HIMANTOPUS CANDIDUS.

Howard & McPherson del. et lith.

Wilson. Sculp.

HIMANTOPUS CANDIDUS.

Stilt- or Long-legged Plover.

- Charadrius himantopus*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 255.
——— *autumnalis*, Hasselq. Iter Palæst., p. 253.
Himantopus melanopterus, Temm. Man. d'Orn., 2nd edit., tom. ii. p. 528, and tom. iv. p. 350.
——— *rufipes*, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 446, tab. 25. fig. 1.
——— *Plinii*, Flem. Hist. of Brit. Anim., p. 112.
——— *atropterus*, Meyer, Taschenb. Deutschl. Vög., p. 315.
——— *candidus*, Bonn. Ency. Méth., Orn., part i. p. 24, pl. 5. fig. 4.
——— *albicollis*, Vieill. Faun. Franç., p. 269, tab. 117. fig. 2.
Hypsibates himantopus, Nitsch, in Ersch und Gruber, Encycl., tom. xvi. p. 150.
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How can I better commence the history of this singular bird than with the following quotation from the 'Natural History of Selborne,' by the Rev. Gilbert White, a man whom we may regard as the father of British ornithologists, and whose writings have inspired more young minds with a love of nature and of our native birds than any other observer?

"In the last week of last month" (April, 1779), "five of those most rare birds, too uncommon to have obtained an English name, but known to naturalists by the terms of *Himantopus*, or *Loripes*, and *Charadrius himantopus*, were shot upon the verge of Frinsham Pond, a large lake belonging to the Bishop of Winchester, and lying between Wolmer Forest and the town of Farnham, in Surrey. . . . One of these specimens I procured, and found the length of the legs so extraordinary that, at first sight, one might have supposed the shanks had been fastened on to impose on the credulity of the beholder: they are legs *in caricatura*. My specimen, when drawn and stuffed with pepper, weighed only four ounces and a quarter; yet the naked part of the thigh measured three inches and a half, and the legs four inches and a half. It must be a matter of great curiosity to see the Stilt-Plover move, to observe how it can wield such a length of lever with such feeble muscles as the thighs seem to be furnished with. At best, one should suspect it to be but a bad walker; but what adds to the wonder is that it has no back toe. Now without that steady prop to support its steps, it must be liable, in speculation, to perpetual vacillations, and seldom able to preserve the true centre of gravity. . . . The old name of *Himantopus* is taken from Pliny, and, by an awkward metaphor, implies that the legs are as slender and pliant as if cut out of a thong of leather." I can easily conceive the delight and amazement of the good man at a sight so novel and curious, having myself participated in similar feelings on first meeting with a nearly allied species of this remarkable form, while wandering in the wilds of Australia; and well do I remember with what delight I watched the movements of a flock which, after running gracefully along the margin of the river Mokai, suddenly rose, turned, and flew back by me with their long red legs streaming out behind.

Since Gilbert White wrote, solitary individuals and small companies of this species have now and then visited the British Islands; such occurrences however, must, be regarded as purely accidental. But at only a short distance over the Channel (say, about 300 miles as the Crow flies), Long-legged Stilts may be seen in the spring and summer of every year, and no further off than Spain be found breeding in many places; for there, as in Italy, Savoy, Greece, and Turkey, it is common. In France, Holland, and Germany it is much less abundant, and, as with us, must be regarded as a mere wanderer; on the other hand, the avifaunas of India and Java comprise a bird of this form, so closely allied to the *H. candidus* as to be scarcely separable from it, but which may prove to be the *H. leucocephalus* of Australia.

From the brief but interesting notes respecting this species contributed to 'The Ibis' by Lord Lilford, the Rev. H. B. Tristram, Mr. Howard Saunders, and others, we learn:—that it is very abundant and breeds in the marshes south of Seville; that it is common in Malta in spring and autumn, numerous on the shores of Corfu and Epirus in March, April, and May, breeds in great numbers in the marshes near Spalatro, in Dalmatia, and undoubtedly in Turkey; that it resorts to the ditches of the oases in Northern Africa, and breeds abundantly in the northern Sahara; that stragglers are occasionally seen in Upper Egypt, small flocks found in the Delta and Faioum; and that it is not unfrequent and breeds on a small marshy lake near Jenin, in the centre of Palestine, where it remains throughout the year.

Of the occurrence of this species in Scotland very few instances are on record, the first being mentioned in Sir Robert Sibbald's 'Scotia Illustrata;' in Ireland, according to Thompson, it is extremely rare; in England, Mr. Yarrell notes examples killed in Anglesea, Devonshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Lincolnshire, and Norfolk: of those killed in the last-mentioned county, a full account will be found in the second volume of my friend Mr. Stevenson's 'Birds of Norfolk.'

