LARUS CANUS. Linn.

LARUS CANUS, *Linn.*

Common Gull.

Larus canus, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 54.

— *hybernus*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 596.

— *cyanorhynchus*, Meyer, Taschenb., p. 480.

— *procellosus*, pt., Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 647.

Laroides procellosus, canus, et canescens, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 750, 751, 753.

Gavia cinerea, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 175, tab. xvi. fig. i.

— *hyberna*, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 189.

If any one of the sea-birds which enliven our shores with their presence be deserving of the term Common it is undoubtedly the one here depicted, and of which during the last few years, as we learn from the daily papers, many thousands have been destroyed, in mere wantonness, or for the sake of their skins for what have been considered decorative purposes. It is sickening to think of the amount of destruction which has been dealt out to these fairy-like creatures for such trivial ends. To kill them off to the last bird when they visit Flamborough and other headlands of our coasts for the purpose of breeding, as has been repeatedly done, is in my opinion most disgraceful. So wholesale has been the destruction of this species and of the beautiful Grebe, that the latter has been almost extirpated,—a result which must meet with the most decided disapprobation of every rightly constituted mind; and I do hope that the ladies, for whom most of these acts of Vandalism are committed, will at once abandon a fashion which must call forth the maledictions of every true lover of nature—no inconsiderable portion of the community. Having said this much with the view of protecting an indigenous species whose buoyant flight and elegant evolutions in the air must have been witnessed and admired by thousands, I now proceed to give an account of its habits and economy. In the British Islands it is so generally dispersed that to particularize localities wherein it may be found is unnecessary. Every writer, whether it be Mr. Rodd, of Cornwall, Macgillivray, of Scotland, or Thompson, of Ireland, testifies to its general distribution over the country to which their observations refer. In winter it may be seen either singly or in small companies on most of our low flat shores, sometimes by the sea, at others in the estuaries, not unfrequently far up our tidal rivers, and occasionally still further in the interior of the country. It often settles and feeds on pastures near the sea, and may be seen following the plough for the sake of the worms and grubs exposed on the newly turned soil. In such situations the snowy whiteness of the plumage contrasts strongly with the surrounding objects; and the birds look truly beautiful when a flock rise suddenly in the air, and when opposed to a black cloud resemble sprites floating in buoyant curves and performing many varied and graceful evolutions.

Each species of Gull usually resorts to some particular group of rocks or islands for the purpose of breeding; and the present one offers no exception to the rule. Among the sites chosen by it in England are Flamborough Head on the coast of Northumberland, and St. Abb's Head in Berwickshire, where, according to Selby, it occupies the whole face of the cliff. In Scotland the craggy cliffs of many parts of the mainland, and similar situations in the Orkney and Shetland Islands, are equally resorted to. It is also said to breed on Lochs Shin and Laighal and a few smaller ones, sometimes making its nest on their turfy shores. In Ireland, Thompson states, on the authority of Dr. J. D. Marshall, that in June 1834 it occupied one of the large natural amphitheatres formed on the north-western side of Rathlin Island, that Mr. J. V. Stewart knew it to breed on the lofty cliffs of the peninsula of the Horn to the westward of Horn Head, and Mr. Neligan informed him that it bred in numbers on a low grassy islet off the Kerry coast. The nest, which is of large size, is generally composed of masses of seaweed, grasses, and other vegetable substances. The eggs are usually three in number, of a dark olive-brown, spotted with darker brown and black, two inches and a quarter in length by one inch and a half in breadth.

“This species,” says Macgillivray, “has a light and buoyant flight, during which it often inclines to either side. It walks and runs prettily, with short steps, pats the sands at the edge of the water with its feet, emits a shrill and somewhat harsh cry, and is apt to give the alarm to other birds at the approach of the sportsman. It is not, however, nearly so timid or so sensible of danger as the larger Gulls, and frequently allows a person to come within shot. Often also, when one has been killed or wounded, its companions, after flying off, collect again, hover around, or even alight, when some of them may frequently be obtained. When feeding along with Rooks in pasture-grounds they are generally less wary than those birds, especially in places where they are not much liable to be molested. They never, I think, molest any other bird, nor are they addicted to quarrelling among themselves. Their food consists of small fishes, such as

sand-eels and young herrings, which they pick from the water, first hovering with extended and elevated wings, then descending, spreading their tail and letting down their feet, with which I have often seen them pat the water, as if they were running on land. They never plunge so as to be immersed, but merely seize on what comes close to the surface. They also feed upon stranded fishes of large size, asteriæ, mollusca, shrimps, and other small crustacea. Sometimes also they pick up grain in the fields; and in a state of domestication may be partly fed on bread. They are easily tamed, but, unless in a garden or where they are not liable to be teased, are seldom found to live long in this condition."

