

figures both forms, under the names they usually go by, and says there is no variation in the width of the frontal bands between the narrow and the wide. I cannot think he could have made a careful examination of a series of specimens belonging to the former, as I have found a very considerable variation among specimens, although I have not yet seen any Malaccan or Sumatran specimens in which the black front passed behind the fore part of the eye, nor any Bornean with a band as narrow as in those specimens from other localities. The post-ocular stripe, and the apical portions of the wing-coverts are of a more silvery and lighter blue, and the general plumage of the adults is darker in the Bornean birds than in the Sumatran or Malaccan, and if they are to be separated the former could only be assigned to a subspecific rank, and in view of its being without a name, as I have shown, may be called *Pitta granatina borneënsis*.

Occiput and nape crimson.

Frontal black band not extending to the eye.....*P. granatina*.

Frontal black band extending behind the eye.....*P. g. borneënsis*.

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## HABITS OF THE AMERICAN HERRING GULL (*LARUS ARGENTATUS SMITHSONIANUS*) IN NEW ENGLAND.

BY GEORGE H. MACKAY.

THIS Gull is the most abundant of those larger Gulls which pass the late autumn, winter and spring months on the New England coast as well as farther south. Naturally exceedingly wary, they will nevertheless frequent the very heart of civilization if unmolested, and may be seen any day during the winter in the waters surrounding New York City, as also in those around Boston, flying and sailing high up over both cities as they pass from the water on one side to that on the other. Long continued undisturbed occupation of these haunts has rendered them exceedingly gentle and tame. In order to become better acquainted with them under more natural surroundings it will be necessary to remain at the seashore at some place where they can be ob-

served, and watch those birds which live 'along shore,' as such have had their wits sharpened, and evidently have learned that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." As a result one becomes acquainted with a most wary, ingenious, and observing bird, ever on the alert to avail itself of all opportunities thrown in its way for obtaining food as well as to preserve its own safety.

This Gull appears on the New England coast early in September, and at times a few the very last part of August, becoming more abundant as the season advances and colder weather approaches. They mostly depart for the north during the first half of April although a few remain until about the time the herring depart, say June 1. After coming south from the north in the autumn they distribute themselves along the seaboard, apparently in communities, attaching themselves to such localities as they may select for their home while here, and as a rule they do not afterwards, I think, leave their accustomed range. I have noticed repeatedly what I have taken to be the same birds daily flying along the line of beach during high water, afterwards going to the flats when they became uncovered by the tide, and finally to the same shoal to roost.

I cite as an instance of their ingenuity that in winter I have seen them carry up in their bills, to a height of twenty-five to thirty-five feet, into the air, a large sea clam (*Mactra solidissima* Gould) measuring six and a half inches by four and a half, for the purpose of breaking the shell (that they might avail themselves of the contents for food) by dropping it on the hard beach. I have seen them carry up the same clam four times when it failed to break on account of insufficient height; but they will carry them up higher after several ineffectual attempts and thus obtain the desired result; they also carry up scallops (*Pecten concentricus*) and mussels (*Modiola modiolus*). The American Crow (*Corvus americanus*) also has the same habit. That they usually succeed seems certain, for I have seen them eating them, and have noticed the broken shells, minus the contents, lying on the beach, surrounded by their tracks. They vary this mode of proceeding in some places by carrying and dropping the clams on a cake of ice, or on a rock.

They are anything but particular in the selection of their food, for to them 'all is fish that cometh to net.' I have known both

the adults and young birds to swallow a dead pollock head first, the estimated measure of which was ten inches long by two inches in diameter at the thickest part. They will eat dead ducks with avidity, never missing an opportunity to avail themselves of so satisfactory a meal if thrown in their way; in fact they seem very fond of animal food when they can procure it. Beginning at the neck of a duck where it joins the body (if the duck is lying on the beach) they will tear open the tough skin with their strong and sharp bills and clean off the flesh (rejecting the skin and feathers) as if it had been done with a sharp knife. Should the dead bird be floating they will alight beside it and pick it, but they very much prefer to have them on the beach, where it only requires a few minutes to strip it. I have known them to carry a dead Red-breasted Merganser (*Merganser serrator*) for nearly a quarter of a mile by stages of about twenty-five yards, holding it by the neck, in order to eat it in security. When a flock of the above birds (*Merganser serrator*) are diving and feeding, it is not unusual to see one or more of these Gulls hovering over where the flock is, about ten feet from the water. When a Merganser appears with a fish in its mouth, the Gull will make a rush for it, for the evident purpose of taking it away or making it drop it, at which time the Merganser will frequently dive to avoid the encounter. While I have never actually seen the Gull take the fish away, it being most difficult at the time to see, yet I am of the belief that he not only makes the Merganser drop it and thus secures the desired end, but that he also takes it out of the bird's mouth. They are also very fond of small live eels and fish. I have seen them caught by baiting a hook with the former, which was fastened to six or eight feet of line to which a half brick was attached. This is anchored on some sand flat or shoal which becomes uncovered at low water. As the tide falls, some one of the Gulls flying about perceives the eel, and as soon as it can be reached by putting its head down (for they never dive), the Gull seizes and swallows it. Should the hook catch when it attempts to fly, it will carry the brick up into the air for fifty or sixty yards (a heavier weight would tear out), but after two or three such attempts it becomes exhausted by the effort and can then be easily captured.

