

## STERNULA MINUTA.

### Little Tern.

*Sterna minuta*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 228.

—— *minor*, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 206, pl. 19. fig. 2.

—— *bicolor*, Scop. Ann. Hist. Nat., tom. i. no. 110.

—— *metopoleucos*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 608.

*Sternula fassipes*, *pomarina*, et *Danica*, Brehm, Handb. Naturg. aller Vög. Deutschl., pp. 790, 791.

—— *danubialis* et *meridionalis*, Brehm (Bonap.).

—— *minuta*, Bonap. Rev. Crit. sur Degl. Orn. Europ., p. 199.

How joyous are the emotions of the sailor when, towards the end of a long voyage, he sees the Little Tern flapping its long wings over the surface, or descending headlong into the ocean. Light-hearted is he now; for he knows that this aerial sprite is a never-failing indication that the shore is near at hand, and that in a few hours he may get a short relief from his monotonous sea-life. Not only to the sailor, however, but to every one who loves the salt breeze, and seeks a change by resorting to the sea-shore, is this little bird an object of interest, its buoyant flight, actions, and whole economy being totally different from those of land-birds: the delicacy of its colouring also, harmonizing as it does with the blue vault of heaven under which it flies, the orange-red of its feet, and its structure beautifully adapted to the end for which it was formed, all excite feelings of pleasure and admiration.

This lovely Tern is one of the smallest species of a family the members of which are so universally distributed that there is no portion of the world, except perhaps its extreme northern and southern regions, where one or other of them is not to be found. This maritime and fluviatile family of birds comprises so many different forms that they must of necessity be divided into many genera. Some are remarkable for their wing-powers, others for their great size; others, again, are as diminutive as the present species; and some offer a seeming alliance to the Petrels, as the members of the genus *Anous*. All the members of each of these various subdivisions assimilate most closely in their mode of life and general economy; and thus the habits of the little *Sternula Nereis* of Australia are precisely similar to those of its antipodal representative, the *S. minuta*, whose history I now proceed with.

The Little Tern, which is a summer visitant to our islands, is dispersed at that season along the whole of our coasts from Sussex to the Orkneys, from Suffolk to the most western part of Ireland, and, moreover, breeds in every suitable situation—that is, wherever the bed of shingle, the strand, or the sandy sea-shore is not overrun by its greatest enemy, the thoughtless boy with his fowling-piece, who so frequently shoots these little mariners from sheer wantonness and mischief. Thoughtless beyond measure, cruel in the extreme, are those who destroy this lovely bird with no other object—cruel, because the pain does not end with the death of the victim; the young, deprived of their parents, are left to starve and die on the shingle. The collector of eggs, when he exercises proper discretion, has, to a certain extent, an excuse; for a little grief on the part of the birds is the only suffering; but the wanton destruction which I have seen dealt out to these pretty objects, I, for one, heartily deprecate.

The Little Tern comes to us in May, and after spending here the three or four following months, departs with its brood to the neighbouring seas, fishing all round our coasts, sometimes in the sheltered bays, at others out in the open seas, but always within soundings. In all the temperate parts of Europe it does the same, the seas also which wash the shores of Africa, those of India, Malaya, and China; everywhere within these limits at least, the bird is found at one season or the other. Sensitive to cold, it seeks warm and congenial climes in winter, and retires to more northern latitudes as the spring-time approaches. Its food consists of the fry of fishes and crustaceans, all of which are obtained by immersion. A visit to the breeding-place of this species, with the opportunity it affords of watching its actions, forms one of the most pleasant times spent by the ornithologist. The birds unite in little colonies, and, like the Common Tern, incubate near each other. Their two eggs are placed in the midst of the shingle, being deposited in a little depression, without a nest other than a few bits of shells arranged neatly around. During the period of incubation the old birds may be seen dotted about over the surface of the shore, while others are passing overhead uttering their peculiar wailing cry. Sometimes these places, like that of the great shingle bed at Dungeness, are interspersed with the flowering stonecrop and foxglove, while others are bare and level sands, where, from the similarity in colour, it is difficult to detect the eggs or the newly fledged young.

As is the case with the other Terns, this species undergoes a seasonal change, which is principally apparent in the black which covers the crown in summer becoming restricted to the hinder part of the head, and the white on the forehead more extensive, in winter.