BERNICLE LEUCOPSIS.

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Bernicle Goose.

Anas leucopsis, Temm. Man. d'Orn., p. 531.

Anser leucopsis Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 921.

— *bernicla*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. & Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 37.

Bernicla leucopsis, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 563.

Few sights are more attractive to the lover of nature than a "skein" of wild geese passing through the air—a string of wandering birds which have quitted some far-off locality, and are journeying onward to a haven better suited to their requirements than the one they have left. How wonderful are the migrations of these birds, and at what great heights are they sometimes performed! The smaller birds probably make their journeys at a similar altitude to that of the "skeins" of geese which occasionally pass over the Metropolis, or of the flights of cranes which periodically cross the Rhine; but birds so small as the Swallow and the Wheatear cannot be seen at such an elevation, and therefore are not noticeable.

Flights of wild geese are equally interesting to the sportsman and to the gunner, whose only regret is that the birds mostly pass on without resting; they do, however, sometimes alight on an estuary, marsh, or extensive field, but are not allowed to remain there long without molestation. During the winter the Bernicle Goose is a common bird in the British Islands, and is equally abundant on the continent of Europe, particularly in Jutland, Holstein, Holland, and some parts of France; it also sparingly occurs in many countries further east. According to the best authorities, it arrives in September and October, is more generally diffused over the western than the eastern coasts, and departs for more northerly regions early in the spring, few or none remaining after the middle of March. "Its migratory journeys are performed during both night and day, in considerable flocks, and invariably along the sea-coast, skirting the land around headlands and bays, and passing only when necessitated over the open sea. Their roosting-places are also on the sea-coast. Their flight is strong and powerful, and a considerable noise is produced by the wings on their alighting" (Morris, 'Brit. Birds,' vol. v.)

As I have had little or no opportunity of observing this bird in a state of nature, I must here, as in many other instances, draw upon the labours of some of my contemporaries. Speaking of the bird as seen by him in Scotland, Macgillivray says:—

"This very beautiful bird more frequently retires to the sea than to the lakes during its periods of repose, or when driven from its feeding-grounds. A large flock then presents a beautiful spectacle, and the birds sit lightly on the water, and when advancing elevate their necks. Not less beautiful do they appear when on wing, now arranged in long lines, ever undulating, at one time extending in the direction of their flight, at another obliquely or at right angles to it, sometimes in an angular figure, and again mingling together. Their voice is clear, and rather shrill, but strikes agreeably on the ear when the cries of a large flock are heard from a considerable distance. They can on occasion run with very considerable speed, but ordinarily walk sedately and prettily. Their food consists of grass, especially the juicy stems of *Agrostis alba*, as well as the blades and roots of other plants. They also feed in marshes, and by the margins of pools and small lakes. The nest is said to be formed of grass, and to contain six or eight eggs. I have examined several specimens from Parry's Arctic Expeditions. Of two presented to Professor Jameson, one is two inches and seven-eighths long, an inch and eleven-twelfths broad; the other is two inches and six-eighths long, an inch and seven-eighths in breadth: they are of an elliptical form, both ends equal, and of a greyish white tint."

Thomson informs us that the Bernicle Goose "is a regular winter visitant to Ireland, where its favourite places of resort are the extensive sandy parts of the coast which are exposed by the receding tide, bordered by short pasture, or having islets of this nature rising here and there above its level surface." "Its greatest haunt" known to him "is an immense sandy shallow bay on the coast of Louth, bordered by an extensive tract of pasture and marshy ground called Lurgan Green, from which it is called Lurgan-Green Bernicle over a considerable part of the island. There immense numbers spend the whole of the year, except the period appropriated to the reproduction of their species, when they are absent for about five months, from the middle of April to that of September. I have rarely passed this locality *en route* from Belfast to Dublin without seeing vast flocks of these birds (numbering sometimes between 300 and 400), either on the sands or the greensward raised but little above them. I have seen them within shot of the coach, and as regardless of its passing as a flock of tame geese—indeed more so, for the latter would have had the impudence to cackle, while the Bernicle had the good taste to remain silent. They were never feeding

