

## RECURVIROSTRA AVOCETTA, *Linn.*

### Avocet.

*Recurvirostra avocetta*, Linn. Faun. Suec., tom. i. p. 191.

———— *europæa*, Dum.

———— *fissipes*, Brehm.

———— *helebi*, Brehm (Bonap.).

How much is it to be regretted that a bird so attractive in its general appearance, and so singular in its form as the Avocet, should be nearly extirpated from our island! yet such is unhappily the case; for, although it was formerly abundant, it is now very rarely to be met with. In all probability, it was never a stationary species with us, but one which, following the almost universal law of nature, was influenced by the seasons, and migrated as regularly as the Summer Snipe and the Ruff.

Except in England, it now breeds in most of the temperate countries of the northern parts of the Old World that are of a marshy character; and when the young have attained their full stature, which they do early in the first autumn of their existence, they wing their way southwards to other countries, where animal life, suitable to the well-being of a bird furnished with such a delicately constructed bill, is still rife. The upcurved form of this organ, which gives so singular an appearance to the bird, is most remarkable, being unsuited to probe the ground, like that of the Snipe or Woodcock, or to break the shell of ordinary-sized mollusks; the slightest frost, therefore, drives the Avocet before it to the oozy, muddy flats of estuaries, bays, and similar situations, where it can patter about with its wide-webbed feet, and gather small Crustaceans and sea-worms. Those who have seen a Stork or a Crane take a worm or frog by the tips of its long mandibles, and, with an upward movement of the head, drop it into its throat, will have a good idea of the actions of the Avocet when it has captured a small shrimp, a marine insect, or any other object upon which it lives, and will at once perceive that, with such a peculiarly formed beak, it could not feed in any other manner. Those authors who have had opportunities for observing the bird in a state of nature assert that it constantly moves its head from side to side after the manner of the Spoon-bill—a movement which is doubtless induced by the structure of the bill.

But, to return to the bird as an inhabitant of Britain, “time was” when the Avocet was a constant summer visitant to Norfolk, Lincolnshire, some parts of Suffolk, the coasts of Essex and Hampshire, and many other low and marshy parts of our island; in all these places it bred in small communities, and was as abundant as the Redshank is on our marshes and sandy dunes at the present time; but the gunner, in the exercise of his calling, has year by year gradually thinned their numbers by shooting them on their arrival, or by visiting their breeding-grounds, when the poor birds, alarmed for the safety of their young, fly round and easily fall a victim to his destructive propensities. Most wantonly, indeed, has the Avocet been shot down, with no other object than the pretence that its feathers were suitable for making artificial flies, which they are not, or for the chance of sale in the London market as an article of food—an excuse equally untenable. Up to a late period, that is, to within ten years of the time at which I am writing this brief history of the bird (March 1864), a few pairs still continued to visit some of the localities above enumerated; but, alas! even those few have now deserted us. In speaking thus precisely, I must not be understood to say that the bird is not to be met with at the present period in either of the three kingdoms; for occasional visitors still arrive; but their appearance is most irregular and uncertain, and the localities to which they resort are as varied as those in which other rare birds are found; and thus an Avocet may this year be observed in Cornwall, in Devonshire, Essex, or Norfolk, and in the next it may stilt over the muddy margins of the rivers of the midland and northern counties of England, or those of Scotland and Ireland. Of these accidental visitations we find numerous notices in the ‘Zoologist’ and other works devoted to the “occurrences of rare birds.” One of the last Avocets observed was seen near Poole, in Dorsetshire, by James Salter, Esq., to whom I am indebted for the following note respecting it:—“During the autumn of 1850 (I believe, in the month of October) I was at a place called Tattenham, about a mile from the town of Poole. My route lay along a narrow causeway which separates an arm of Poole Harbour on the one side, from a brackish marsh on the other. When I noticed the bird, it was busying itself at the edge of a small stream which runs through the marsh. I approached to within ten yards of it; it did not seem in the least degree alarmed at my presence, but continued scooping at the mud with its beak. In two or three minutes it rose and flew off to the harbour, uttering a sharp cry. The bird was in fine plumage, and apparently in good health.” On the continent of Europe it is still abundant in the north of Holland, in Holstein, and some of the islands in the Baltic. It also occurs in Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and Turkey, and, at the seasons of migration, crosses and recrosses the Mediterranean and Black Sea to Africa and Asia Minor; it is even said to be found