THE HERRING OR SILVERY GULL.

†*LARUS ARGENTATUS*, *Brunn.*

PLATE CCCCXLVIII.—MALE.

On the 22nd of May, 1833, I was kindly received with my party on board the United States revenue cutter *Swiftsure*, commanded by Captain COOLIDGE, and on the morning of the next day was landed on White Head Island, at the entrance of the Bay of Fundy. This island is the property of a worthy Englishman of the name of FRANKLAND, who received us with great hospitality, gave us leave to ransack his domains, and invited us to remain as long as we pleased. The Herring Gulls, he said, were breeding in great numbers, and we might expect good sport. We immediately set out in search of them, directing our course toward the pine woods, in which we were informed we should find them, and in approaching which we passed over an elevated marsh of great extent. As we came up to the place I observed that many of the Gulls had alighted on the fir-trees, while a vast number were sailing around, and when we advanced nearer, the former took to wing, abandoning their nests, and all flew about uttering incessant cries.

I was greatly surprised to see the nests placed on the branches, some near the top, others about the middle or on the lower parts of the trees, while at the same time there were many on the ground. It is true I had been informed of this by our captain, but I had almost believed that, on arriving at the spot, I should find the birds not to be Gulls. My doubts, however, were now dispelled, and I was delighted to see how strangely Nature had provided them with the means of securing their eggs and young from their arch-enemy man. My delight was greatly increased on being afterwards informed by Mr. FRANKLAND that the strange habit in question had been acquired by these Gulls within his recollection, for, said he, "when I first came here, many years ago, they all built their nests on the moss and in open ground; but as my sons and the fishermen collected most of their eggs for winter use, and sadly annoyed the poor things, the old ones gradually began to put their nests on the trees in the thickest parts of the woods. The youngest birds, however, still have some on the ground, and the whole are becoming less wild since I have forbidden strangers to rob their nests; for, gentlemen, you are the only persons out of my family that have fired a

gun on White Head Island for several years past, and I daresay you will not commit any greater havoc among them than is necessary, and to that you are welcome."

I was much pleased with the humanity of our host, and requested him to let me know when all the Gulls, or the greater part of them, would abandon the trees and resume their former mode of breeding on the ground, which he promised to do. But I afterwards found that this was not likely to happen, because on some other islands not far distant, to which the fishermen and eggers have free access, these Gulls breed altogether on the trees, even when their eggs and young are regularly removed every year, so that their original habits have been entirely given up. My opinion that, after being thus molested for some time longer, they may resort to the inaccessible shelves of the high rocks of these islands, was strengthened by Mr. FRANKLAND's informing me that many pairs had already taken refuge in such places, where they bred in perfect security. The most remarkable effect produced by these changes of locality is, that the young which are hatched on the trees or high rocks, do not leave their nests until they are able to fly, while those on the ground run about in less than a week, and hide themselves at the sight of man among the moss and plants, which frequently saves them from being carried away. The young on the trees are shaken out of their nests, or knocked down with poles, their flesh being considered as very good by the fishermen and eggers, who collect and salt them for winter provision.

Some of the nests which I saw were placed at a height of more than forty feet on the trees, others, seen in the thickest parts of the woods, were eight or ten feet from the ground, and were placed close to the main stem, so as to be with difficulty observed. It was truly curious to see the broad-winged birds make their way to and from them in these secluded retreats. The nests placed on the ground were several yards apart, and measured from fifteen to eighteen inches in diameter, their cavity being from four to six. The lower stratum consisted of grass, plants of various kinds, moss, and grey lichens, and the whole was lined with fine bent, but without any feathers. Those on the trees measured from twenty-four to twenty-six inches in diameter externally, and were composed of the same materials, but in greater quantity, the object of which I thought might be to allow more space to the young while growing, as they could not enjoy the pleasure of running about like those hatched on the ground. Perhaps, however, the smaller size of the nests placed there may be owing to their belonging to the younger Gulls, as I have often observed that the older the individual the larger is its nest. Mr. FRANKLAND informed me that they frequently repair the old nests at the commencement of the breeding season, and I found the assertion proved by my own observation. The eggs, which are three, measure three inches

in length, by two in breadth, have an oval somewhat pyriform shape, are rough though not granulated, and are of a dull yellowish earthy colour, irregularly blotched and spotted with dark umber. They are nearly as large as those of the Great Black-backed Gull; but they differ considerably in size as well as in colour, some being more or less rounded or elongated. The yolk is bright orange, the albumen bluish-white; and they are excellent eating.

