CHROICOCEPHALUS RIDIBUNDUS.

Black-headed Gull.

Larus ridibundus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 225.

— *cinerarius*, Linn. *ibid.*, p. 224.

— *canescens*, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 649.

— *erythropus*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 597.

— *capistratus*, Temm. Man. d'Orn., tom. ii. p. 785 ?

— *nævius*, Pall. Zoogr. Rosso-Asiat., tom. ii. p. 321.

Chroicocephalus ridibundus, Eyton, Cat. Brit. Birds, p. 53.

THIS very elegant and interesting species is so abundantly dispersed along the shores of every part of the British Islands that it would be superfluous to name any particular locality in which it may be found ; it is equally plentiful in Holland, Scandinavia, and all other countries of the Continent, wherever the shores are of a similar character to our own. During the months of autumn and winter it ascends into deep bays and the mouths of large rivers, where it paddles about with its pretty red feet over the oozy mud in search of marine worms, crustaceans, and the fry of fishes, all of which it devours with avidity. If absent from such localities at any time, it is visiting the fields of the interior for earth-worms and insect-larvæ, which are in equal request. In many parts it is often, like the Rook, the companion of the ploughman, and not unfrequently both the sable and the silvery-bodied birds may be seen with him in the same furrow. The head of the Gull is now white, which on the approach of spring gradually gives place to a well-defined hood of black or brownish black. Hitherto the bird has been only partially gregarious ; now it becomes strictly so, and large masses leave, almost to a day, for various parts of the marshes and large sedgy ponds, for the purpose of breeding, just, in fact, as the Rooks leave extensive wastes and resort to their accustomed trees for the like purpose. The bird now assumes a different kind of life, and earth-worms and insect-food take the place of crustaceans and sea-worms. Neither the flying chafer nor the dragonfly is able to evade the sharp and quickly made turns ; and to watch a colony when thus engaged is a very pleasing sight.

This fairy-like bird undergoes several changes of plumage between youth and maturity ; they have, however been so often described that I think we may dispense with them for matters of greater moment ; but I may mention (although they do not always occur) that I have seen fresh-moulted specimens with the whole of the under surface suffused with rich rose-colour, the finest I ever saw being one sent up in a fresh state by W. Thompson, Esq., of Weymouth, which, though so early in the spring as the 20th of March, had the black cowl quite perfect, and its bill and feet deep blood-red. When such individuals do occur, they form indeed most beautiful objects. In size and colouring both sexes are alike at each stage of their existence, the female, as I have often found it, as large as the male.

Respecting the Black-headed Gull, Yarrell writes as follows :—

“ A breeding-station in Norfolk, at a place called Scoulton Mere, where Sir Thomas Brown says this species bred constantly in his time, three hundred years ago, is thus described by the authors of the ‘Catalogue of Norfolk and Suffolk Birds:’—‘Near the centre of the county of Norfolk, at the distance of about twenty-five miles from the sea and two from Hingham, is a large piece of water called Scoulton Mere. In the middle of this mere there is a boggy island of seventy acres extent, covered with reeds, and on which there are some birch and willow trees. There is no river communicating between the mere and the sea. This mere has from time immemorial been a favourite breeding-spot of the Brown-headed Gull. These birds begin to make their appearance at Scoulton about the middle of February ; and by the end of the first week in March the great body of them have always arrived. They spread themselves over the neighbouring country to the distance of several miles in search of food, following the plough as regularly as Rooks ; and, from the great quantity of worms and grubs which they devour, they render essential service to the farmer. If the spring is mild, the Gulls begin to lay about the middle of April ; but the month of May is the time at which the eggs are found in the greatest abundance. At this season a man and three boys find constant employment in collecting them, and they have sometimes gathered upwards of a thousand in a day. These eggs are sold on the spot at the rate of fourpence a score, and are regularly sent in considerable quantities to the markets at Norwich and Lynn. They are eaten cold, like Lapwings’ eggs, and also used for culinary purposes ; but they are rather of an inferior quality, and somewhat like Ducks’ eggs in flavour. The person who sells these eggs gives £15 a year for the privilege of collecting them. This species of Gull never lays more than three eggs the first time ; but if these are taken, it will lay again. We found many of the old birds sitting in the

