighbourhood of their nest. That pretty little bird, the lesser tern, is the smallest as well as the most elegant of our British terns. It arrives on our coast during the month of April. I have noticed it myself at Hunstanton on the 16th of that month. It usually nests in May, sometimes in the shingle above high-water mark, using or making a slight depression for the reception of its eggs, which are usually three in number, and of stone colour, marbled and streaked with various shades of brown. Small companies of this and the preceding species, consisting perhaps of eight or nine, or more, individuals, may often be observed in the autumn, either at rest on the mud flats at Breydon, or hawking over the edges of the channel or one of the several runs (drains) in connection with the same, in search of the “small fry” and bits of animal matter they observe on the surface, and which they pick up without resting on the water. Their aerial evolutions are most graceful and very interesting to watch. When feeding, or cleaning and preening their plumage, they are so busily engaged as to seem quite fearless, allowing one to approach very close, thus affording an easy shot to the gunner. They exhibit only momentary alarm at the report of a gun; should one of their number be struck down, their sympathy and affection are shown to a remarkable degree by the fearlessness of the rest of the birds in hovering over their dead or wounded. Opportunity is thus given to the sportsman (?) to “pop” them off, one by one, until the whole party lies bleeding and helpless upon the surface. The same affectionate trait is observed in the character of the terns during the nesting season, thus suggesting a striking subject in forming one of the picture groups shown in my collection of fish-eating birds at the Great International Fisheries Exhibition in London, in 1883, entitled “The Widowed Bird.” The black tern is a spring and autumn visitor only, to Norfolk, although breeding in great numbers in former years in a certain alder-car at Upton. The other species of terns, which are also either spring or autumn visitors, are the Arctic, whiskered, roseate, white-winged black, gull-billed, Sandwich, and Caspian terns.

My next family of fish-eaters are the *laridæ*, or gulls, of which there are 15 or 16 British species, ten or eleven of these having been found in this country. These are the black-headed, or Scoulton gull, respecting which were published some notes in my paper in the *Handbook* for

1885; the common gull, little gull, Sabines gull, kittawake gull, glaucous gull, the herring, the greater and lesser black-faced gulls, and the Iceland gull; there are four British skua gulls, the whole of which occur on one coast, viz., the great skua, pomarine, Richardson's, and Buffon's skuas. I should have liked to gossip a little on this interesting family and the important part they take in the sphere of life in which an All-wise Providence has placed them, to act as Nature's scavengers in clearing away decaying and decomposed animal matter, especially fish, which otherwise would become a nuisance or cause disease. Four British guillemots also occur on our coast, but do not breed here, as their nesting habits require soil of a rocky nature. The common or foolish guillemot is one of the most numerous of the sea-birds inhabiting our coast, and breeds in large colonies on the rocks at Flamboro', the Bass, and other suitable stations. After the breeding season, immense flocks of these birds, as well as the razor-bill, make their appearance all along the eastern shores, accompanying and feeding on the enormous shoals of fish that arrive here. This bird is a voracious feeder, and it seems almost incredible to what extent its throat is capable of being opened, enabling it to swallow full-sized herrings and other large prey. The ringed and brunnich guillemots are said to be but varieties of the common species. The black guillemot is a smaller species, and has occurred late in the Autumn, on a few occasions. I had the honour of first placing it on record as a Norfolk species, an example being taken near Wells in December, 1866. The razor-bill is also a common species, and is invariably found associating with the guillemot. The little auk is generally a winter visitor, and a sea-loving species, although solitary individuals are brought inland during the prevalence of strong north-easterly gales, and have occasionally been picked up dead in localities quite in the centre of the country. The puffin or sea-parrot is another species of a kindred nature, and only occasionally in the spring or winter visits our coast. The family of divers is so named for the immense power the bird possesses in diving, its body being so shaped and its legs placed so far back (as I have previously noted when speaking of the grebe) as to afford great facilities in aquatic life. There are three species of this genus, and all are generally found in an immature stage on this coast. They are the great northern, black-throated, and red-throated divers. The latter is sometimes found, in its adult stage, with the red throat. The diver, although chiefly affecting the ocean and feeding on its finny inmates, is often found on our inland waters, where our fresh-water fish prove equally acceptable to its palate.

The gannet, or solan goose, is another, and an enormous, fish-eater, and is a common resident on our coast. It has

several breeding-stations on the rocky parts, and is therefore only found here in the autumn and winter, when it follows with the usual hosts of other birds to feed on the shoals of fish as they move southwards. They sometimes become entangled in the fishermen's nets. The cormorant, more frequent a few years ago than now (according to Sir Thomas Browne), used to breed on trees at Reedham; and Lubbock, in his "Fauna of Norfolk," notes that cormorants have in some seasons nested in the trees around Fritton Decoy in numbers, while in other years there has not been a single nest. It is, however, still occasionally met with on our Broads, and when occurring is not unusually seen perched on the posts that mark the course of the channels through these waterways. From the stomach of one specimen I took a pike that measured $13\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length. The shag, or green cormorant, is a smaller species, and more rarely occurs than the preceding. The last example I received was obtained when in rather a novel situation. It was shot whilst perched on the spire of the parish church at Attleborough. Another sea-loving race of birds are the petrels, several species of which have at different times occurred on this coast; these include the fulmer, fork-tailed, dusky, and storm petrel. Then there are two other closely-allied species. Space will not permit me to say much about my concluding class of birds. Of the saw-bills, so named from the saw-like teeth that cover the edges of both mandibles in the bills, there are three species that frequent both our coasts and the inland waters; they are the goosander, merganser, and smew. These, however, do not breed here, and only make their appearance in the late autumn.