HEMATOPTUS OSTRALEGUS, Linn.

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Oyster-catcher.

Hæmatopus ostralegus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 257.

Ostralegus hæmatopus, Macgill. Man. of Nat. Hist., Orn., vol. ii. p. 59.

——— *vulgaris*, Less. Rev. Zool., 1849, p. 47.

WHY has this bird been called Oyster-catcher, when it is said by most observers never to feed upon that species of mollusk, but to be extremely fond of the common limpet, which it dexterously detaches from the rocks left bare by the tide? Thompson, who has studied more fully the food of our native birds than perhaps any other writer, says:—"The *Ostrea* inhabits too deep water to be ever accessible to the bird. The contents of the stomachs of eight individuals, shot in spring, autumn, and winter, proved, on examination, to be as follows: five contained only the opercula and portions of the animal of the whelk (*Littorina communis*), with which some of them were wholly filled; one exhibited the opercula of *Purpurea lapillus*; another presented a good deal of vegetable matter (consisting of tender roots and green leaves), small, white, worm-like larvæ, a few opercula of the whelk, and an operculum of *Buccinum undatum*; in the stomach and crop of the last, which was remarkably fat, were fifty opercula of large whelks, about twenty-five animals of good-sized limpets (*Patella vulgaris*), and an holothuria (*Cucumaria*)."

Having commenced this history of a species so common, so attractive, and which plays so important a part among our shore-loving birds, by showing that its trivial name, like that of the Goat-sucker, is a misnomer, I proceed to state that it is found on every part of the coasts of England, Ireland, and Scotland suited to its habits. Being a winter as well as a summer bird in the British Islands, it must be considered indigenous with us. Unlike the Turnstone, the Grey Plover, and some other Grallatorial birds, which frequently desert whole districts and even entire countries for a time, the present species rarely changes the locality in which it has taken up its abode, and, consequently, may almost to a certainty be found any day in the year by those acquainted with its habits and its usual places of resort. It is a strikingly showy bird, whether seen on the low rocky promontories of the coast or on the shingly beach of such rivers as the Don and the Dee, where it sometimes breeds. Apart from Britain, the Oyster-catcher is enumerated in the avifaunas of all the countries of Europe; indeed its range extends from the Arctic circle to the Mediterranean, and eastward as far as India; but as yet we do not know if it has been observed in China, the bird brought from that country by Mr. Swinhoe, which at first was considered identical, proving, on further examination, to be distinct and probably *Hæmatopus longirostris*. Other species of this form are distributed over certain parts of the globe; in the Old World some are found in Europe, throughout the greater part of Africa, India, China, Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand; and others in America, from the United States to Terra del Fuego,—the whole probably amounting to ten or twelve in number.

"The Oyster-catcher of Europe," says Sir William Jardine, in a note to his edition of Wilson's 'American Ornithology,' "is to be found on all the sandy British coasts in immense abundance. All those I have observed breeding, have chosen low rocky coasts, and deposited their eggs on some shelf or ledge, merely baring the surface from any moss or other substance covering the rock. When approached, the parents fly round, uttering with great vehemence their clamorous note. A great many old and young birds are always to be found on these coasts, enlivening the monotony of an extensive sand-beach with their clean and lively appearance and their shrill notes. As the young begin to assemble, the flocks increase; by the month of August they consist of many thousands, and at full tide they may be seen, like an extensive black line, at the distance of miles. They remain at rest until about half tide, when a general motion is made, and the line may be seen broken as the different parties advance close to the water's edge. After this they keep pace with the reflux until the feeding-banks begin to be uncovered, of which they seem to have an instinctive knowledge, when they leave their resting-place in small troops,—taking day after day the same course. They are difficult to approach; but when one is shot the flock will hover over it for some time, without heeding the intruder. During flight they assume the wedge-shape (▷), like Ducks. They feed at night when the tide is suitable, and are often very noisy. Mussels and other shell-fish, crabs, &c. &c. are their most common food."