when I observed them, though doubtless they partake of the pasture. No person being permitted to fire a shot on Lurgan Green was probably the cause of their tameness. They were captured in little pitfalls, dug in the earth, without being in the least degree injured. Several placed in the aquatic menagerie at the Falls, near Belfast, at once became tame, and proved to be of a mild and gentle disposition. About the middle of October, in the years 1848 and 1849, flocks of about twenty in number were seen flying over the sea and points of land in a southerly direction, off Analong, at the base of the mountains of Mourne. They flew in a line, like wild geese, about twenty yards above the sea or ground, and were headed by an old stager whose adult plumage was strongly defined. In Belfast Bay the Bernicle is a rare visitant, chiefly in the early part of winter; but a single bird has been obtained there as late as the beginning of August. The bird has been met with in many other parts of the country; but its only regular haunt is the locality above mentioned—Lurgan Green."

Mr. Selby states that "upon the Lancashire coast, the Solway Frith, &c. it is very abundant, frequenting the marshy grounds that are occasionally covered by the spring tides, and such sands as produce the sea-grasses and plants upon which it feeds. Like the rest of the genus it is a very wary bird, and can only be approached by the most cautious manœuvres. It is sometimes shot by moonlight when it comes on the sands to feed, by persons crouched on the ground, or from behind any occasional shelter in such places as the flocks are known to frequent. Its flesh is sweet and tender, and highly esteemed for the table. It is a bird of handsome shape, and from the length of its neck and tarsi stands high upon the ground. When caught alive it soon becomes very tame, and thrives well upon grain &c.; but no attempts have been hitherto made to domesticate the breed."

The history of this species, brief as it is, would be still more so (and, moreover, incomplete) without at least an allusion to the old legends connected with it. Its trivial name of Bernicle [or Barnacle] is derived from an oft-told tale, the absurdity of which has scarcely, if ever, been surpassed. It is that the bird derives its origin from the Barnacle shell, the *Lepas anatifera* of Linnæus. "This curious fancy," says Macgillivray, "which no doubt arose from the slight resemblance of the filaments of that animal to the sprouting feathers of a young bird, is still entertained by many persons; but, like the milking-propensity of the Goatsucker and the winter submersion of the Swallows, it might now, I think, be allowed to rest in its grave." Those who may wish to read the legend in part or in the whole, may refer to Professor Max Müller's 'Lectures on the Science of Language,' p. 540, or to the 12th volume of Shaw's 'General Zoology,' p. 50.

Mr. Selby states that no attempt has been made to domesticate this fine Goose. It is to be regretted that this has not been done; for pinioned birds readily breed in a semidomesticated state at Hawkstone, the seat of Viscount Hill, who kindly allowed me to shoot one for the purpose of the present work. I suspect, however, that it would be necessary to pinion the young birds so reared, to prevent their obeying the impulse that would doubtless urge them to migrate to countries better suited to their existence during summer—probably Lapland, Finland, northern Russia, and Siberia.

Mr. Newton, in his 'Notes on the Ornithology of Iceland,' informs us that, according to Faber, this species arrives in Iceland about the middle of April, and departs about the middle of October. He found it most abundant in the South-west, but does not believe that it breeds on the island.

There is no perceptible difference in the colouring of the sexes; but the markings of the male are stronger and more beautifully arranged.

The Bernicle is a smaller and more elegant bird than the Bean Goose, and on the other hand is much larger than its near ally the Brent, its weight being about seven pounds.

As it is impossible to represent so large a bird of the natural size, my figures are necessarily much reduced.

Gould, John. 1873. "Bernicle Goose, *Bernicla leucopsis* [Pl. 5]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324049>.

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