THE ROSEATE TERN.

† STERNA DOUGALLII, *Mont.*

PLATE CCCCXXXVII.—ADULT.

On the 28th of April, 1832, it was my lot to be on the beautiful rocky islet named Indian Key, where I spent a few hours of the night in unsuccessful attempts to procure repose, which was effectually banished by the consciousness of my being in a portion of the country not yet examined by any industrious student of nature, and in which I expected to find much that would prove interesting. The rain fell in torrents, and the rattling of the large drops on the shingles of the veranda in which my hammock had been slung, together with the chilness of the air, contributed to keep me awake. Finding it useless to remain in bed, I roused my companions; it was just four o'clock, and in a few minutes all the people in the house were up, and breakfast preparing. Before six the rain abated, and as I was determined not to lose a day, the guns were mustered, we made our way to the boats, and pushed off through a gentle shower in quest of unknown birds! In about an hour the rain ceased, the sky gradually cleared, and the sun soon dried our clothes. About this time we observed a great number of Terns on a sand bar, which we approached. The birds were not shy, so that we obtained an opportunity of firing two guns at them, when we leaped out, and on wading to the shore picked up thirty-eight Roseate Terns and several of another species.

Beautiful, indeed, are Terns of every kind, but the Roseate excels the rest, if not in form, yet in the lovely hue of its breast. I had never seen a bird of this species before, and as the unscathed hundreds arose and danced as it were in the air, I thought them the Humming-birds of the sea, so light and graceful were their movements. Now they flocked together and hovered over us, again with a sudden dash they plunged towards us in anger; even their cries of wrath sounded musical, and although I had carried destruction among them, I felt delighted. As I have just said, I had not before seen a Roseate Tern, not even the skin of one stuffed with tow; the species was not in the Synopsis of my friend BONAPARTE, and now I had my cap filled to the brim with specimens. You may rest assured that I took precious care of those which I had procured, but not another individual was robbed of life

Roseate Tern

Male.

Drawn from Nature by J. J. Audubon, F.R.S., F.L.S.

Lith. Printed & Col^d by J. T. Bowen, Philad^a

on that excursion. The other Terns were as new to me. I observed the form of their black bill and feet, the yellow tip of the former, and wrapped them up with care, while I tried to recollect the name they bore in books. To have found hundreds of the Roseate Tern in the Floridas, while I had anxious but slender hopes of meeting it on the coast of Labrador, was to me quite astonishing. So it was, however, and I determined to ransack every key and sand-beach, to try to find its breeding-ground. Nor were my desires ungratified.

The Roseate Tern spends the breeding season along the southern shores of the Floridas in considerable numbers. At different times in the course of nearly three months which I spent among the keys, I saw flocks of twenty, thirty, or more pairs, breeding on small detached rocky islands, scantily furnished with grass, and in the company of hundreds of Sandwich Terns. The two species appeared to agree well together, and their nests were intermingled. The full number of eggs of the present species is three. They differ considerably in size and markings; their average length, however, is an inch and three quarters, their breadth an inch and one-eighth; they are of a longish oval shape, rather narrowed at the small end, of a dull buff or clay colour, sparingly sprinkled and spotted with different tints of umber and light purple. They were deposited on the bare rocks, among the roots of the grasses, and left in fair weather to the heat of the sun. Like those of the Common Tern and other species, they are delicious eating. The eggs of the Sandwich Tern were more attended to during the day, but toward night both species sat on their eggs. I did not see any of the young, but procured a good number of those of the preceding year, which kept apart from the old birds, but had in all respects the same habits.

The Roseate Tern is at all times a noisy, restless bird; and on approaching its breeding place, it incessantly emits its sharp shrill cries, resembling the syllable *crāk*. Its flight is unsteady and flickering, like that of the Arctic or Lesser Tern, but rather more buoyant and graceful. They would dash at us and be off again with astonishing quickness, making great use of their tail on such occasions. While in search of prey, they carry the bill in the manner of the Common Tern, that is perpendicularly downward, plunge like a shot, with wings nearly closed, so as to immerse part of the body, and immediately reascend. They were seen dipping in this manner eight or ten times in succession, and each time generally secured a small fish. Their food consisted of fishes, and a kind of small molluscous animal which floats near the surface, and bears the name of "sailor's button." They usually kept in parties of from ten to twenty, followed the shores of the sand-bars and keys, moving backwards and forwards much in the manner of the Lesser

Tern, and wherever a shoal of small fish was found, there they would hover and dash headlong at them for several minutes at a time.

