LARUS ARGENTATUS. *Brunn.*

LARUS ARGENTATUS, Brünn.

Herring Gull.

Larus argentatus, Brünn. Orn. Bot., p. 44.

Laroides major, *argenteus*, *argentatoides*, *argentaceus* et *Americanus*, Brehm.

If ornithologists are right in considering Brehm's numerous names synonyms of the present species, the Herring-Gull will hereafter be only known by the specific term *argentatus*; indeed this is the appellation by which it is generally recognized, and certainly is the one that should be retained for this familiar Gull—a Gull that is more generally dispersed around the shores of the British Isles than any other, while, numerically speaking, there is no one of the larger kinds that can be compared with it; and I question if there be one of our rock-loving birds which is held in greater favour—its graceful flight, the silvery whiteness of its head, tail, and under surface, and the delicate grey of its back, relieved by the black marks near the tips of its pinions, rendering it an object of great beauty when sailing about in the neighbourhood of the frowning cliffs, on which it lays its charmingly coloured eggs. All artists who attempt the delineation of such wild scenes as the rookeries of the Guillemot and Puffin, always depict the Herring-Gull among the foremost of the objects. It is the bird, beyond all others, that is so enchanting to the ornithologist when he looks over such precipices as the Needles, in the Isle of Wight, and those of Handa Island, lying off the west coast of Sutherland, and sees in the dark abyss below the thousands of birds that are winging their way over the waters, their various cries mingling with the sound of the wind reverberating from the rocks and the thundering roar of the waves which gradually increase in violence as they come across the wide Atlantic and are here brought to a stand. Although so numerous around the coasts of England, Ireland, and Scotland, the Herring-Gull is seldom, if ever, seen southward of the Bay of Biscay; and some ornithologists have gone so far as to assure me that it does not frequent the Mediterranean at all. This assertion I cannot, of my own experience, either refute or confirm; but I think it is probably correct, as the bird is evidently as much a northern species as many others of the larger members of the *Laridæ*. In Britain its numbers certainly increase as we proceed northward, and it is a hundred times as numerous off the coasts of Scotland as on those of England. It frequents the seas of the northern portion of Europe, and is as abundant in the Baltic as it is with us; but how much further eastwards it proceeds has not yet been clearly ascertained. Jerdon does not include it in his 'Birds of India,' thus clearly showing that it is not a southern bird. In America, Dr. Baird informs us that it frequents the Atlantic, and it is common from Texas to Newfoundland.

Before I proceed to give some extracts respecting the habits, economy, and peculiarities of the Herring-Gull as described by other writers, I give a note kindly forwarded to me by W. Oxenden Hammond, Esq., of St. Alban's Court, Kent. I consider the scene upon which he has written of interest, and one that may have been witnessed by others.

"Writing from Connemara, my brother says:—'On September 7, 1868, we walked to the crest of the mountain-cliff that rises precipitously out of the deep waters of the Atlantic at the extreme west point of the Island of Achill. We saw a sun-fish straight down below us: having come up from the deep water, he basked for a few minutes in the sun, and then sank; in a minute or two he floated again. A Sea-gull (I should say the Common Herring-Gull, a large white Gull, with blue-grey back and wings) immediately went down to him off the cliff, when the fish, instead of taking alarm and sinking, allowed the bird to settle within two feet, and swim around him. The distance was too great for us to see the Gull's eyes or his bill open and shut; but I distinctly saw him breast the fish and occupy himself with it for some time; and I am satisfied that the fish was encumbered by parasites, and that it came up for the purpose of being relieved, and that the Gull responded and was probably in the common habit of rendering such service. The fish rose and sank several times whilst we remained on the cliff.'"

