THALASSIDROMA LEACHI.

Illustrated by H. C. Richter, del. & lith.

Walter, Imp.

THALASSIDROMA LEACHII.

Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel.

Procellaria Leachii, Temm. Man. d'Orn., 2nd edit., tom. ii. p. 812.

Hydrobates Leachii, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 562.

Thalassidroma Leachii, Keys. und Blas. Wirbelth. Eur., p. 93.

Procellaria Bullockii, Flem. Hist. of Brit. Anim., p. 136.

Thalassidroma Bullockii, Selby, Ill. Brit. Orn., vol. ii. p. 537.

Procellaria leucorrhoa, Vieill. Nouv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat., tom. xxv. p. 422.

Cymochorea leucorrhoa, Coues, Proc. of Acad. Nat. Sci. Philad., 1864, pp. 76, 90.

LIKE the common Storm-Petrel, the *Thalassidroma Leachii* must be regarded as indigenous to Britain, inasmuch as it breeds therein, and probably in many more localities than have as yet been noticed. At one or other season of the year it has been observed on the shores of every part of our islands, from the extreme south of England to the north of Scotland and the Hebrides; almost every local list of birds enumerates it as occurring in the county to which it pertains; in Ireland, according to Thompson, it is found in all quarters of the island, but less frequently. Apart from England, it has been met with on the coast of Holland and in many parts of Scandinavia; Professor Reinhardt says it is found in Greenland; the American ornithologists include it in their avifauna; and Von Schrenck observed it in Amoorland, and states that specimens from the Kurile Island do not differ from those seen in England. It was first observed as a British species, and discriminated as distinct from the *Thalassidroma pelagica*, by the celebrated collector W. Bullock, in whose sale-catalogue it appears as "An undescribed Petrel with a forked tail, taken at St. Kilda in 1818;" and the credit of first making us aware of its breeding in our islands is due to the late Sir William M. E. Milner, Bart., whose notes on the subject, extracted from the 'Zoologist' for 1848, will be found below. From that date until 1869 many hundreds of Leach's Storm-Petrel have been shot or otherwise obtained; but by far the greater number have been picked up dead, or in such an exhausted and helpless state as to be unable to fly—some on the sea-shore, others as far inland as the middle of our island: one was obtained in the streets of Halifax, in Yorkshire; Mr. J. E. Harting states that another was caught alive, in an exhausted state, by a man at work on the highroad between Edgeware and Stanmore, on the 4th of January, 1850. The Rev. Bryan Burgess, Chaplain to Lord Chesham, tells me that on the 2nd of November, 1859, Poulter, his Lordship's gardener, brought him a Fork-tailed Petrel (*Thalassidroma Leachii*) which he had found lying on its back and flapping its wings in the deer-park at Latimer, in Buckinghamshire; it died almost as soon as it was picked up, had the stomach empty, the whole frame very thin, and was much battered about the head, as if it had been pecked by other birds or had sustained some severe blows; and Mr. G. Dawson Rowley has recorded, in 'The Field' for December 15, 1866, that another was caught in a "ham-and-beef" shop in Brighton. In all probability most of the examples alluded to have been driven to our shores by violent gales of wind, and starvation, the inevitable result, has caused them to fall down and die. The next autumn gale may bring us many more, and the succeeding morn reveal a number of exhausted birds, which are as likely to be found in an open park or on a garden-walk as on the sea-shore. Our lakes and ponds of fresh water do not seem to have any attractions for these truly ocean-loving birds.

Not having had an opportunity of observing this bird in a state of nature, I cannot do better than transcribe the short account given by Sir William Milner above alluded to, and the more full one contained in the third volume of Audubon's valuable 'Ornithological Biography.'

