

Genus XEMA.

GEN. CHAR. *Beak* short, slender, straight, laterally compressed, its tip bent down; the lower mandible somewhat angulated beneath. *Nostrils* very slender, linear. *Legs* slender; *tibiae* naked on the lower part. *Tail* forked.

LAUGHING GULL.

Xema ridibundus, Boje.

La Mouette rieuse ou à Capuchin brun.

THE characters which distinguish the genus *Xema* of Dr. Leach from the genus *Larus*, consist not only in a decided difference of form, but in certain points of colouring, and the changes which the species comprised in it undergo at different seasons; for example, the bill and legs are bright red, and the head changes in spring from white to black or deep chocolate brown, which latter colouring is certainly confined to the breeding-season, and disappears on the approach of autumn; in addition to this we find that the young pass through a very different gradation of plumage to that which obtains among the Gulls in general. Independently of these variations in the colouring, we may observe that the general contour of the species is much more light and elegant, the bill more feeble, and the tarsi more slender; they choose, moreover, a very different place for the purposes of nidification, always resorting to low flat lands, often some distance from the sea, the nest being placed on the ground, whereas the generality of the Gulls build upon ledges of rock bordering the sea.

Of all the species comprised in the present group which inhabit our island, the Laughing Gull is by far the most common and perhaps the most elegant of its genus. During the summer it resorts in immense flocks, for the purpose of nidification, to many of our marshy islands near the coast, after which it again returns to the sea, or the mouths of large rivers, and is found at this season round the whole of our coasts, but is not then to be distinguished by the bright chocolate colouring of the head, which character is so remarkable during the breeding-season. In general habits, manners, and mode of flight, it agrees with the rest of the Gulls; though, as its light form and long tarsi sufficiently indicate, its actions on the ground are much more nimble and rapid. It is said to be a bird of passage in Germany and France, but is found in the greatest abundance in Holland throughout every season of the year. Its food consists of various insects, worms, mollusca, and small fishes.

In its full summer plumage the bill, naked skin round the eye, and tarsi, are bright red; the whole of the head and throat deep chocolate brown; the back and shoulders delicate grey; quills white on their outer edges, with the exception of the first, in which it is black, the extremities of all the rest being black slightly tipped with white; rump, tail, and whole of the under surface white.

The winter plumage is similar to that of summer, with the exception of the chocolate hood, which is gradually exchanged for pure white, a change which Mr. Yarrell has correctly observed in his valuable paper "On the Laws which appear to influence the assumption and changes of plumage in Birds," published in the Transactions of the Zoological Society of London, (vol. 1. part 1. p. 13,) is produced not by a process of moulting, but by an alteration in the colour of the feathers.

The young of the year have the colour of the bill and tarsi much more obscure; the top of the head and ear-coverts are mottled with brown, which is also the colour of the back and shoulders, each feather having a lighter margin; the tail is broadly edged with black.

The full plumage of maturity is not acquired until after the moulting of their second autumn, and is assumed by gradations. The sexes do not differ in their colouring.

The Plate represents an adult, and a young bird of the year, of the natural size.