Mr. Robert Gray, writing on the birds of Western Scotland, p. 487, says:—"From Ailsa Craig northwards to the Shiant Isles and the cliffs of Cape Wrath, the Silvery Gull, as this species has been called, has many breeding-places. For the most part it prefers nesting on the turf, near the summit of its sea-beaten haunts, and is therefore found at times in colonies, not mixing with, but sitting alongside, groups of Lesser Black-backs as well as the Great Black-backs, forming a large but harmonious family of Gulls, conspicuous at a great distance when viewed from the sea, and looking like large white flowers among the grass. It is very abundant on all the shores, including those of the outward islands, where I have observed it to be very

tame. Those bred at St. Kilda and Haskeir rocks betake themselves in autumn to the western side of the islands of Harris, North Uist, Benbecula, and South Uist, and are easily approached. I have shot very interesting specimens there, showing the last remains of the immature plumage, sprinkled in brown spots over the back of the birds and the wing-coverts, giving them a marbled appearance, the rest of the plumage being complete."

"The flight of this Gull," writes Macgillivray, in his 'History of British Birds,' "is strong, but buoyant, direct, and unwavering when the bird is proceeding towards a distant place, and then usually elevated, but on ordinary occasions somewhat devious, although from its size this species is not capable of turning and winding so dexterously as the smaller kinds. When engaged with a shoal of fry, the Herring-Gulls hover over the water, now ascending to the height of perhaps twenty feet, then skimming close over the surface; and on observing an object, stretching upward and vibrating their wings and letting down their feet so as to touch and sometimes pat the water, they pick it up without alighting. Sometimes they plunge partly into the water, and occasionally pick up their prey while swimming. All this while they emit now and then a loud and rather shrill cry. Their food consists of fishes of small size, occasionally large dead fish, crabs, echini, asteriae, and mollusca. In winter and spring they often travel in bands over the fields, searching the pastures and, more especially, ploughed land for worms, grubs, and insects.

"At that season they may sometimes be seen on lakes, either solitary or in small flocks. They walk and even run with ease, and not ungracefully. Often, on the sands, they may be seen rapidly patting the surface with their feet; but the purpose of this action is not understood, although some have supposed it to be the causing of worms to emerge.

"In the beginning of May they resort to their various breeding-places along the coast, often in great numbers, betaking themselves to small unfrequented islands, frequently also to the faces of abrupt cliffs, but sometimes settling here and there in pairs. The nest, which is often bulky, is formed of grass and herbaceous plants of various species, according to the locality. The eggs, which are generally three, vary greatly in size and colour, the smallest being two inches and a half in length, and the largest two inches and ten twelfths, their breadth from one inch and eight twelfths to two twelfths more; the ground-colour pale yellowish grey, brownish grey, light brown, or olivaceous, sometimes dotted with dark brown and purplish grey, sometimes clouded in large patches, and sometimes dotted, spotted, and clouded or even covered with tortuous and angular markings."

"In Shetland," as Dr. Edmonston informs me, "the Herring-Gull breeds almost always in cliffs of difficult access, hardly ever in flat situations." Now, as in the Outer Hebrides it very often breeds on islands as flat as they can be in a gneiss country, and very seldom in cliffs, the difference in habits must depend upon circumstances, perhaps not easily appreciable. On an island in the Bay of Fundy, Mr. Audubon found it nesting on fir trees, and was informed that, some time before, it had bred on the flat ground in the neighbourhood. "It is," Dr. Edmonston continues, "the most elegant and most sagacious of all our birds. Of all birds this is the most indefatigable persecutor of the sportsman. At all seasons it is the watchful guardian of wild animals. This habit, however, so generous and interesting, is often fatal to itself, by exciting the vindictive feelings of man. Its carriage is stately and dignified. The young are generally three in number; and long after they have left the nest the parents continue to watch and feed them. Altogether it is a most interesting and delightful bird. Those who have made the name of Gull synonymous with stupidity have known little of the Herring-Gull, or they have meant the contrary to what they have said. In spring it is found in flocks on the corn-fields, picking up whatever seed the harrow may have left uncovered; and at this season it is excellent eating."

The principal figure in the Plate is about two thirds of the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Herring-Gull, *Larus argentatus* [Pl. 59]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324103>.

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