XEMA SABINI.

Sabine's Gull.

Larus Sabini, Sab. Linn. Trans., vol. xii. p. 520, pl. 29.

Xema Sabini, Leach, in Ross's Voy., App., p. lvii, with fig.

— *collaris*, Leach.

Gavia Sabini, Macgill. Man. Nat. Hist., Orn., vol. ii. p. 241.

SEVERAL instances of the occurrence of this species in the British Islands are on record. The late Mr. Thompson exhibited to the Linnean Society, on the 15th of April, 1834, a specimen which had been killed in Belfast Bay on the 18th of September, 1822; the collection of Mr. Rodd of Penzance has been enriched by at least two examples; another was shot in Belfast Bay in September 1834; a fifth in Dublin Bay in October 1837; a sixth at Milford Haven in 1839; a seventh at Newhaven, in Sussex, in December 1853; and Mr. Murray A. Mathews has seen two at Weston-super-Mare, in Somersetshire, which had been killed on Weston Sands a year or two previously. All these specimens are immature, affording additional evidence that young birds wander much further from their homes than adults.

This beautiful species of Gull was described for the first time in the twelfth volume of the 'Transactions of the Linnean Society' by the late Joseph Sabine, Esq., from specimens sent to this country by his brother, Captain (now General) Sabine, President of the Royal Society, who accompanied the expedition of 1818 in search of a north-west passage. "They were met with by Captain Sabine and killed by him on the 25th of July 1818, on a group of three rocky islands, each about a mile across, off the west coast of Greenland, twenty miles distant from the mainland, in latitude $75^{\circ} 29'$ N., and longitude $60^{\circ} 9'$ W. They were associated in considerable numbers with arctic Terns, breeding on those islands, the nests of both birds being intermingled. This Gull lays two eggs, on the bare ground; these are hatched in the last week in July: the young are mottled at first with brown and dull yellow. The eggs are an inch and a half in length and of regular shape, not much pointed; the colour is olive blotched with brown. The parent birds flew with impetuosity towards those who approached their nest and young; and when one bird of a pair was killed, its mate, though frequently fired at, continued on wing close to the spot where it lay. They get their food on the sea-beach, standing near the water's edge and picking up the marine insects which are cast on shore." "A solitary individual," says Swainson, "was seen in Prince Regent's Inlet, on Sir Edward Parry's first voyage; and many specimens were procured in the course of the second voyage, on Melville Peninsula; so that it is a pretty general summer visitor to the arctic seas, and is entitled to be enumerated amongst the European as well as American birds. It arrives in the high northern latitudes in June, and retires to the southward in August. When newly killed, they have a delicate pink blush on the under surface" (Fauna Boreali-Americana, vol. ii. p. 428). Specimens are also said to have been obtained at Spitzbergen, Igloodik, Behring's Straits, Cape Garry, and Felix Harbour; and some Esquimaux told Captain James C. Ross that it breeds in great numbers on the lowland west of Neityelle. It seems likely that there is some mistake with respect to the statement that this bird has been procured at Spitzbergen; for Mr. Newton, in his notes on the birds of that country, remarks that Dr. Malmgren, who has thoroughly explored a very large extent of it, and especially the locality in which the bird was said to have been found, did not meet with any trace of it.

Little has been recorded respecting the breeding-places of the *Xema Sabini*; but that the coasts of Greenland, Hudson's Bay, and the fur-countries of America are the places principally resorted to for this purpose, there can be little doubt.