About the beginning of May the Herring Gulls collect into great flocks for the purpose of reproducing, and betake themselves to large sand-bars or mud-flats at low water, where their cacklings may be heard at a great distance. With the aid of a glass you may see them going through their courtships; the males swell their throats, walk about proudly, throw their heads upwards, and emit their love notes. These general meetings take place at all hours of the day, according to the state of the tide, and continue for about a fortnight, when they all depart and betake themselves to the islands on which they breed. Several of these are situated near the one mentioned, and there is one near Cape Sable, a few miles from the most southern point of Nova Scotia, on which we saw thousands alighted on the trees as we were sailing along that coast on our way to Labrador. Some individuals begin to lay about the 19th of May or a few days earlier, while others have not finished the process until the middle of June. During this period they resort at certain hours to bare rocky islets, on which they copulate. At White Head Island, while we were seated on the edge of a beautiful sand-bar eating our dinner, we saw, on one of these rocks, a vast number, forming as it were a dense mass, which covered about half an acre. At twelve o'clock, we observed that all those which were not sitting on their eggs, flew over us and alighted on the sea, about half a mile from the shore, where they remained upwards of an hour, swimming gracefully but in silence all the while. A seal happening to raise its head above the water frightened them, and all raised their wings as if about to fly. Soon after they rose all at once, separated, and went off in search of food, but returned in less than an hour to the island, flying high and cackling loudly. A little before sunset all those unoccupied with incubation went off to the same rocky islands to roost, flying in silence, and mostly in files. It was curious to observe that, whenever a large flock made towards the sea cackling, all the Ducks about immediately flew off to a considerable distance, as if afraid of them; and we saw that these Gulls, although timorous in the presence of man, shew great courage in attacking predatory birds, such as Jays, Crows, Ravens, and even Hawks, which they pursued and forced into the deep woods, or drove away from the vicinity of their nests.

Shy and wary nearly in as great a degree as the Black-backed Gull, they

were with difficulty obtained, unless we approached them under cover. The least noise made them instantly leave their perch, and although there were six of us, each furnished with a good gun, and some sufficiently expert, not more than a dozen were killed that day, and all of them while flying. The moment one started, it would sound an alarm, on which hundreds would rise and sail over us, at such a height that it was useless to shoot at them. Now and then, one accidentally passing low over the woods, was brought down. While returning in the evening we shot one at a great height, having merely broken the tip of its wing. Having caught it, we placed it on the narrow path, on which it ran before us nearly to the house of the Governor, as Captain FRANKLAND is called. It offered no resistance, but bit severely, and now and then lay down to rest for a few moments. It ran fast enough to keep several yards before us, cackling all the while, and once suddenly made off from the path at a rapid rate.

Their flight is as strong as that of the Great Black-backed Gull, but more buoyant as well as graceful. During the love season their aërial evolutions are extremely beautiful; they pass through the air in wide circlings, at a great height, and then come down in curious zigzags until near the tops of the trees, or the surface of the sea. While in pursuit of fish, they dart in curved lines with great rapidity, frequently wheeling suddenly when over their prey, and falling towards it. When travelling, they pass indifferently over the land or the water, but generally at a considerable height. Their food consists principally of herrings, of which they destroy great numbers, following the shoals. They also feed on other fishes of small size, shrimps, crabs, and shell-fish, as well as on young birds and small quadrupeds, and suck all the eggs they can find. The rocky shores of the islands on which I found them breeding are covered with multitudes of sea-urchins, having short greenish spines, which give them the semblance of a ball of moss. At low water the Herring Gulls frequently devour these animals, thrusting their bill through the shell, and sucking its contents. They also take up shells in the air, and drop them on the rocks to break them. We saw one that had met with a very hard mussel, take it up and drop it three times in succession, before it succeeded in breaking it, and I was much pleased to see the bird let it fall each succeeding time from a greater height than before. They seem to go out to sea in search of food at particular periods, setting out at the first ebb and returning to the shore as the tide rises.

