RISSA TRIDACTYLA.

J. Gould & H.C. Richter, *del. et. lith.**Walter Tapp*

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Kittiwake.

Larus Rissia, Brünn. Orn. Bor., p. 140.

— *tridactylus*, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 55.

— *torquatus*, *gavia*, et *canus*, Pall. Zoog. Rosso-Asiat., tom. ii. pp. 328, 329, 330.

Gavia tridactyla, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 563.

Rissa Brünnichii, Leach, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xiii. p. 181, pl. 21.

Cheimonea tridactyla, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 84.

Rissa cinerea, Eyt. Hist. of Rarer Brit. Birds, p. 52.

— *tridactyla*, Bonap. Geog. and Comp. List of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 62.

Laroides tridactylus, *rissa*, et *minor*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 754, 755, 756, pl. 37. fig. 3.

THE Kittiwake is at once the most beautiful and the most interesting of our indigenous Gulls. Its plumage is so perfect and unsullied that, in this respect, no other species can surpass it; neither has any of its congeners so buoyant and graceful a flight. On the blue waters of the ocean it sports like a fairy, and when seen flying round the rocks and dark chasms wherein it breeds, one might almost imagine that they are spirits and not birds which are floating in the air. Those who are acquainted with the breeding-places of this bird, and have heard its wild cries amidst the spray and the loud monotonous booming of the waves of the ocean, will readily comprehend the feelings which fill my breast while thus feebly writing on the Kittiwake. Not for a moment must it be supposed that it is the only species to be found in such situations; for there also is to be seen a vast number of rock-loving birds of different genera, and even different families—Willocks, Puffins, Cormorants, other kinds of Gulls, Pigeons, the ubiquitous Starling, the Sea-Eagle, and the sharp-eyed Peregrine Falcon often forming part of the assemblage. Intermingled with such birds, the Kittiwake floats about to and fro, performing the most graceful curves and elegant evolutions. To those lovers of nature who have seen such scenes these lines will afford no information; to others, and particularly to those who have not had an opportunity of visiting these cradles of the birds of the ocean, they may be of interest, and induce a desire to view in reality that of which I am only depicting the shadow. Let them visit Flamborough Head, Ailsa Craig, Horn Head, in Ireland, and above all the Island of Handa, off the western coast of Sutherland, in the month of June or July, and I venture to say they will, in the first place, be awe-struck by the scene, and, secondly, highly interested in the sight which will be before them. In whatever aspect the Island of Handa be viewed, whether it be rounded by boat, or the green carpet of turf on its summit be traversed on foot, each will have special claims to his admiration: to look down from these giddy heights into the dark channels and chasms from above excites terror in many beholders; while the roaring waves which, after spanning the Atlantic, dash against the base of the rocks, have dismayed many a bold heart when the boatmen, with fearless temerity, have taken the traveller close beneath some of the most majestic of Albion's cliffs. In such places the Kittiwakes build their nests and rear their young; these are their summer homes—the *ultima Thule* of their happiness; a narrow ledge of rock, from one to two hundred feet high, forms a base for their seaweed nest. At other seasons, the Kittiwake is sailing round our coasts, scanning the ocean for its natural food, the surface-swimming fry of fishes, and other marine creatures of a lower order, for procuring which it is more especially adapted than those Gulls which principally haunt the shores and inlets; I say adapted, because its whole structure and the density of its plumage are better fitted for a sea life, and clearly point out, if not an affinity to, a mimicry, if I may so term it, of the Petrels, a tribe of birds more truly oceanic than the Gulls. Ornithologists will also see a divergence from one group to the other in its short feet, nearly obsolete hind toe, in its more lengthened wing, in its dense plumage, and its more buoyant flight.

Beyond the British Islands, and apart from our own seas, the Kittiwake has many other, and far distant, homes: southward it has been observed in Madeira and on the Mediterranean; while northward it has been found in Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Nova Zembla, Greenland, Spitzbergen, Davis's Straits, and all along the northern parts of America in summer, and its southern coasts in winter. Professor Newton says, "this very common bird appears to frequent the whole of the Spitzbergen coast." In Parry's Expedition it was observed as far to the northward as they reached—lat. 82° 45' N. "It is extremely numerous," says Capt. James C. Ross, "during the summer season, along the west coast of Prince Regent's Inlet, where, in several places that are peculiarly well fitted for breeding-stations, they congregate in inconceivable numbers. We killed enough to supply our party with several excellent meals, and found them delicious food, perfectly free from any unpleasant flavour."

