STERNA MELANOGASTER, Temm.

Black-bellied Tern.

Sterna melanogaster, Temm. Pl. Col. 434.—Burg. in Proc. Zool. Soc., part xxiii. (1855) p. 184.
—— acuticauda, Hardw. and Gray, Ill. Ind. Zool., pl. 70. fig. 3.

Hydrochelidon melanogaster, Gray, Gen. of Birds, vol. iii. p. 660, Hydrochelidon, sp. 7.—Bonap. Compt. Rend. de

Sterna javanica, Blyth, Cat. of Birds in Mus. Asiat. Soc. Calcutta, p. 293.—Jerd. Birds of India, vol. ii. part ii. p. 840.

This very elegant Tern is so generally distributed over the Indian peninsula that it seems superfluous to particularize the localities in which it has been observed by those who have paid attention to the ornithology of that country; but I may mention that Capt. Irby found it numerous in Oude and Kumaon, that the late Hon. F. J. Shore met with it at Lukurghat (where he states that the boatmen call it *chelooree*), that Capt. Burgess saw it in abundance on the sandbanks of the river at Sukkur about the middle of March, and also found it common on the river Bheena. Like other species of the genus, it occasionally ascends the rivers for a considerable distance from the sea, particularly those that are subject to inundations, and where sandy and shingly banks are the natural consequence.

"While walking on a sandbank in the midst of the river Bheena," says Captain Burgess, "I was beset by a pair of these Terns, and, on looking about on the ground, found two eggs deposited in a slight hollow scraped in the moist sand not far from the edge of the water. These birds, when flying overhead, utter a cry very like the chirp of a Sparrow. They breed during the months of March and April, laying two eggs of a rich stone-colour, spotted chiefly round the centre, and more sparingly over the larger end, with grey and light-brown spots, and measure one inch and rather more than two-tenths in length by one inch in width."

Mr. Jerdon states that "it is seen hunting singly or in small scattered parties over every river in India, and that it breeds on the sandbanks of the rivers in all parts of the country, and usually lays three eggs."

Some authors have considered this species to be identical with the Sterna javanica of Horsfield; but it only requires a careful reading of Horsfield's description, in the thirteenth volume of the 'Transactions' of the Linnean Society, to ascertain that this is a fallacy. Others, again, have associated it with the Marsh-Terns, and assigned it a place in the genus Hydrochelidon: this also is an error; for its delicate feet, as well as several other parts of its structure, indicate that it is a true Sterna, of which genus, beautiful as are most of its members, there is not one more graceful in contour, or more striking in appearance. As far as I am aware, it is the only species having a black belly—a feature which offers so strong a contrast to the delicate hue of the other parts of the plumage that it must render the bird a most conspicuous object during flight. I believe this mark is common to both sexes, and hence the name of melanogaster applied to it by Temminck is singularly appropriate.

Crown of the head and nape deep black; all the upper surface, wings, and tail light grey; shafts of the primaries and tail white; line at the base of the upper mandible, chin, and throat white; breast pearly white, gradually blending with the black of the abdomen and under tail-coverts; bill orange; irides brown; legs and feet vermilion.

"In winter," says Mr. Jerdon, "the head is white mixed with dusky, and the abdomen is pearly grey instead of black."

The Plate represents the bird of the natural size, in the plumage of summer.