The young are at first fed chiefly with shrimps and other small crustacea, which are picked up from the mud-bars or along the shores. They are then of a deep rusty colour all over, and when fully feathered they retain a good deal of that hue, but the feathers are edged with light grey or brown; the feet and legs are of a greenish-blue colour, inclining to purple; the bill dusky

or nearly black. In spring they acquire their full size, but still retain the grey and rusty plumage. The next year they shew much light ash-grey and white about the head, neck, and lower parts, the orange spot appears on the bill, the feet and legs are flesh-coloured, the tail still partially banded towards the extremity. At this age, however, I believe they breed, as I observed some coloured in the manner described, mated with older birds. The third spring they acquire the colouring represented in the plate.

I found no other species breeding on the same islands. Old and young associate together all the year round, excepting during the breeding season, when the latter separate and pursue their avocations together. The cry or cackling of this species, which is heard at a considerable distance, may be imitated by pronouncing the syllables *hac, hac, hac, cah, cah, cah*.

The Herring Gull has a greater range of migration along our coast and in the interior than any other American species. I have found it on our great lakes, and on the Ohio, Missouri and Mississippi, down to the Gulf of Mexico, during the autumnal months, and in winter along the shores of the latter, and all our eastern coasts. It may be said to be resident in the United States, as it breeds from off Boston to Eastport in Maine; but the greater number go farther north. We found the nests of some on the bare rocks of the Seal Islands off Labrador, but not on the coast itself. They were composed of dry plants and moss brought from the mainland. The birds kept by themselves, and appeared to be completely mastered by the Great Black-backed Gulls. On our return we saw old and young on the northern coast of Newfoundland, and on the different bays over which we passed.

I have represented an adult male, but not one of the largest, and a young bird shot in winter, which I have placed on a bunch of Racoon oysters, where it was standing when shot.

LARUS ARGENTATUS, Bonap. Syn., p. 360.

HERRING GULL, *Larus argentatus*, Nutt. Man., vol. ii. p. 304.

HERRING GULL, *Larus argentatus*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. iii. p. 588; vol. v. p. 638.

Male, 23, 53. Young, in winter, 18 $\frac{3}{4}$, 51.

Abundant in autumn, winter, and early spring, from Texas along the whole Atlantic coast to Newfoundland. Breeds from the Bay of Fundy to Melville Island. Common in autumn on the Great Lakes, the Ohio, and Mississippi.

Adult Male in spring.

Bill shorter than the head, robust, compressed, higher near the end than at the base. Upper mandible with the dorsal line nearly straight at the base, declinate and arched towards the end, the ridge convex, the sides

slightly convex, the edges sharp, inflected, arcuato-declinate towards the end, the tip rather obtuse. Nasal groove rather long and narrow; nostril in its fore part, lateral, longitudinal, linear-oblong, wider anteriorly, pervious. Lower mandible with the angle long and narrow, the outline of the crura curved, the dorsal line beyond the prominence slightly concave, the sides erect and nearly flat, the edges sharp and inflected.

Head rather large, oblong, narrowed anteriorly. Neck of moderate length, strong. Body full. Feet of moderate length, rather slender; tibia bare below; tarsus somewhat compressed, covered anteriorly with numerous scutella, laterally with angular scales, behind with numerous small rectangular scales; hind toe very small and elevated, the fore toes of moderate length, rather slender, the fourth longer than the second, the third longest, all scutellate above, and connected by reticulated entire membranes, the lateral toes margined externally with a thick narrow membrane. Claws small, slightly arched, depressed, rounded, that of the middle toe with an expanded thin inner margin.

The plumage in general is close, full, elastic, very soft and blended, on the back rather compact. Wings very long, broad, acute, the first and second quills nearly equal, the rest of the primaries rather rapidly graduated; secondaries broad and rounded, the inner narrower. Tail of moderate length, even, of twelve rounded feathers.