"The Kittiwakes," says Macgillivray, "arrive along our coasts in the end of March, and betake themselves to high maritime cliffs, selecting those most inaccessible and generally such as are frequented by Auks, Guillemots, and other sea-birds. To these favourite places of resort they return year after year; nor am I aware that with us new stations are ever occupied, or colonies formed. In Scotland their principal breeding-places are St. Kilda, Berneray of Barra, the Shiant Isles, on the east side of Lewis, the Flannan Isles, on the west side, some of the Shetland Islands, the Bullers of Buchan, near Peterhead, Fowlsheugh, near Stonehaven, the Red Rock, near Montrose, the Isle of May, and the Bass Rock, in the mouth of the Firth of Forth, and St. Abb's Head, to the southward of it. England, however, is less plentifully supplied with Kittiwakes, the Fern Islands and Flamborough Head being, I believe, the only breeding-places there. On the coasts of Ireland it breeds in great numbers.

"The Kittiwakes generally select the lower part of the cliffs, from almost the edge of the water to the height of about one hundred feet, the space above being occupied by Auks and Guillemots. When these birds are not present, they occupy a more extended space, and are not apt to descend so far. The nests, bulky and formed of grass and seaweeds, are placed on the shelves and small projections, as well as in crevices and on the walls of caverns—sometimes, also, on grassy spots. Frequently they are deposited on so narrow a space as to seem stuck against the face of the rock, like those of the Swallows. Rowing along the bases of the cliffs, one cannot fail to view with delight these beautiful birds perched here and there, sometimes in groups, often singly, at short intervals, each in a horizontal position, singly seated on its comfortable-looking nest. The individuals not thus occupied fly about incessantly, uttering their loud and clear cries, and often approaching so near as to be easily shot. . . . The noise of guns does not always frighten the sitting birds from their nests; and those which have left them, presently return when the boat has advanced a short way.

"The Kittiwake feeds on small fishes (which it picks from the water, hovering with elevated wings), as well as crustacea, small shell-fish, and other marine animals (which it procures along the shores). It walks little (and not with ease, owing to the shortness of its legs), rests either standing or lying, associates occasionally with Gulls and Terns, is of a gentle disposition, social and amiable.

"With us it is scarcely ever seen inland. It flies with a rapid and constant beat of its curved wings, glides and wheels, and hovers over the smooth sea, or skims lightly over the high waves, descending into the furrows, and rising buoyantly to surmount the advancing ridge. Its cry is clear and rather sharp, but mellow, and resembles the syllables kitteaa or kitteweaa, whence its common name of Kittiwake, or, on the eastern coast of the middle division of Scotland, 'Kittiweeak.'

"The eggs, two or three in number, are of a broadly oval form, two inches to two-twelfths more in length, and an inch and a-half in breadth; of a pale yellowish grey, greenish white, or light olive-green; spotted and dotted all over with dark brown and pale purplish grey. The young continue in the nest, or in the vicinity, until they are able to fly," and, Mr. Selby says, "seem instinctively to be aware of their perilous situation, where sometimes the least movement would precipitate them into the waves beneath, and are observed seldom to change their attitude in the nest till sufficiently fledged to be enabled to provide for their own safety. During incubation the females are very tame and will sit upon their eggs or callow young though closely approached; at the same time the males continue to fly round in circles, uttering the frequently repeated cry which has obtained for them the common English name of *Kittiwake*."

With reference to this bird as seen in Ireland, Dr. J. D. Marshall informed Thompson that "on nearly all the precipitous headlands north of the Bull, in Rathlin, these birds take up their summer residence, and, during my visit in June, were in such countless multitudes as to darken the air above our heads. Along the headlands of Rathlin every pinnacle and ledge of rock was tenanted by the Razor-Bill, Puffin, or Kittiwake; and numerous as the others were, the last far outstripped them in numbers."

I cannot close this page without recording my obligations to Mr. Gatcombe, of Plymouth, for his obliging attention in procuring me fine examples of this bird at different seasons for the purpose of this publication, whereby its interest has been greatly enhanced.

The summer and winter plumage of the adult Kittiwake are precisely alike, except in the colouring of the head, which at the former season is pure white, and at the latter is streaked and blotched with greyish brown.

The young, as will be seen on reference to the accompanying Plate, where it occupies the foremost place, is very different in colour from the old birds, particularly in the tail, the upper part of the back, and shoulders, which, during the first autumn, are marked with black on the usual snow-white ground of the fully adult. The sexes are similarly clothed.

The Plate represents an adult, in summer plumage, and a young bird, in that of autumn, of the size of life.

Gould, John. 1873. "Kittiwake, *Rissa tridactyla* [Pl. 61]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324105>.

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