Mr. Hewitson says, "the Oyster-catcher is very particular in the selection of a site for its eggs, always making choice of a piece of gravel, or stony ground if to be met with near, more especially should it be mixed with broken shells, to which it shows a curious partiality, carefully collecting them together, and arranging them in a slight hole in the ground, and, when these are not to be found, selecting in their stead

small flat pieces of stone. Simple and hard though the materials be which compose its nest, it is as particular in its arrangement of them as many of our smaller birds are in the softer and more luxurious composition of their neat and beautiful abodes. Whether the position for the egg is chosen upon the pebbly beach or upon the harder surface of the rock, it is always carefully strewn with these small flat pieces of shell or gravel. The whiter they are, the better they seem to please the taste of the architect, which seems, however, to experience some difficulty in placing them to its liking, and prepares numerous nests before it makes use of one. This I have always noticed with wonder, and in some instances have seen as many as a dozen, all apparently as well finished as the one which contained the eggs." I suspect that nests of this description are only to be met with in certain localities; for the eggs found on the fine sandy borders of some of our inland rivers were placed in a slight depression only; and in the rocky spots of the coast where they are deposited just above high water-mark, but little in the shape of a nest is to be detected. The Oyster-catcher generally lays two, three, or four eggs. Perhaps the normal number may be three, since not more than three, and most frequently two, were found in the nests detected by me in the beaches in Tasmania, where I was surrounded by *Hematopus longirostris* and *H. fuliginosus*, the former of which is very nearly allied to the European species; and we may safely infer that the nidification of the two birds is as similar as their outward appearance.

Macgillivray, speaking of the bird when raiding, as it sometimes does, into the interior of the country, says:—"When by the silver Dee, gliding rapidly along amidst corn-fields, pastures, and fragrant birch-woods, you hear a loud and shrill cry, and, turning round, see a pair of Sea-pies winging their flight up the country, their glossy black and pure white plumage contrasting strongly with every thing around, and their long vermilion beaks giving them a strange and foreign aspect, they never fail to rivet your gaze. Equally attractive are they when running about on some grassy meadow, picking up an insect or a slug, then standing, and again advancing with short quick steps, prettily tripping it among the gowans, then emitting their loud alarm-cries, and flying off to a more distant place or alighting on the pebbly beach.

"While reposing, the Sea-pie stands with its legs quite straight, or uses one leg only, the other being drawn up, the body horizontal, the neck retracted, the head either directed forward or with the bill buried among the feathers of the back. In this position they present a curious appearance when there is a high wind, as in that case each individual directs his breast towards it, and on a sandy beach or level shore they often stretch out in long lines. Its flight is strong and steady, performed by regular beats of the extended wings, with the neck drawn in and the feet directed backwards. Its alarm-note is a single shrill scream; but on some occasions it emits a modulated softened cry of several notes. When wounded so as to be unable to fly, it readily betakes itself to the water and swims off, sitting light and moving with considerable speed."

The eggs, which are deposited in April and May, are of a yellowish stone-colour, spotted with ash-grey and dark brown, and are about two inches and two lines in length by one inch and six lines in breadth. The process of incubation occupies about three weeks; and during that period the male keeps guard, as it were, and becomes very noisy on the approach of danger. The young when hatched are clothed in a greyish brown down.

The Oyster-catcher readily becomes tame, especially when taken young, and then forms an amusing pet, of which a very interesting instance is given in Thompson's 'Natural History of Ireland,' vol. ii. p. 127, to which I must beg leave to refer my readers.

Both Selby and Macgillivray speak disparagingly of the flesh of this bird, the former saying it "partakes of the odour of the food upon which it subsists," and the latter that it is "very dark, abounds in fat of a yellowish colour, has a disagreeable smell, and rather unpleasant taste;" but this is contrary to my experience (which, however, is not great); for those I have eaten have been tender, juicy, and well flavoured; and that they must be partaken of by many persons is certain, since it is very frequently seen in the shops of the second-class poulterers in London; and we learn from Macgillivray that it is as often seen in the markets of Edinburgh, where they are usually sold at two shillings a couple.

The sexes are precisely alike at the same age, both in colour and markings; their throat, which is jet-black in summer, is crossed by a mark of pure white in winter, the absence or presence of which will serve to indicate the period of the year at which a mounted specimen has been killed. The bill is at all times orange in the adult bird, the eye blood-red, and the legs pinky flesh-colour; but their hues are more or less brilliant, according to the season; thus in autumn they are not so bright or vivid as in spring, prior to the commencement of the breeding-season, when, like all other birds, they are in their finest costume.

The Plate represents a bird in the summer and another in the winter plumage, a trifle under the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Oyster-catcher, *Hæmatopus ostralegus* [Pl. 45]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324002>.

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