What has been said of the habits and economy of the bird in this country is equally descriptive of them when seen on the European continent, whether it be on the warm shores of the Mediterranean, the cold ones of the Baltic, or the rugged coasts of Norway. I believe Richardson was in error when he stated, in the 'Fauna Boreali-Americana,' that it breeds in Arctic America; for it does not appear that the bird has ever been found so far to the westward. Mr. Alfred Newton would even have considered Brännich's statement, that it is found in Iceland, problematical, had he not procured in 1858 the skin of an immature bird, which had been shot near Reykjavick the preceding winter. Mr. Baring-Gould saw the bird near the Iceland coast on his voyage thither from the Færoes; but it is certainly not a usual inhabitant of the last-named islands.

In summer the head, neck, under surface, rump, and tail are white; with streaks of brownish grey on the upper part of the head, the hinder portion, the sides, and the lower part of the neck; back and wings light greyish blue; on the external five primaries a band of greyish black, broadest on the outer one, and diminishing until on the fifth it is reduced to a narrow band near the tip; the first primary is white for nearly three inches from the end, with a spot of black at the tip of the inner web; the second has a white space of an inch and a half in extent, then a black band, and the tip white; the third has a white spot near the end; the shafts of the primaries of the same colour as the webs, the outer ones black for nearly their entire length; bill greyish green; the tip ochre-yellow, and its basal margins and the mouth orange; irides brown; edges of the eyelids dull red.

In winter the plumage is pure white, with the exception of the back and upper surface of the wings, which are delicate grey. In spring a slight change takes place; the head becomes spotted with brown, and the entire under-surface frequently suffused with a rosy hue, which adds greatly to the beauty of the bird's appearance. Considerable variety occurs in the colouring of the legs; in some individuals they are yellow, in others green and greyish green: there appears to be no general law for the regulation of the tints of the soft parts of this species—a circumstance unusual among Gulls, the colouring of whose feet is generally constant.

"The variation of colour in the legs and toes of different individuals of *Larus canus*," says Mr. Harting, "is very remarkable. Not only do the old birds differ in this respect from the young, which is the case with many birds, but the former also differ *inter se* in summer and winter. An old bird killed in June had the tarsi and toes bright yellow, while another adult bird shot in February had the same parts greyish green. Two old birds procured in October exhibited the yellow colour only around the tarsal joint, the rest of the leg and foot being pale greenish-grey. An immature bird of this species, which I shot on the Thames, at Barking, on the 11th of October, had the legs and toes dull flesh-colour."

The young, when first fledged, have the upper surface greyish brown, variegated with brownish white; the primaries are blackish brown, with paler tips; the secondaries light grey at the base, brown towards the end; tail white for two-thirds of its length, the remainder brownish black, tips narrowly edged with white; tail-coverts white, with a spot of brown towards the end of each; forehead white; before the eyes a semicircular band of black; cheeks streaked with brown; neck and breast marked with roundish or transverse small spots of light brownish grey; lower tail-coverts with a brown spot near the end; bill black, except at the base, where it is livid flesh-colour; irides dusky; eyelids brown; feet yellowish flesh-colour.

After the first moult, which is completed in November, the head and hinder part of the neck are streaked with brownish grey, the back is greyish blue, with a mixture of brown, a large portion of the inner primaries has become grey, the secondary coverts are dull bluish grey, the rump and upper tail-coverts are nearly white, the spots being very small, the bill is not so dark, and the feet are yellower.

In the second winter the brown markings are much less apparent, the dark band on the tail is much reduced in breadth, the bill is yellowish, the feet are livid yellowish green.

In the summer of the third year the full plumage of maturity is attained.

For the above description of the change from the youthful age to that of the adult we are indebted to the researches and observations of Macgillivray, from which they are condensed.

The principal figure in the Plate is of the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Common Gull, *Larus canus* [Pl. 60]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324104>.

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