GELOCHETDON ANGLICA.

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Gull-billed Tern.

Sterna anglica, Mont. Orn. Dict., Supp.

—— *stübberica*, Otto, Deutsch. Uebers. von Buff. Naturg.

—— *risoria*, Brehm, Beitr., tom. iii. p. 650.

—— *aranea*, Wils. Am. Orn., vol. viii. p. 143.

Thalasseus anglicus, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 563.

Viralea ? *anglica*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Hist., vol. xiii. p. 174.

Gelochelidon anglica, agraria, et meridionalis, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 772, 773, 774, tab. 38. fig. 3.

—— *palustris*, MacGill. Man. Nat. Hist., Orn., vol. ii. p. 237.

Laropis anglica, Wagl. Isis, 1832, p. 1225.

It is to be regretted that the law of priority with regard to specific names, now so rigidly adopted by all scientific ornithologists, obliges us to retain that of *anglica* for the present species, inasmuch as almost any other term would have been more appropriate, since neither England nor, indeed, any of the British Islands is its native country, and I question if, during the last fifty years, more than twenty examples have been seen therein, while on many parts of the neighbouring continent and in Africa it is common; in India it is equally abundant; and it would also seem to be a denizen of America; for Selby, after investigating specimens from that country, felt no hesitation in considering the Marsh-Tern, of Wilson's 'American Ornithology,' to be the same bird; Audubon, "having taken six specimens of the American Marsh-Tern to the British Museum, and minutely compared them in all their details with the specimens of the Gull-billed Tern, which formed part of the collection of Colonel Montagu and were procured in the south of England, found them to agree so perfectly that no doubt remained with me of the identity of the bird described by Wilson with that first distinguished by the English ornithologist;" and Mr. Elliot Coues, in his 'Review of the Terns of North America,' says:—"I have not a sufficient number of skins before me for a perfectly satisfactory comparison of the birds of the two continents; but, so far as I can judge, I am decidedly inclined to agree with Audubon in opinion that no difference exists. I have minutely compared the specimens before me, and found them absolutely identical in every particular of size, form, and colour."

These observations tend to show the correctness of the remark I have made respecting the inappropriateness of the term *anglica* as applied to a species so widely distributed; still it must be retained until naturalists, by common consent, agree to change this and hundreds of other equally inapplicable terms: and surely this will be done some day!

Montagu was the first to distinguish this species from the other Terns he saw around him on the coasts of Sussex and Kent; and the first figure and description of it appeared in the Supplement to his 'Ornithological Dictionary,' published in 1813. The bird was at first confounded with the Sandwich Tern; but the difference in the form and length of the bill in the two birds soon led him to characterize it as distinct, and he gave it the name of *anglica*, not being at the time aware that it occurred elsewhere than in England. Of the three specimens known to him, one was shot in Sussex, and he saw two others that had been killed at Rye; and Mr. Yarrell has recorded two more, one of which was killed in Kent: the locality of the other escaped his recollection. Besides these, five have been shot in Norfolk, one in Yorkshire, one near Brighton, and one in Cornwall.

Until of late years, but little had been recorded respecting the habits and economy of this Tern; but, thanks to the energy of the English naturalists who have recently visited Eastern Europe and North Africa, we are now much better acquainted with them, as will be seen from the extracts given below from their notes recorded in 'The Ibis.'

I have stated in general terms that the Gull-billed Tern is found in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America; it appears, however, to range still more widely, since Mr. Salvin found it common at Chiampan and on the Pacific coast of Guatemala, in Central America; and Temminck states that two specimens killed by the late Prince Maximilian of Wied, in Brazil, did not differ from examples obtained in Hungary; Dr. Leith Adams saw it in Nubia; Mr. Taylor says it is the most common of the Terns frequenting the marshy places of the interior of Egypt, and that he obtained specimens between Cairo and Sakara. Mr. Tristram states that it occurs in flocks both in the Western and Eastern Sahara, that several were shot at Bou Guizoun and near Ain el Ibel, on the El-Aghouat route, and vast flocks met with round the Zahrez, in the same country.

"At Zana," says Mr. Salvin, "we found it breeding, a considerable number frequenting the marsh. Numerous as the bird was, we only obtained five eggs; and these were not collected by ourselves. In fact we left Zana before the birds began to sit, and consequently were never able to determine the exact locality where they breed; but it is probably on some of the small mounds on the north side of the marsh, which stand like islands out of the swampy ground. These Terns feed over the grass-fields and open land, hovering and descending as our more familiar species do on the English coast over a shallow, their food being grasshoppers and beetles, which there swarm."