middle of June : most of these had only one egg in the nest ; but a few of them had two. Their nests are made of the tops of reeds and sedge, and are very flat at the surface. The eggs vary so much in size, shape, and colour, that a person not well acquainted with them would suppose some of them to belong to a different species of bird. Some are thickly covered with dusky spots ; and others are of a light blue colour, without any spots at all. The young birds leave the nest as soon as hatched, and take to the water. When they can fly well, the old ones depart with them and disperse themselves on the sea-coast, where they are found during the autumn and winter. By the middle of July, they all leave Scoulton, and are not seen there again till the following spring. We were a little surprised at seeing some of these Gulls alight and sit upon some low bushy willows which grow on the island. No other than the Brown-headed Gull breeds at this mere ; a few of them also breed in many of the marshes contiguous to the sea-coast of Norfolk.'

"The Rev. Richard Lubbock, who sent me some particulars of this species from Norfolk, mentions that he saw several of these birds in June 1841, dashing round some lofty elms catching cockchafers. The eggs are yellowish olive-brown, spotted with two shades of darker brown ; the length two inches one line and a half, by one inch and six lines in breadth. When their nests are robbed, the birds are induced to lay two or three times ; and Mr. Hewitson mentions that the eggs produced at these second and third layings are sometimes one third less than the natural size. Mr. Thompson says this species is a constant resident in Ireland. Mr. J. Macgillivray noticed that it was abundant in summer on the marshes of some of the islands of the Outer Hebrides. It was observed to be plentiful on some of the reedy lochs of Sutherland ; and a few breed on the boggy parts of some of the islands of Orkney and Shetland ; but Dr. Fleming mentions that these birds leave Scotland in winter.

"This species breeds in Sweden, in Russia, and in Siberia. It is included by several naturalists among the birds of Germany. M. Temminck says it is abundant in Holland at all seasons. It is common on the French coast in winter ; and a few of them breed near the lakes and rivers of the interior. It visits Switzerland in summer, is not uncommon at Genoa, is included by M. Savi in his 'Birds of Italy ;' and the Zoological Society have received specimens sent by Keith Abbott, Esq., from Erzeroom."

Mr. R. Gray, speaking of this bird as seen by him, says, "This beautiful Gull is very abundant in the West of Scotland, extending to all the outer islands. Its breeding-haunts are also numerous throughout those districts in which it meets with encouragement. I have visited many of these on the mainland, and on both groups of islands, and find a great similarity in choice of situation, construction of nests, time of breeding, and general habits of the birds in localities widely apart. The two best-known to myself are both within easy reach of Glasgow. One of these interesting nurseries is on a small marshy islet in Hairlaw Loch, a patch of water, partly artificial, situated near Neildon Pad, which is within full view of the city. There are, perhaps, from 500 to 800 pairs to be found breeding there every year.

"Another numerous colony of Black-headed Gulls has for many years frequented the island of Inchmoin, on Loch Lomond. This island, which is about two miles in circumference, is quite flat, and stands but little above the level of the water. In wet seasons, therefore, it is to a great extent converted into a wet marsh. About the centre, where the ground is firmer, the Gulls construct their nests, which in some cases measure about eight inches in height ; so that the contents are always safe against damp. Here, as well as at Hairlaw, many of the nests contain four eggs, though three is the usual number. Great variety also exists in the markings, some being pale blue and slightly spotted, others entirely of a dark colour, like some varieties of the egg of Richardson's Skua. In one nest on Inchmoin I found two eggs, one of which was much elongated, pale green in colour, and spotless, while the other was much shorter, nearly twice the thickness, and almost as black as a piece of bog-oak."

The principal figure in the accompanying Plate is of the size of life, and young four or five days old.

Gould, John. 1873. "Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* [Pl. 64]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324108>.

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