"Not far from the top of the cliff of the Isle of Dun, forming the western horn of the Bay of St. Kilda," says Sir William, "were a colony of the Fork-tailed Petrel, breeding, like the Stormy Petrel, under the stones and rock, about a yard deep. We were first attracted to them by a low chirping noise, which from time to time the females made while sitting upon their eggs. In one hole only did we find the male and female together. The egg is considerably larger than that of the Stormy Petrel, but resembles it in being surrounded at the larger end by a beautiful zone of red freckles. They are nearly three weeks before the Stormy Petrel in depositing their eggs; and in the localities where we found the Fork-tailed there was not a single Stormy Petrel." Sir William mentions that he also obtained specimens and eggs of the *Thalassidroma Leachii* on Borrera, another small island of the St. Kilda group.

After mentioning that towards the end of August 1831, the Storm-Petrel was so abundant off the coast of Newfoundland that from twenty-five to thirty individuals were shot in about an hour, Audubon says, "The species of this genus with which I am acquainted all ramble over the seas, both by night and by day, until the breeding-season commences; they then remain in their burrows, under rocks or in their fissures,

until sunset, when they start off in search of food, returning to their mates or young in the morning, and feeding them then.

"The Fork-tailed Petrel emits its notes night and day, and at not very long intervals. They resemble the syllables *pewr-wit, pewr-wit*. Its flight differs from that of the other two species" (the common and Wilson's Storm-Petrels), "being performed in broader wheelings and firmer flappings. It is more shy; and when it wheels off, after having approached the stern of a ship, its wanderings are much more extended before it returns. I have never seen it fly close around a vessel, as the others are in the habit of doing, especially at the approach of night; nor do I think that it ever alights on the rigging of ships, but spends the hours of darkness either on the water or on low rocks or islands. It also less frequently alights on the water, or pats with its feet, probably on account of the shortness of its legs, although it frequently allows them to hang down. In this it resembles the *Thalassidroma pelagica*; and Wilson's Petrel has a similar habit during calm weather. I have seen all the three species immerse their head into the water to seize their food, and sometimes keep it longer under than I had expected.

"About the 1st of June the species collect in numbers, and return to their breeding-places. They now fly in front of the high rocks, passing and repassing a thousand times in a day, enter their dark and narrow mansions or stand in the passage and emit their cries, and occasionally alight on some broad shelf, and walk as if about to fall down, but with considerable ease, and at times with rapidity. Now and then the mated birds approach each other, and, I believe, disgorge some food into each others mouths. They collect grasses and pebbles, of which they form a flat nest, on which a single white egg is deposited, which measures an inch and a quarter in length by seven-eighths in breadth, is nearly equally rounded at both ends, and looks very large for the size of the bird. When you pass close to the rocks in which the birds are, you easily hear their shrill querulous notes; but the report of a gun silences them at once, and induces those on the ledges to betake themselves to their holes.

"The Fork-tailed Petrel, like the other species, feeds chiefly on floating mollusca, small fishes, crustacea, which they pick up among the floating seaweeds, and greasy substances which they occasionally find around fishing-boats or ships out at sea. When seized in the hand, it ejects an oily fluid through the tubular nostrils, and sometimes disgorges a quantity of food. I could not prevail on any of those I caught to take food of any kind."

In the late Dr. Henry Bryant's "Remarks on some of the Birds that breed in the Gulf of St. Lawrence," published in the eighth volume of the 'Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History,' it is stated that "these birds were frequently seen, but do not breed in numbers or in many places on the north shore. I found them but at two places, on Gull Island, at Romaine, and on a small island between Mecattina and Bras D'Or. As the opposite side of Newfoundland is lower, and the islands less rocky, it probably breeds there. On the Atlantic shore it is found breeding everywhere that a suitable island exists, from Mount Desert, in Maine, to the Straits of Belle Isle. At Romaine the eggs were just being laid on the 26th of June."

The sexes differ so little, either in size or colouring, that by dissection alone can they be discriminated.

The forked tail and short tarsi are the characters by which Leach's Storm-Petrel may be distinguished from the common species: these deviations in structure doubtless have an influence over its actions and economy; but how far they modify them can only become known when we have acquired a more intimate acquaintance with the bird and its habits in all their phases.

The Plate represents a male and a female, of the size of life.

Gould, John. 1873. "Forked-tailed Storm-Petrel, *Thalassidroma leachii* [Pl. 85]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324129>.

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