The collectors employed by the Smithsonian Institution at Washington are understood to have lately met with this bird breeding in considerable numbers; but it is to the intrepid Siberian explorer, Von Middendorff, that naturalists as yet owe their only specimens of its eggs which have yet reached European collections. One of these was exhibited by Mr. Alfred Newton to the Zoological Society at their meeting on the 10th of December, 1861, accompanied by the following remarks:—"The ruins of an egg of this rare Gull were sent to me by Dr. Baldamus. He obtained them from Von Middendorff, who found the species on the lakes of the *Tundras* and the little islets at the mouth of the Taimyr, breeding abundantly in company with the Arctic Tern (*Sterna macrura*, Naum.), as General Sabine had done twenty years previously on the islands in Melville Bay. . . . Whether any specimens were brought home by the first discoverer of this species I do not know; if so, it is probable they are no longer in existence, though it is clear, from the accounts given in the 'Transactions of the Linnean Society' (vol. xii. p. 520), that many might have been

procured. I am not aware that any of the late Arctic voyagers obtained others; nor has greater success attended the Greenland correspondents of the Danish naturalists."

"The occurrence of the same species of Gull on the internal waters of both the Old and New Worlds," remarks Mr. Newton, "is unique; and it is still very desirable that examples from Siberia should be carefully compared with others from North America, so that we could feel assured of their specific identity."

On the continent of Europe, one has been killed on the coast of Holland, a second on the Rhine, and a third near Rouen; and Temminck notices that there is one in the museum at Vienna. In temperate America, Audubon states that he saw one flying over the harbour of Halifax in Nova Scotia, and that on one occasion great numbers were seen about one hundred miles off Newfoundland.

The immature plumage of this Gull, and the forked form of its tail, remind us of the Terns; in the latter character it differs conspicuously from the square-tailed *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*; but sufficient is not yet known of its habits and actions to enable one to say if there be anything peculiar in its flight, if it be more swift on the wing or more buoyant in the air than those Gulls which have the tail square; in all probability it differs in these as in other respects.

"Although the *Larus Sabini*" says Mr. Thompson, "approximates to the *Larus minutus* in general appearance, the plumage of the first year as well as that of maturity being very similar in both species, the superior size of the *L. Sabini*, its tail being forked to the depth of an inch, and the comparatively greater length of its tibia and tarsus may always (even in a preserved state) be sufficient specific distinction. In the form of the tail, the *L. Sabini* approaches the typical species of *Sterna* more nearly than its congener the *L. minutus*. The latter, however, resembles that genus more in the form of the bill and in the dimensions of the tarsus and tibia."

In the adult, the entire head and throat are deep slate-grey, bounded posteriorly by a narrow band of deep black; back of the neck, all the under surface of the body, the underside of the wings, the greater wing-coverts, the secondaries, the upper tail-coverts, and the tail are white; back, scapularies, and lesser wing-coverts grey, primaries black, broadly margined for nearly the whole of their length and tipped with white; base of the bill black, the tip of both mandibles yellow; inside of the mouth and edges of the eyelids vermilion-red; legs and feet black.

The following is Mr. Thompson's description of the autumnal plumage of the young bird in its first year:—"The forehead, space immediately above the eye, and between it and the bill (with the exception of the narrow line of greyish black closely encircling the front and lower part of the eye), upper part of the throat, and sides of the neck are white; crown, nape, and back of the neck blackish grey; back, scapularies, greater and lesser wing-coverts blackish grey tinged with yellowish brown, the extremity of every feather varying from greyish white to white as it approaches the tail; under part of the throat and upper part of the breast pale ash-colour; lower breast and all the under plumage white; shafts of the first six primaries brownish black at the base, becoming gradually darker towards the extremity, where they are black in the first three, but in the fourth, fifth, and sixth assimilate in colour to the feathers at that part, which is white; the entire of the outer webs of the first five are black; the inner webs with a broad edging of white to within one to two inches of the end, which part is black in the first three, but tipped with white in the fourth and fifth; in the sixth the inner web is white, the outer black, except for three or four lines from the tip (where it is white), and again at about an inch from the end (where a white spot of an oval form appears); feathers of the tail white, with black tips."

The Plate represents an adult and a young bird, of the size of life. The figure of the latter was taken from an English-killed specimen kindly lent to me for the purpose by E. H. Rodd, Esq.

Gould, John. 1873. "Sabine's Gull, *Xema sabini* [Pl. 67]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324111>.

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