Mr. A. E. Knox, after stating that a specimen of the Black-winged Stilt was killed on the 17th of May, 1859, on the banks of a small pond near the junction of Midhurst and Bepton Commons, says:—"As opportunities for observing the habits and manners of these rare and accidental visitors so seldom occur, I make no apology for detailing some circumstances which appear to me to be especially worthy of notice, as tending to throw light on its remarkable and, to the ordinary observer, grotesque external conformation.

"The pond to which I have alluded is very shallow, the depth of the water, even at fifteen paces from the shore, scarcely exceeding a foot. About that distance from the banks, the surface was covered with numerous blossoms of the Water-Crowfoot (*Ranunculus aquatilis*). On examining these next day and frequently afterwards, I found them inhabited by numerous minute Dipterous and Coleopterous insects (small flies, midges, and beetles) comfortably nestled at the bottom of the flowers among the stamens, from which, indeed, none but the most delicate and attenuated instrument would be capable of extracting them without at the same time injuring the blossoms. Now, not one of our wading or swimming birds, except the Stilt, possesses a beak perfectly adapted to this purpose. But the Stilt has a bill almost as finely pointed as that of a Humming-bird; and those which make the nearest approach to it, as some among the smaller *Tringa*, want the accompaniment of length of limb (that unusual development of *tibia* and *tarsus*) to enable them to wade to a sufficient distance from the shore.

"The bird was first noticed by an intelligent lad, the son of a small farmer of the name of Pearson, while driving the cows home to be milked in the evening. It was then standing nearly up to its belly in the water, and rapidly extracting the insects from the flowers, or, as the boy supposed, picking the petals themselves. It allowed him to approach within twenty yards before it took flight, when it extended its long red legs behind it, after the manner of a heron, and, alighting again on the opposite bank, immediately commenced wading out to the water-plants. Young Pearson then hastened home to his father, who lives at a short distance from the pond; and the latter, hurrying to the spot with a loaded gun, found the bird employed as before among the flowers of the Water-Crowfoot. But it was now exceedingly shy and wary, flying from one side of the pond to the other before Pearson could get within shot (but never uttering any cry or sound), so that he found it necessary to endeavour to "stalk" the bird. This a newly made ditch and bank, one end of which approached within a few yards of the water's edge, enabled him to do successfully. On raising his head above the bank just before he fired, he perceived the Stilt within twenty yards of him, knee-deep in the water, in the midst of a cloud of gnats and midges, at which it was snapping right and left, much after the manner of a dog when teased by the flies in hot weather. The bird, fortunately but little injured by the shot, was brought to me the following morning, and, on dissection, proved to be a female. The ovarium contained several eggs, the largest of which was about the size of a pea. The stomach was crammed with beetles and gnats in a half-digested state, the *elytra* of the former showing that different species had been captured. I could not help being struck with the remarkable tenuity of the tips of the mandibles, as well as by the more obvious peculiarity from which the bird has derived its trivial name (the extraordinary length of its legs); but after listening to the simple story of George Pearson and his son, I perceived that the mystery was solved, and that here was a new instance of the wonderful adaptation of means to an end, of structure to habits, such interesting examples of which are continually presenting themselves to the observant naturalist."—*Ibis*, 1859, p. 395.

Mr. Salvin says:—"Over the whole of the lower end of the marsh of Zana and Chot Saboun the Stilt breeds in great abundance amongst the wet grass, choosing for the position of its nest a small tuft, so as just to keep the eggs out of the water.

"The bird uses its long legs with much greater ease than might be expected; and its long delicate strides, as it stalks about in search of food, are far from being ungraceful. The only time they seem to be in its way is at the moment of taking flight, when they hang awkwardly down till the bird, being fairly started, stretches them out far beyond the tail.

"The young Stilt is able to walk almost immediately on leaving the egg; one we found was capable of moving about while the other three were struggling to free themselves from the shell. The nest is composed of a few bits of dead reed or grass. The complement of eggs laid by one bird is four." (*Ibis*, 1859, p. 361.) They are of a buffy stone-colour, thickly blotched all over with purplish black.

My specimens of *Himantopus candidus* from North Africa, which have the back of the neck nearly white, indicate that the female has the back brown instead of rich greenish black as in the male. For the loan of the young bird represented on the opposite Plate, I am indebted to the kindness of A. W. Crichton, Esq.

The larger figures are those of the two sexes, of the size of life.

Gould, John. 1873. "Stilt or Long-legged Plover, *Himantopus candidus* [Pl. 34]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323993>.

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