Walter, Imp.

STERNA HIRUNDO. Linn.

J. Gould, and H. Chubb, del. et sculp.

STERNA HIRUNDO, *Linn.*?

Common Tern.

Hirundo marina, Ray, Syn., p. 131.

Sterna major, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 203, pl. 19. fig. 1.

—— *hirundo*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 227?

—— *fluviatilis*, Naum. Isis, 1820 (Temm.).

—— *marina*, Eyton, Rare Brit. Birds, p. 55.

Hydrocecropis hirundo, Boie, Isis, 1844, p. 179.

WHETHER Linnæus did, or did not, take his description of *Sterna hirundo* from an example of the present species is a question which, in my opinion, can never be satisfactorily determined; under these circumstances, then, it will surely be better to keep the term for our well-known bird, the more so as it is known by that appellation to every British ornithologist, and the name has been retained for this species by Mr. Elliott Coues in his recently published and elaborate 'Review of the Terns of North America.' I make this remark because I am aware that, in retaining the name of *hirundo* for our Common Tern, I am running counter to the opinion of some living ornithologists, who are inclined to believe that this appellation should be assigned to the *Sterna macrura* of Naumann, the Arctic Tern of British authors.

Both the Common and the Arctic Terns are abundant on our coasts; still they seldom intermingle: at one season of the year they may be observed fishing some distance out at sea, at others breeding on the great beds of shingle and sand bordering our coasts at the mouths of rivers and inland waters. The Common Tern quits the open ocean in the month of May, for the purpose of reproducing and nurturing its young, and then resorts to shingly beaches such as those at Dungeness, Pevensey, Selsey, and Weymouth, on our southern coasts, and all similar situations on the west, from the Bristol Channel to the Solway Frith, and occasionally high up the larger rivers. It also breeds here and there all round the coasts of Ireland. I might mention hundreds of other localities, from the mouth of the Thames to Penzance and the Scilly Islands, and thence to Holyhead, and onward again by the flat shores of Lancashire to the Isle of Skye; but it has always been an object with me in the present work to generalize rather than to enter into the minute details that may be found in the numerous works which have been written on our native birds.

When the breeding-season is over, the Common Tern returns again to all parts of the open sea that are within soundings, and when the cold weather sets in proceeds to the warmer countries of Portugal, Spain, the neighbourhood of the Mediterranean, and the coasts of Africa generally. It is believed that under no circumstances does it go so far north as the Arctic Tern; it is, in fact, a more southern species, and consequently loves warmth, whether it be found on the shores of Europe or those of Asia: for it is an inhabitant of both quarters of the globe; but it seems to be less numerous in the latter. Dr. Jerdon informs us that it appears to be rare in Southern and Central India, but, according to Dr. Adams, is common on the Indus and the rivers of the Punjab, and also on the lakes of Cashmere, and that it does not breed, so far as is known, in India. He procured it, on one occasion only, on the Lake of Ootacamund, on the Neilgherries.

Easy and graceful in all its actions does the Common Tern appear as it comes in from the sea towards the intruder who has strolled out upon the heated shingle, where its two or three eggs are deposited. Its lovely grey back and wings so closely harmonize with the clear blue of the heavens, that, were it not for its silvery under surface, it would scarcely be noticed: if the weather be lowery, and black clouds form a background to the scene, the bird becomes a more conspicuous object; but be the weather what it may, down it comes, uttering its loud, harsh, craking scream. If the eggs be approached, it manifests much uneasiness, and with repeated flaps of its great wings makes many singular and different turns—at one moment near at hand, at another at a distance, as if inviting you to follow. If it be so fortunate as to hatch its young, it manifests still greater anxiety, and even becomes bold in their defence. Still, with all these actions, its appearance is more that of a fairy spirit than a bird, and those who have never visited its breeding-ground on the sea-shore can form no idea of the strange feelings called up by the assemblages of these birds, and the monotonous rolling of the breakers, and the other adjuncts of the scene. To and from the sea do these old birds constantly go forth in search of food for their little progeny, sometimes far out in the bay, at other times they meet the shoal of fry nearer at hand; the shallows also afford them a supply of sand-eels and crustaceans, all of which are acceptable to the growing young. At first, or in the downy state, these little chicks are very beautifully marbled with moss-like brown and buff; but this costume is very soon thrown off; white feathers, barred with brown, take its place; and the birds now present an appearance almost as attractive as some of the flowering plants which frequently grow around and even upon the shingle on which they are lying. That great nursery of Terns and Ring-Dotterels, Dungeness in Romney

Marsh, is a beautiful marine garden of this kind: here the stonecrop is in perfection, interspersed among acres of purple thrift and foxglove, growing on beds of stone, sand, and shells many miles in extent. This interesting part of our coast, with the prominent lighthouse at the apex, and the town of Lydd at the base of the triangle, and numerous freshwater pools, frequented in summer by thousands of Black-headed Gulls, in the centre, will be duly appreciated by every naturalist who has an opportunity of visiting it.

As is the case with the other Terns, the sexes of the Common species are alike in colour; but they differ considerably in size, the female being much smaller than her mate. Both have jet-black crowns in summer—a colour which is confined to the nape in winter. At all seasons the beautiful orange tint of their bills, feet, and legs affords a conspicuous contrast to the delicate hues of their plumage.

I have more than once spent a pleasant hour watching this species fishing in the canals of Holland, where they are evidently regarded as friends, since they are never molested by any one. I have even seen them in the very streets of Leyden performing their usual elegant turns and actions within a few feet of the houses, or dropping like a stone into the dirty water, whence they generally rose with a glittering fish, which they bore away to their young on the beach at Scheveling, the sand-hills on the coast, or the margin of some of the inland waters of that flat marshy country. That it does breed inland as well as on the coast is proved by the following passage from Thompson's 'Natural History of Ireland':—"When at Fort Lough, a small lake or tarn on the north-west of Donegal, on the 29th of June 1832, I was conveyed in a 'corragh' to its two islands, where this species, with several of its nests containing eggs, was observed. The nests were placed among loose stones, and all composed of the common reed (*Arundo phragmitis*) and *Equiseta*, both of which grow on the islet. On visiting Ram's Island, in Lough Neagh, on the 15th of June 1833, for the purpose of ascertaining what species of Gulls and Terns breed on the narrow strip of land adjoining it, I found the Tern to be the Common one, of which there were considerable numbers; but having killed three, required as specimens, they were no further disturbed. Several of their nests were seen, none of which contained more than three eggs—the usual number. I looked particularly to these with reference to the determination of the species from the eggs alone, as we can frequently find them when the birds will not come sufficiently near for identification. Some consider the egg to be rather larger and more round in form than those of the Arctic Tern, and these were certainly about the roundest Tern's eggs I had ever seen. This character may therefore be generally correct, though the difference between the eggs of the two species is by no means well defined. Sir William Jardine has remarked that the Common Tern seems to prefer, for a breeding-place, a shingly beach or low-lying ground to rocky islands. My observation agrees with this as a general remark; but it is far from being of universal application. The Common Tern is more cosmopolite than any of the others, breeding in localities of various kinds, both about fresh water and the sea."

The eggs are yellowish stone-colour, spotted and blotched with dark grey and reddish brown; they are one inch and eight lines in length by one inch and two lines in breadth.

The Plate represents a female in the breeding-plumage, with two young birds about three days old, all of the natural size. The principal plants are the Stonecrop (*Sedum Anglicum*) and reduced masses of the Common Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) of our garden-borders.

Gould, John. 1873. "Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo* [Pl. 70]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324114>.

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