

HIMANTOPUS CANDIDUS.

Stilt or Long-legged Plover.

Charadrius himantopus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 255.

— *autumnalis*, Hasselq. Iter. Palæst., p. 253.

Himantopus melanopterus, Temm. Man. d'Orn., 2nd edit., tom. ii. p. 528, and tom. iv. p. 350.

— *rufipes*, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 446, tab. 25. fig. 1.

— *Plinii*, Flem. Hist. of Brit. Anim., p. 112.

— *atropterus*, Meyer, Taschenb. Deutschl. Vög., p. 315.

— *candidus*, Bonn. Ency. Méth., Orn., part i. p. 24, pl. 5. fig. 4.

— *albicollis*, Vieill. Faun. Franç., p. 269, tab. 117. fig. 2.

Hypsibates himantopus, Nitsch, in Ersch und Gruber, Encycl., tom. xvi. p. 150.

How can I better commence the history of this singular bird than with the following quotation from the 'Natural History of Selborne,' by the Rev. Gilbert White, a man whom we may regard as the father of British ornithologists, and whose writings have inspired more young minds with a love of nature and of our native birds than any other observer?

"In the last week of last month" (April, 1779), "five of those most rare birds, too uncommon to have obtained an English name, but known to naturalists by the terms of *Himantopus*, or *Loripes*, and *Charadrius himantopus*, were shot upon the verge of Frinsham Pond, a large lake belonging to the Bishop of Winchester, and lying between Wolmer Forest and the town of Farnham, in Surrey. . . . One of these specimens I procured, and found the length of the legs so extraordinary that, at first sight, one might have supposed the shanks had been fastened on to impose on the credulity of the beholder: they are legs *in caricatura*. My specimen, when drawn and stuffed with pepper, weighed only four ounces and a quarter; yet the naked part of the thigh measured three inches and a half, and the legs four inches and a half. It must be a matter of great curiosity to see the Stilt-Plover move, to observe how it can wield such a length of lever with such feeble muscles as the thighs seem to be furnished with. At best, one should suspect it to be but a bad walker; but what adds to the wonder is that it has no back toe. Now without that steady prop to support its steps, it must be liable, in speculation, to perpetual vacillations, and, seldom able to preserve the true centre of gravity. . . . The old name of *Himantopus* is taken from Pliny, and, by an awkward metaphor, implies that the legs are as slender and pliant as if cut out of a thong of leather." I can easily conceive the delight and amazement of the good man at a sight so novel and curious, having myself participated in similar feelings on first meeting with a nearly allied species of this remarkable form, while wandering in the wilds of Australia; and well do I remember with what delight I watched the movements of a flock which, after running gracefully along the margin of the river Mokai, suddenly rose, turned, and flew back by me with their long red legs streaming out behind.

Since Gilbert White wrote, solitary individuals and small companies of this species have now and then visited the British Islands; such occurrences, however, must be regarded as purely accidental. But at only a short distance over the Channel (say, about 300 miles as the Crow flies), Long-Legged Stilts may be seen in the spring and summer of every year, and no further off than Spain be found breeding in many places; for there, as in Italy, Savoy, Greece, and Turkey, it is common. In France, Holland, and Germany it is much less abundant, and, as with us, must be regarded as a mere wanderer; on the other hand, the avifaunas of India and Java comprise a bird of this form, so closely allied to the *H. candidus* as to be scarcely separable from it, but which may prove to be the *H. leucocephalus* of Australia.

From the brief but interesting notes respecting this species contributed to 'The Ibis' by Lord Lilford, the Rev. H. B. Tristram, Mr. Howard Saunders, and others, we learn:—that it is very abundant and breeds in the marshes south of Seville; that it is common in Malta in spring and autumn, numerous on the shores of Corfu and Epirus in March, April, and May, breeds in great numbers in the marshes near Spalatro, in Dalmatia, and undoubtedly in Turkey; that it resorts to the ditches of the oases in Northern Africa, and breeds abundantly in the northern Sahara; that stragglers are occasionally seen in Upper Egypt, small flocks found in the Delta and Faioum; and that it is not unfrequent and breeds on a small marshy lake near Jenin, in the centre of Palestine, where it remains throughout the year.

Of the occurrence of this species in Scotland very few instances are on record, the first being mentioned in Sir Robert Sibbald's 'Scotia Illustrata;' in Ireland, according to Thompson, it is extremely rare; in England, Mr. Yarrell notes examples killed in Anglesea, Devonshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Lincolnshire, and Norfolk: of those killed in the last-mentioned county, a full account will be found in the second volume of my friend Mr. Stevenson's 'Birds of Norfolk.'