LARUS FUSCUS, Linn.

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Lesser Black-backed Gull.

Larus fuscus, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 55.

— *flavipes*, Meyer, Taschenb., tom. ii. p. 469.

Laroides melanotus, harengorum, et fuscus, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 747, 748, 749.

Leucus fuscus, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 86.

Clupeilarus fuscus, Bonap. Consp. Gen. Av., tom. ii. p. 220.

Dominicanus fuscus, Bruch, Monogr. in Caban. Journ. für Orn. 1853, p. 100, sp. 6.

THE Lesser and the Greater Black-backed Gulls of the European avifauna are so precisely alike in form and colouring, that it is by the great difference in their size alone that they can be distinguished from each other. Generally speaking, these two nearly allied but really distinct species (for such, notwithstanding their similarity, every ornithologist considers them) frequent different rocks for the purpose of breeding; and though in some localities they are associated, still there are others, and even countries, where one is found while the other is entirely absent; for instance, the Lesser Black-backed Gull is not mentioned as occurring in Iceland, where the greater species is common; and the same may be said with respect to America. As regards the coasts of the British Islands, it is to be found on every part of them at one season or another. It nests on many parts of the rocky shores of Ireland, as shown by that careful observer Thompson, who mentions the Gobbins, on the north coast, the Horn in Donegal, the coast of Connaught, the largest of the Sovereign Islands, near the harbour of Kinsale, the cliffs near Howth, in the county Dublin &c. as places in which it is known to breed, and enumerates several other localities in which its nests have been found. In Scotland, according to Macgillivray, it is generally dispersed along the coasts, and permanently resident—but in some districts is of rare occurrence, and in the northern more so than in the southern, probably from their being more adapted for affording secure breeding-places. It is usually not uncommon, in the winter season, in the Firths of Tay, Forth, and Clyde, where very few, however, remain to breed. Mr. Selby mentions that himself and Sir William Jardine obtained the eggs and young of this species upon one of the islands of Loch Awe, and observed many colonies in Sutherlandshire, one upon Loch Shin, and another upon one of the islands of Loch Laighal. It breeds also in the Hebrides, Orkney, and Shetland. In England it is numerous, at all seasons, on the Northumberland coast and those of the south-eastern, southern, and western counties, and also in Wales. Professor Nilsson states that it is common about the Baltic and on the coast of Norway; and Mr. Wheelwright shot one example in Lapland. It also occurs in Holland, France, Belgium, Dalmatia, the islands of the Adriatic, and in Italy. Loche states that it is found in Algeria; Messrs. Elves and Buckley noticed it on the Black Sea; the Rev. H. B. Tristram on the Lake of Galilee, in Palestine, and mentions that it is plentiful on the coast of Syria in winter; Dr. von Heuglin states that he saw several pairs, throughout the year, on the Red Sea and in the Gulf of Aden; Mr. Yarrell mentions that it is also found in Barbary and Egypt, and that specimens have been received from Trebizond, in Persia; and, lastly, we know that it visits India, but appears to be rare in that country, since Dr. Jerdon says he only obtained a young bird far inland, near Jaulna, in the Deccan, but did not again meet with the species, and is not aware of its having been procured by any one else.

“The flight of this bird,” says Macgillivray, “is peculiarly elegant, easy, and buoyant, with the wings considerably curved. Its ordinary cry is loud, mellow, and somewhat plaintive, and when a number join in emitting it, which they sometimes do when assembled for repose on an unfrequented beach or island, may be heard at a great distance, and is then far from being unpleasant. It also emits occasionally a cackling or laughing cry, more mellow than that of the Greater Black-backed Gull. It searches for food on the open sea, in estuaries, on the beaches, and frequently on the land, sometimes flying to a great distance from the coast. Small fishes, crustacea, echini, shell-fish, land-mollusca, and earth-worms are its habitual food; but it also eats of stranded fishes, and devours young birds. When shoals of herrings are in the bays, creeks, or estuaries, it may often be seen in great numbers, intermingled with other gulls; but when reposing, whether on the sea or on the land, it generally keeps separate, in small flocks.

