

STERNA HIRUNDO, Linn.?

Common Tern.

Hirundo marina, Ray, Syn., p. 131.

Sterna major, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 203, pl. 19. fig. 1.

—— *hirundo*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 227?

—— *fluviatilis*, Naum. Isis, 1820 (Temm.).

—— *marina*, Eyton, Rare Brit. Birds, p. 55.

Hydrocecropis hirundo, Boie, Isis, 1844, p. 179.

WHETHER Linnæus did, or did not, take his description of *Sterna hirundo* from an example of the present species is a question which, in my opinion, can never be satisfactorily determined; under these circumstances, then, it will surely be better to keep the term for our well-known bird, the more so as it is known by that appellation to every British ornithologist, and the name has been retained for this species by Mr. Elliott Coues in his recently published and elaborate 'Review of the Terns of North America.' I make this remark because I am aware that, in retaining the name of *hirundo* for our Common Tern, I am running counter to the opinion of some living ornithologists, who are inclined to believe that this appellation should be assigned to the *Sterna macrura* of Naumann, the Arctic Tern of British authors.

Both the Common and the Arctic Terns are abundant on our coasts; still they seldom intermingle: at one season of the year they may be observed fishing some distance out at sea, at others breeding on the great beds of shingle and sand bordering our coasts at the mouths of rivers and inland waters. The Common Tern quits the open ocean in the month of May, for the purpose of reproducing and nurturing its young, and then resorts to shingly beaches such as those at Dungeness, Pevensey, Selsey, and Weymouth, on our southern coasts, and all similar situations on the west, from the Bristol Channel to the Solway Frith, and occasionally high up the larger rivers. It also breeds here and there all round the coasts of Ireland. I might mention hundreds of other localities, from the mouth of the Thames to Penzance and the Scilly Islands, and thence to Holyhead, and onward again by the flat shores of Lancashire to the Isle of Skye; but it has always been an object with me in the present work to generalize rather than to enter into the minute details that may be found in the numerous works which have been written on our native birds.

When the breeding-season is over, the Common Tern returns again to all parts of the open sea that are within soundings, and when the cold weather sets in proceeds to the warmer countries of Portugal, Spain, the neighbourhood of the Mediterranean, and the coasts of Africa generally. It is believed that under no circumstances does it go so far north as the Arctic Tern; it is, in fact, a more southern species, and consequently loves warmth, whether it be found on the shores of Europe or those of Asia: for it is an inhabitant of both quarters of the globe; but it seems to be less numerous in the latter. Dr. Jerdon informs us that it appears to be rare in Southern and Central India, but, according to Dr. Adams, is common on the Indus and the rivers of the Punjab, and also on the lakes of Cashmere, and that it does not breed, so far as is known, in India. He procured it, on one occasion only, on the Lake of Ootacamund, on the Neilgherries.

Easy and graceful in all its actions does the Common Tern appear as it comes in from the sea towards the intruder who has strolled out upon the heated shingle, where its two or three eggs are deposited. Its lovely grey back and wings so closely harmonize with the clear blue of the heavens, that, were it not for its silvery under surface, it would scarcely be noticed: if the weather be lowery, and black clouds form a background to the scene, the bird becomes a more conspicuous object; but be the weather what it may, down it comes, uttering its loud, harsh craking scream. If the eggs be approached, it manifests much uneasiness, and with repeated flaps of its great wings makes many singular and different turns—at one moment near at hand, at another at a distance, as if inviting you to follow. If it be so fortunate as to hatch its young, it manifests still greater anxiety, and even becomes bold in their defence. Still, with all these actions, its appearance is more that of a fairy spirit than a bird, and those who have never visited its breeding-ground on the sea-shore can form no idea of the strange feelings called up by the assemblages of these birds, and the monotonous rolling of the breakers, and the other adjuncts of the scene. To and from the sea do these old birds constantly go forth in search of food for their little progeny, sometimes far out in the bay, at other times they meet the shoal of fry nearer at hand; the shallows also afford them a supply of sand-eels and crustaceans, all of which are acceptable to the growing young. At first, or in the downy state, these little chicks are very beautifully marbled with moss-like brown and buff; but this costume is very soon thrown off; white feathers, barred with brown, take its place; and the birds now present an appearance almost as attractive as some of the flowering plants which frequently grow around and even upon the shingle on which they are lying. That great nursery of Terns and Ring-Dotterels, Dungeness in Romney