

HÆMATOPUS OSTRALEGUS, Linn.

Oyster-catcher.

Hæmatopus ostralegus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 257.

Ostralegus hæmatopus, Macgill. Man. of Nat. Hist., Orn., vol. ii. p. 59.

——— *vulgaris*, Less. Rev. Zool., 1849, p. 47.

WHY has this bird been called Oyster-catcher, when it is said by most observers never to feed upon that species of mollusk, but to be extremely fond of the common limpet, which it dexterously detaches from the rocks left bare by the tide? Thompson, who has studied more fully the food of our native birds than perhaps any other writer, says:—"The *Ostrea* inhabits too deep water to be ever accessible to the bird. The contents of the stomachs of eight individuals, shot in spring, autumn, and winter, proved, on examination, to be as follows: five contained only the opercula and portions of the animal of the whelk (*Littorina communis*), with which some of them were wholly filled; one exhibited the opercula of *Purpurea lapillus*; another presented a good deal of vegetable matter (consisting of tender roots and green leaves), small, white, worm-like larvæ, a few opercula of the whelk, and an operculum of *Buccinum undatum*; in the stomach and crop of the last, which was remarkably fat, were fifty opercula of large whelks, about twenty-five animals of good-sized limpets (*Patella vulgaris*), and an holothuria (*Cucumaria*)."

Having commenced this history of a species so common, so attractive, and which plays so important a part among our shore-loving birds, by showing that its trivial name, like that of the Goat-sucker, is a misnomer, I proceed to state that it is found on every part of the coasts of England, Ireland, and Scotland suited to its habits. Being a winter as well as a summer bird in the British Islands, it must be considered indigenous with us. Unlike the Turnstone, the Grey Plover, and some other Grallatorial birds, which frequently desert whole districts and even entire countries for a time, the present species rarely changes the locality in which it has taken up its abode, and, consequently, may almost to a certainty be found any day in the year with those acquainted with its habits and its usual places of resort. It is a strikingly showy bird, whether seen on the low rocky promontories of the coast or on the shingly beach of such rivers as the Don and the Dee, where it sometimes breeds. Apart from Britain, the Oyster-catcher is enumerated in the avifaunas of all the countries of Europe; indeed its range extends from the Arctic circle to the Mediterranean, and eastward as far as India; but as yet we do not know if it has been observed in China, the bird brought from that country by Mr. Swinhoe, which at first was considered identical, proving, on further examination, to be distinct and probably *Hæmatopus longirostris*. Other species of this form are distributed over certain parts of the globe; in the Old World some are found in Europe, throughout the greater part of Africa, India, China, Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand; and others in America, from the United States to Terra del Fuego,—the whole probably amounting to ten or twelve in number.

"The Oyster-catcher of Europe," says Sir William Jardine, in a note to his edition of Wilson's 'American Ornithology,' "is to be found on all the sandy British coasts in immense abundance. All those I have observed breeding, have chosen low rocky coasts, and deposited their eggs on some shelf or ledge, merely baring the surface from any moss or other substance covering the rock. When approached, the parents fly round, uttering with great vehemence their clamorous note. A great many old and young birds are always to be found on these coasts, enlivening the monotony of an extensive sand-beach with their clean and lively appearance and their shrill notes. As the young begin to assemble, the flocks increase; by the month of August they consist of many thousands, and at full tide they may be seen, like an extensive black line, at the distance of miles. They remain at rest until about half tide, when a general motion is made, and the line may be seen broken as the different parties advance close to the water's edge. After this they keep pace with the reflux until the feeding-banks begin to be uncovered, of which they seem to have an instinctive knowledge, when they leave their resting-place in small troops,—taking day after day the same course. They are difficult to approach; but when one is shot the flock will hover over it for some time, without heeding the intruder. During flight they assume the wedge-shape (\triangleright), like Ducks. They feed at night when the tide is suitable, and are often very noisy. Mussels and other shell-fish, crabs, &c. &c. are their most common food."

Mr. Hewitson says, "the Oyster-catcher is very particular in the selection of a site for its eggs, always making choice of a piece of gravel, or stony ground if to be met with near, more especially should it be mixed with broken shells, to which it shows a curious partiality, carefully collecting them together, and arranging them in a slight hole in the ground, and, when these are not to be found, selecting in their stead