Specimens were obtained by Mr. Tristram on sand-spits and small lagoons north of Beyrout, in Palestine; Mr. Wright states that three magnificent examples were killed at Malta, in May 1864; Lord Lilford observed that the species was not uncommon at Butrinto, in the Ionian Islands, in January, February, and March; Messrs. Elwes and Buckley found it to be common on the coast of Albania, in summer; and Mr. W. H. Simpson has given the following interesting account respecting the bird in Western Greece:—

"The most numerous of all the birds, during the latter half of May, on the lagoon of Mesolonghi are the Terns, and notably *Sterna hirundo*, *minuta*, and *anglica*. If unmolested, their numbers would be enormous, as there are probably few places in the Mediterranean more adapted by nature for these birds, if innumerable flat islets and sandy spits washed by an immense extent of very shallow salt water abounding in fish can be any inducement to their undertaking the duties of incubation. But now that the towns of Mesolonghi and Ætolico are beginning to stir, and the fisheries to be more looked after, all the birds will suffer from the increase of activity. The eggs of *Sterna anglica* especially are much eaten by the natives. It was from this circumstance that I came to discover their principal colony, as the following extract from my note-book will show:—'On the 23rd I started in my monoxylon with Vitalis and a native to search the salt lagoon and the islets south-east of the town, my chief object being to discover the quarters of *Sterna anglica*, which was flying about in every direction. This bird had caused me many a fruitless ride across the high plains of the Atlas during the summer of 1857; and it now seemed likely that I was to have another equally wild-goose chase across the lagoon and mud-flats of Mesolonghi, under the equally powerful sun of Greece. Already several days had elapsed since we first noticed them, and still we were unable to gain any satisfactory tidings of their mysterious retreat. My associates became very mutinous in consequence of our prolonged ill-success; so I directed the boat to be landed at a fisherman's hut, outside the main group of islets, where some fish was roasted to appease their hunger and ill-temper. While this was being prepared, the usual questions, of course, were put, and elicited the usual reply in the negative. 'Where do these broken shells come from, then?' 'Oh! they come from a long way off; and the birds won't lay any more.' 'Wouldn't twenty *lefta* per egg induce the birds to alter their determination?' 'They couldn't lay upon trust; part of the money must be paid down.' So the fisherman's boy agreed to try, and our monoxylon set off towards the outer spit, which was searched without success. On returning to the islet, I was much surprised at seeing a straw hat, filled with eggs of *Sterna anglica*, awaiting our inspection. Late as it was, I made the boy take me to the place, where I had the satisfaction of seeing the bird in great numbers, and succeeded in finding four nests, two of which, with their full complement of eggs, were taken then and there.' The greater number of the nests were on two of the innermost islets of the group. Generally they were placed on the raised outer edge, which, in case of flood, would remain longest high and dry. The eggs were deposited upon the sand or soil, in a depression slightly lined with a few bits of dead grass—and are not easily detected, as their colours blend with surrounding objects. The birds appear to commence incubation simultaneously, or nearly so, as most of the nests contained eggs pretty fresh. They did not evince the anxiety which many Terns do about their eggs, but simply contented themselves with flying in a body at a great height over the islands. I strongly suspect that in these hot countries the Terns do not care to sit upon their eggs throughout the day; and this may be the reason why one often sees flocks of *Sterna anglica* feeding miles away from head quarters."

Mr. Jerdon says:—"This Tern is exceedingly abundant all over India, frequenting tanks, marshes, and rivers, and occasionally hunting over the fields. It feeds alike on aquatic food and on grasshoppers, beetles, and other insects, and is a noisy bird."

The eggs are one inch and seven eighths long, by an inch and five sixteenths in breadth; the ground-colour fine buff, spotted all over with irregularly shaped spots of dark brown, rufous, and purplish, the lighter tints appearing as if beneath the surface.

The sexes are alike in plumage at the respective seasons; that is, their heads are jet-black in summer, and almost spotless white in winter. The young, on the other hand, vary very materially from youth to maturity. The one figured is, perhaps, a month or five weeks old; and its differences from the adult will be readily perceptible on reference to the accompanying Plate.

The figures represent an adult male and a young bird, about the size of life.

Gould, John. 1873. "Gull-billed Tern, *Gelochelidon anglica* [Pl. 74]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324118>.

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