“In May they betake themselves to unfrequented islands, headlands, and sometimes to inland lakes, often in considerable numbers, and there remain until their young are able to fly, although they make extensive excursions around in search of food. Their nests, composed of withered grass and other herbage, are placed in hollows formed in the turf, or in superficial chinks of the rocks. The eggs, generally three in number, differ considerably in size and much in colour, but are usually about two inches and nine twelfths in

length, and an inch and ten twelfths in breadth, their ground-colour being dull yellowish grey, light brown, or olivaceous, with spots and patches of purplish grey and dark brown. The young leave the nest at any time, if molested, but generally remain a fortnight or longer. If pursued they readily betake themselves to the water, where they swim with ease, although not with much speed."

Mr. Hewitson observes that "upon the Fern Islands, off the Northumberland coast, this species appears to prefer those which are the most bare and barren, and where there is the least herbage; and though they have their choice, very few of them deposit their eggs on the grass; and yet they rarely lay them without making a tolerably thick nest for their reception; it is of grass loosely bundled together in large pieces, and placed in some slight depression or hollow of the rock. Amongst upwards of a hundred that I examined, one or two only had small pieces of seaweed mixed with the other materials. This species will frequently leave the coast, and, winging its way far inland, make its nest upon the margin of some lake or island, surrounded by its waters. I have had the eggs from a small island in the lake of Ullswater, where I have seen the birds during the summer-season.

"No class of birds are so regular in their time of breeding as those which frequent the ocean. Whilst most of our land-birds have been for two months or more irregularly engaged, either in building their nests, in incubation, or have already reared their young, they have deferred it to a much later period, and, urged by one impulse, the numerous species which inhabit these islands resort to them at once, and all is noise and bustle. This occurs every year upon the Fern Islands within a few days of the same date of time, the first or second week of June. This late period of breeding is, no doubt, influenced by the weather, which, at an earlier season, would, in situations so exposed, be too severe for the rearing of their young ones. After these birds have begun to sit they become very bold and daring in the protection of their eggs. Whilst among them I was amused by one, near the nest of which I was sitting; it retired to a certain distance to give it full force in its attack, and then, making a stoop at my head, came within two or three yards of me, repeating its attack without ceasing, till I left the place. Mr. Darling, under whose hospitable roof at the lighthouse I have enjoyed many pleasant hours during my various visits to these islands, informs me that the bonnet of an old woman, who was in the habit of gathering the eggs of the sea-gulls, was riddled through and through, and almost torn to pieces with their bills."

Mr. Selby states "that the young, upon exclusion from the egg, are covered with a parti-coloured down of grey and brown, which is rapidly hidden by the growth of the regular feathers, and in a month or five weeks they are able to take wing;" and Mr. Yarrell, that "the young birds of former seasons, while yet immature in plumage and incapable of breeding from want of sufficient age, are not permitted by the adult and breeding birds to inhabit the breeding-stations during their breeding-season, but are driven away to other localities."

The young birds, during the first year, are distinguished by a mottled-brown plumage and by having a black bill; after that period has elapsed the adult livery is gradually assumed during the succeeding two years, and the only change that subsequently takes place is that the head and neck are slightly streaked with brown or greyish-brown during the months of winter and spring.

Mr. Selby says, the Lesser Black-backed Gull readily submits to confinement, and may be reared from a tender age, as it thrives upon worms or any kind of offal; and he frequently kept it for the sake of witnessing the changes in its plumage in its progress to maturity, which, as in other large species, occupy three years. Its digestion is rapid and its voracity very great. An individual he kept in a garden made no difficulty of swallowing whole young Plovers of both kinds when fully half-grown.

"I have seen a good deal of rearing birds from the nest," remarks Mr. George Dawson Rowley, "and am often astonished to observe with what different dispositions and characters they are hatched, which variations they preserve through life. I find in the same brood the greedy, the quarrelsome, the timid, and the mischievous. Of some Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus*) kept in my garden, the prevailing characteristic of Mr. Jack is mischief; and his tricks, if related, would fill a small book. Bob, one of his companions, on the contrary, is the most quiet, unobtrusive creature possible, presenting a most marked difference." Thus it would seem that Lesser Black-backed Gulls, like many other created beings, exhibit great diversity of disposition.

The Plate represents an adult in summer plumage and a young bird about the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Lesser Black-backed Gull, *Larus fuscus* [Pl. 56]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324100>.

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