

CHROICO CEPHALUS RIDIBUNDUS.

Black-headed Gull.

Larus ridibundus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 225.

— *cinerarius*, Linn. *ibid.*, p. 224.

— *canescens*, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 649.

— *erythropus*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 597.

— *capistratus*, Temm. Man. d'Orn., tom. ii. p. 785?

— *nævius*, Pall. Zoogr. Rosso-Asiat., tom. ii. p. 321.

Chroicocephalus ridibundus, Eyton, Cat. Brit. Birds, p. 53.

THIS very elegant and interesting species is so abundantly dispersed along the shores of every part of the British Islands that it would be superfluous to name any particular locality in which it may be found; it is equally plentiful in Holland, Scandinavia, and all other countries of the Continent, wherever the shores are of a similar character to our own. During the months of autumn and winter it ascends into deep bays and the mouths of large rivers, where it paddles about with its pretty red feet over the oozy mud in search of marine worms, crustaceans, and the fry of fishes, all of which it devours with avidity. If absent from such localities at any time, it is visiting the fields of the interior for earth-worms and insect-larvæ, which are in equal request. In many parts it is often, like the Rook, the companion of the ploughman, and not unfrequently both the sable and the silvery bodied birds may be seen with him in the same furrow. The head of the Gull is now white, which on the approach of spring gradually gives place to a well-defined hood of black or brownish black. Hitherto the bird has been only partially gregarious; now it becomes strictly so, and large masses leave, almost to a day, for various parts of the marshes and large sedgy ponds, for the purpose of breeding, just, in fact, as the Rooks leave extensive wastes and resort to their accustomed trees for the like purpose. The bird now assumes a different kind of life, and earth-worms and insect-food take the place of crustaceans and sea-worms. Neither the flying chafer nor the dragonfly is able to evade the sharp and quickly made turns; and to watch a colony when thus engaged is a very pleasing sight.

This fairy-like bird undergoes several changes of plumage between youth and maturity; they have, however been so often described that I think we may dispense with them for matters of greater moment; but I may mention (although they do not always occur) that I have seen fresh-moulted specimens with the whole of the under surface suffused with rich rose-colour, the finest I ever saw being one sent up in a fresh state by W. Thompson, Esq., of Weymouth, which, though so early in the spring as the 20th of March, had the black cowl quite perfect, and its bill and feet deep blood-red. When such individuals do occur, they form indeed most beautiful objects. In size and colouring both sexes are alike at each stage of their existence, the female, as I have often found it, as large as the male.

Respecting the Black-headed Gull, Yarrell writes as follows:—

“A breeding-station in Norfolk, at a place called Scoulton Mere, where Sir Thomas Brown says this species bred constantly in his time, three hundred years ago, is thus described by the authors of the ‘Catalogue of Norfolk and Suffolk Birds:’—‘Near the centre of the county of Norfolk, at the distance of about twenty-five miles from the sea and two from Hingham, is a large piece of water called Scoulton Mere. In the middle of this mere there is a boggy island of seventy acres extent, covered with reeds, and on which there are some birch and willow trees. There is no river communicating between the mere and the sea. This mere has from time immemorial been a favourite breeding-spot of the Brown-headed Gull. These birds begin to make their appearance at Scoulton about the middle of February; and by the end of the first week in March the great body of them have always arrived. They spread themselves over the neighbouring country to the distance of several miles in search of food, following the plough as regularly as Rooks; and, from the great quantity of worms and grubs which they devour, they render essential service to the farmer. If the spring is mild, the Gulls begin to lay about the middle of April; but the month of May is the time at which the eggs are found in the greatest abundance. At this season a man and three boys find constant employment in collecting them, and they have sometimes gathered upwards of a thousand in a day. These eggs are sold on the spot at the rate of fourpence a score, and are regularly sent in considerable quantities to the markets at Norwich and Lynn. They are eaten cold, like Lapwings’ eggs, and also used for culinary purposes; but they are rather of an inferior quality, and somewhat like Ducks’ eggs in flavour. The person who sells these eggs gives £15 a year for the privilege of collecting them. This species of Gull never lays more than three eggs the first time; but if these are taken, it will lay again. We found many of the old birds sitting in the