Bill gamboge-yellow, with a large orange-red patch inclining to carmine towards the end of the lower mandible. Edges of eyelids gamboge; iris silvery white. Feet flesh-coloured; claws brownish-black. The head, neck, lower parts, rump and tail, are pure white; the back and wings pearl-grey or light bluish-grey, very slightly tinged with purple; the edges of the wing and the extremities of all the quills, are white. The first six quills are brownish-black towards the end, that colour including the outer webs and the greater part of the inner of the two first, and on the rest gradually diminishing, so as on the sixth merely to form a bar; first quill with a patch of white about an inch and a half long on both webs near the end; second with a circular white patch on the inner web, the tips of all white.

Length to end of tail 23 inches, to end of wings $24\frac{1}{2}$, to end of claws $21\frac{1}{2}$; extent of wings 53; wing from flexure 18; tail $7\frac{1}{4}$; bill along the ridge $2\frac{1}{2}$, along the edge of lower mandible 3; its depth at the angle $\frac{3}{4}$; tarsus $2\frac{1}{2}$; middle toe $2\frac{1}{4}$, its claws $\frac{4}{12}$. Weight 1 lb. 10 oz.

The Female is similar to the male, but somewhat less.

Young in November.

Bill brownish-black, paler at the base of the lower mandible. Edges of eyelids greenish-grey; iris hazel. Feet purplish flesh-colour; claws brownish-black. The general colour of the whole plumage is light purplish-grey,

the upper part of the head darker, the lower parts minutely mottled with pale yellowish-grey; the feathers of the upper parts, and the upper tail-coverts, irregularly edged and barred with greyish-white. Primary quills greyish-brown, their inner webs paler, their tips whitish; tail of the same colour, its base and outer webs of lateral feathers irregularly mottled with whitish, the tips brownish-white.

Length to end of tail $18\frac{3}{4}$ inches, to end of wings 20; extent of wings 51; wing from flexure 16; tail 6; bill along the ridge 2, along the edge of lower mandible $2\frac{1}{2}$; tarsus $2\frac{1}{4}$; middle toe 2, its claw $\frac{4}{12}$. Weight 22 oz.

From the examination of individuals of this species, it would appear that little reliance can be placed on the markings of the quills as affording a specific character. Four undoubted specimens of *Larus argentatus* now before me, have a white spot, varying in length from one to two inches, and including both webs, near the end of the *first* quill. One has no spot on the *second* quill; another has a spot on both webs of the *second* quill of one wing, and a smaller spot on part of the inner web of the same quill of the other wing; the third has a very small spot on part of the inner web of the same quill of both wings; the fourth has a large circular spot on the inner web of that quill also in both wings.

Male. The mouth is of the same structure as in *Larus marinus*, 1 inch 4 twelfths in width. The tongue is 1 inch $10\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths long, and similar to that of the species just named. Lobes of the liver 3 inches, and $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches; gall-bladder 1 inch 4 twelfths long, 8 twelfths wide. Œsophagus $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, at the commencement 2 inches wide, on the neck 1 inch 10 twelfths, and within the thorax 2 inches; it is thus very wide, and its walls are of moderate thickness, the muscular fibres distinct, and the inner coat longitudinally plicate. The stomach is proportionally small, of an elliptical form, 2 inches long, 1 inch 9 twelfths in breadth, its lateral muscles thin. It contains bones and scales of fishes. The epithelium in all respects as in *Larus marinus*. Cæca $\frac{1}{2}$ inch long, 3 twelfths broad; cloaca globular, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter. Trachea 10 inches long, from 5 twelfths to 4 twelfths in breadth, moderately flattened, its rings 150, feeble. Bronchi wide, each of 28 half rings.

W.E.H.

Herring or Silvery Gull

1. Adult in Spring. 2. Young in Autumn.

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

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

Audubon, John James. 1844. "The Herring or Silvery Gull, *Larus argentatus*, Brunn. [Pl. 448]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 7, 163–169. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319560>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/124981>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319560>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/319560>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries

Sponsored by

Biodiversity Heritage Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: NOT_IN_COPYRIGHT

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.