

Genus ARDEA.

GEN. CHAR. *Bill* long, strong, straight, compressed in a lengthened cone; upper mandible slightly channelled, ridge rounded. *Nostrils* lateral, basal, slit lengthwise in the groove, and half shut by a membrane. *Legs* long, slender, naked above the knee. *Toes* three before, the two outer united by a membrane, the inner divided, and one behind placed interiorly. *Claws* long, compressed, sharp, the middle one denticulated on the inside. *Wings* of middle size, the first quill a little shorter than the second and third, which are the longest.

COMMON HERON.

Ardea cinerea, Linn.

Le Héron.

OUR large sheets of water adjacent to woods and wild scenery have their pictorial beauties greatly enhanced by this majestic bird, which, however, preserved with the utmost rigor when the art of Falconry was in vogue, is now in less estimation; and notwithstanding its preservation at the present period in many extensive heronries, we have every reason to believe its numbers are yearly diminished; circumstances to which the draining of our fens and marshes doubtless also materially contribute: and it is a question whether at no long distant date the Heron will not become as scarce in our island as the Bustard. It may not be out of place here to observe, that the Crane and Stork were once as common with us as the Heron is now; but being migratory birds, and finding that year after year their subsistence decreased, it is not so much to be wondered at that they should altogether abstain from visiting such an inhospitable abode. The range of the Heron is very extensive, being distributed not only over the continent of Europe, but in nearly every portion of the Old World; and in America we find its place supplied by a species closely resembling it in colour and habits, but nearly a third larger.

The Heron is very nocturnal in its general habits, and will when undisturbed remain during the day perched upon the branch of some large tree, where it sleeps away till evening calls it to exert itself in procuring the necessary supply of food; when there are no trees in the neighbourhood, it may be observed reposing in the centre of the marsh, but generally so elevated as to command a view of every approach, so as to be as safe as circumstances will admit. In the dusk of evening it may be seen leaving its retreat, and winging its way to the accustomed fishing-place, where it spends the whole of the night and morning in watching for its prey: to this end it wades into the water, there remaining motionless as a statue, its keen eye watching the approach of its victims,—fish, particularly eels which are working their way into the shallows in search of their own food: let one come within the range of its neck, which is retracted upon its shoulders in readiness for a blow, and quick as lightning it is seized by the never-failing stroke of its sharp-pointed bill. We may here notice the strong digestive powers with which this bird is provided, whence arises the necessity of an exuberant supply of food; and as its means of procuring it are in conformity with its wants, few birds make such destructive havoc in the preserves of fish: in addition to fish, however, it greedily devours frogs, aquatic insects, water rats, mice, &c. Few birds are more buoyant than the Heron; it elevates itself to a considerable height, and is also capable of maintaining its flight over large rivers and tracts of country.

On the earliest approach of spring, these birds assemble in flocks at the accustomed breeding-places, or heronries as they are termed, and either repair the nests of the preceding year, or construct new ones. They are large, flat structures, composed of sticks and twigs, the interior being lined, according to Mr. Selby, with wool and other materials, and are placed on the topmost branches of trees of the highest growth. The eggs are four or five in number, of a blueish green colour. The young are easily reared, and become quite domesticated in captivity, forming stately ornaments to sheets of water in the vicinity of mansions. During the first year of their existence, they are destitute of the flowing plumes of the back, chest and occiput, the whole plumage having an obscure and dusky tinge.

The adult male has the forehead, the sides of the head, throat, and shoulders of the wings, breast and belly pure white; on the front of the neck a double row of oblong spots of black; several long plumes of white springing from the lower part; a long plume of white feathers rising from the occiput; the sides of the chest black; the whole of the upper surface of a silvery grey; the scapularies elongated, forming loose, streaming, pendent feathers which fall over the wings; the beak and the band round the eyes beautiful yellow, with a tinge of grey; and the tarsi olive green.

The female resembles the male externally, but is somewhat smaller.

We have figured an adult male nearly three fourths of the natural size.