

LARUS MARINUS, *Linn.*

Great Black-backed Gull.

Larus marinus, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 55.

— *maximus*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Coll. Brit. Mus., p. 40.

— *Mülleri*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 729.

— *Fabricii*, Brehm, *ibid.*, p. 730.

Leucus marinus, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 86.

Those who have visited the sea-shore of almost any part of the British Islands, but more especially the northern and western coasts, must have observed a large bird following the tide, hunting up and down the beach, and scrutinizing any floating substance cast on shore by the wash of the waves or deposited among the kelp and great masses of stranded weeds. That bird is the Great Black-backed Gull, commonly known to sailors as the "Cob," and, in its young state, as the "Wagel." It matters but little what part of the British shores are visited; for it may be seen everywhere, at one season or the other, from the Scilly Islands to the Orkneys; it may, moreover, be as abundantly met with in all similar situations round Ireland and the Hebrides. When fully adult, the colourings of the two sexes of this bird are very similar; they carry the rich dark colouring of the back during summer and winter, while their heads, which are streaked or more or less spotted with brown in winter, become during the breeding-season pure white.

From its peregrinations along the sea-coast the Great Black-backed Gull is not deterred by the most tempestuous weather; nor will the hardest gale induce it to take shelter, further than to resort to the mouths of large rivers or secluded bays till the tempest is over. It may be that this noble Gull whose prowess the spectator is admiring is an old bird in its fully adult black-and-white plumage; or it may be a young bird in its speckled garb of immaturity, not having yet attained the decided livery of the adult. If curiosity should induce any one to see more of the Great Black-backed Gull at the breeding-season, and observe its majestic sweeping flight over the face of the lofty rocky cliffs, he will go to the Bass, Handa, or any other similar situation, of which there are many all round the shores of the British Islands. There the bird makes its nest on the ledges of rocks and incubates its eggs; it also sometimes breeds in the marshes. Besides Britain, the bird also frequents the whole of the rocky portion of Scandinavia, and is found in similar latitudes in America. Now, as there are persons who have paid more attention to the history of the Great Black-backed Gull than I have done, I must, in fairness to those authors, quote what some of them have written, with due acknowledgment.

Selby states, with much truth, that "this bird has a voracious appetite, and preys upon all kinds of animal substances that may happen to be cast on shore; it also keeps a close watch upon the lesser Gulls, whom it drives from any food they may have discovered, appropriating the whole to itself; and Montagu mentions it as being a great enemy to the fishermen, as it will sever and devour the largest fish from their hooks if left dry by the ebbing tide. Its flight is slow and buoyant, without much exertion of the pinions, and, like that of the other species, is always opposed to the wind. Its voice is a strong and hoarse cackle, that may be heard at a great distance when the bird is sailing in the air; and this is more frequently repeated during the spring and breeding-season than at any other time."—*Ill. Brit. Orn.* vol. ii. p. 508.

"About the estuary of the Thames," says William Yarrell, in his 'History of British Birds,' vol. iii. p. 472, "the Great Black-backed Gull is decidedly a marsh breeder, both male and female assisting in the formation of their grassy nest, and driving all other birds, friends or foes, from the vicinity of the chosen spot. The female lays three eggs of large size, measuring three inches and two lines in length by two inches and four lines in breadth; the general colour yellowish brown, tinged with green, sparingly spotted with slate-grey and dark brown. The food of this species is fish and any animal matter; it will kill and eat small birds, and has been known to destroy weak lambs. It is bold as well as strong, and, if wounded, will make a resolute defence against capture. Its flight is powerful, and sustained without much apparent effort. It is also frequently seen at the edge of the water, or, like other Gulls, swimming buoyantly on its surface, supported by the mass of feathers with which the body is invested."

The Great Black-backed Gull, according to Mr. Thomson, "is a resident species in Ireland; it is also found in Wales, having been observed by Montagu in considerable abundance on the extensive sandy flats of the coast of Caermarthenshire, breeds on the steep holmes and Lundy Island, in the Bristol Channel, and has been shot in winter as high up the Severn as Worcester."

The latest author who has written on this large and powerful bird is Mr. Robert Gray, who observes that