The wreckers informed me that this species returns regularly to these islands each spring, about the 10th of April, and goes off southward early in September. These birds, with their favourite companions the Sandwich Terns, habitually resorted to the sand-bars each day, to rest for an hour or two. I have never seen them on any part of our middle or eastern coast, and am of opinion that they rarely proceed farther eastward than the Capes of Florida, and that they are more attached to the immediate vicinity of the shores than the larger species, which more generally fly out to some distance. The delicate and beautiful rosy tint of the breast soon fades after death. Those specimens which were not skinned immediately after being procured did not retain it for a week, and in none of them was it perceptible, without separating the feathers, at the end of a month. In winter it disappears, as well as the glossy black of the head. The length of the outer tail-feathers varies considerably; but I could perceive no decided difference of size or colour in the sexes, although I thought the females somewhat smaller than the males.

STERNA DOUGALLII, Mont. Temm.

ROSEATE TERN, Nutt. Man., vol. ii. p. 278.

ROSEATE TERN, *Sterna Dougallii*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. iii. p. 296.

Male, $14\frac{10}{12}$, 30.

Florida Keys, where it is abundant, and breeds. Migratory.

Adult Male.

Bill longer than the head, slender, tapering, compressed, nearly straight, very acute. Upper mandible with the dorsal line slightly arched, the ridge rather broad and convex at the base, narrow towards the end, the sides convex, the edges sharp and inflected, the tip acute. Nasal groove short, extended to one-third of the length of the bill, deflected towards the edge; nostrils basal, linear, direct, pervious. Lower mandible with the angle extremely narrow, very acute, extending to a little beyond the middle, the dorsal line straight, the sides convex, the sharp edges inflected, the tip extremely acute.

Head of moderate size, oblong; neck of moderate length; body very slender; feet small; wings and tail very long. Tibia bare for a considerable space; tarsus very short, slender, roundish, covered anteriorly with small scutella, laterally and behind with reticular scales; toes small, slender, the first very small, the third longest, the fourth nearly as long, the second much shorter, all scutellate above, the anterior united by reticulated webs having a

concave margin; claws curved, compressed, acute, that of hind toe smallest, of middle toe by much the largest, and having the inner edge thin and dilated.

Plumage soft, close, blended, very short on the head; the feathers in general broad and rounded. Wings very long, narrow, and pointed; primary quills tapering, the first longest, the rest rapidly graduated; secondary short, broad, incurved, rounded, the inner more tapering. Tail long, very deeply forked, of twelve feathers, of which the outer are tapering, the middle short and rounded.

Bill brownish-black, deep orange at the base. Iris brown. Feet vermilion; claws blackish-brown, yellow at the base. The upper part of the head and elongated occipital feathers greenish-black; the hind neck white, the rest of the upper parts pale bluish-grey, the tail lighter; the edges of the wings, the tips and inner edges of the quills, and the shafts white. The first primary is black on the outer web and part of the inner, the next two are similarly marked, but with the black shaded over with pale grey, the loose barbules being of that colour; the other primaries become gradually lighter. The lower parts are of a beautiful light roseate hue, which soon fades after death; the under surface of wings and tail white.

Length to end of tail $14\frac{1}{2}$ inches, to end of wings 12, to end of claws $9\frac{4}{12}$; extent of wings 30; wing from flexure $9\frac{1}{2}$; tail to end of shortest feathers $4\frac{3}{4}$, to end of longest feathers $7\frac{1}{2}$; bill along the ridge $1\frac{1}{2}$, along the edge of lower mandible $2\frac{1}{2}$; tarsus $1\frac{0}{12}$; middle toe $1\frac{0}{12}$, its claw $\frac{3\frac{1}{2}}{12}$.

Roseate Tern

Male.

Drawn from Nature by J. J. Audubon, F.R.S., F.L.S.

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Audubon, John James. 1844. "The Roseate Tern, *Sterna dougallii*, Mont. [Pl. 437]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 7, 112–115. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319549>.

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