They frequently act as sentinels for the Black Ducks (*Anas obscura*), as do also the Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus mar-*

*inus*). Under such conditions the Ducks appear to give up all care to the Gull and go to sleep in perfect confidence, nor is it misplaced. If therefore a flock of these Ducks is noticed with heads under their wings, asleep, with either one of these Gulls near by, in such a place as would appear they might be approached within shooting distance, the observer will save himself some trouble if he will pass on without making the attempt, for, depend upon it, the Gull will see him in ample time to warn the Ducks, which it will always do by flying up a short distance in the air over them and uttering its sharp, harsh cry of alarm, on hearing which the Ducks lose no time in heeding the warning, and depart for another locality. One of my old shooting companions utilized this trait to his own advantage by having a wooden Gull decoy which he placed on the rocks in full sight, while in the water near at hand would be his Black Duck decoys. "It took away the *fear* from the Ducks," he used to say, "and made them decoy better." The best way to obtain Herring Gulls from the land is to lie concealed under the headland which forms the shore line, and as they lead along the beach, as is their habit, they often pass within gun shot, especially if the wind is blowing on shore. The young birds in the gray plumage can almost invariably be waved up within gun shot by lying concealed and shaking a pair of Gull wings in such a manner that they have the appearance of a Gull hovering over something. Rarely can the adults be so decoyed, they being too suspicious and wary. These birds are very densely feathered on the breast, on the fore part of which they rest when on the water; floating with extreme buoyancy, with wings and tail elevated, they have the appearance of an inverted arc. I know of no bird frequenting New England waters which appears so much at ease during the coldest and stormiest winter weather, showing quite conclusively that they must possess great power of endurance. I have often asked myself the question how they managed always to obtain sufficient food during such times to sustain them, for of those I have noticed all seemed to be in excellent physical condition.

These Gulls pass the larger part of the time during the day on the wing, visiting the flats, however, when they become uncovered. Their modes of flight are a slow, heavy movement of the wings with long strokes, sailing with set wings, and circling. They have a habit at times of circling and soaring *very high* in

the air. At other times they will follow the line of surf along the beaches for miles hunting for anything that might prove available for food. They will also collect in numbers and follow the fishing vessels, especially when they are cleaning fish and throwing the entrails overboard, for which they fight and struggle, giving vent to their feelings in screams. When flying about, they ordinarily keep at an altitude of about thirty to forty yards; the head is carried low with eyes scanning the surface of the ocean and adjacent shores. When danger is discovered while flying near the shore they make a backward movement of the wings and fall off before the wind if practicable. When it is blowing hard they will frequently alight in numbers just outside of where the rollers are breaking and under the shelter of the beach. Here they will sit, with necks and feathers drawn down, with every appearance of contentment, regardless of wind or weather. They will frequently alight on the beaches in numbers when it blows hard, selecting such places where the headland has been blown off level with the beach, such places, I suppose, being considered safer, as affording a wider scope of vision. When wounded they are apt to show fight, biting quite hard.

I think it more than likely that some of our American birds, as also the European form (*Larus argentatus*), cross the Atlantic, reaching the several shores by following the many steamships, the very close resemblance of these two forms (the European bird only being slightly smaller) renders it most difficult to distinguish one from the other, except for expert ornithologists, into whose hands few seem thus far to have fallen.

When flying about Herring Gulls do not associate together in large numbers, being oftener seen in twos and threes. It is with considerable hesitation that I regard them as gregarious within a strict interpretation of the term, for they apparently only come together when there is some particular reason for doing so, as for instance something to eat, or to roost on some sand shoal or rest, and not apparently because they *like* to be together. I regard them as very curious and much afraid that some of their companions may fare better than themselves. Although they accumulate in considerable numbers at times on the sand bars, beaches, flats, and back of the breakers when resting on the ocean; they do not seem to me to evince much friendship for each other during the period in which they remain on this coast.

In regard to their plumage I am inclined to the belief that it requires three seasons before these birds acquire their full plumage, and my reason for so thinking is the apparently intermediate feathering which I have noticed.

They make a note similar to *cack, cack, cack*, quickly repeated, which is the alarm cry ; also a kind of cackle sometimes repeated in a much higher key than at others. And when they are collected in numbers together on the flats on a fine pleasant day, it is extremely interesting to listen to their various notes, I might almost say music. When squabbling for some floating food they will also make considerable fuss and noise.

A few adult American Herring Gulls remain during the summer frequenting the south side of Cape Cod, also at Wepecket Islands, Buzzard's Bay, where on June 26, 1891, some thirty or forty of these birds were noted. The only instance that has come to my notice of this bird's breeding in Massachusetts occurred during the summer of 1888 when Mr. Vinal Edwards (in the employ of the U. S. Fish Commission) of Wood's Holl, Massachusetts was attracted by the continued presence of a pair of Herring Gulls in the white plumage at the middle Wepecket Island, Buzzard's Bay (near Woods Holl). On landing to investigate, he found the usual well-constructed nest containing downy young which could not have been more than two or three days from the shell.

That it is customary for some of our water birds to return to their old haunts in New England waters has long been my belief, as I have expressed in former articles. It is therefore with pleasure that I narrate an instance of such return by an American Herring Gull, for the facts concerning which my readers are indebted to the politeness of Captain Edward Fogarty, master of the Brenton Reef Lightship, Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, who has at my request most kindly furnished me with a description of the Gull and details of its sojourn in the vicinity of the Lightship for so long a period. As identification and reliable data are not always obtainable in such cases, I feel certain that the following narrative will prove of considerable interest. Hearing that a certain Gull had been in the habit of frequenting, and returning year after year to the waters adjacent to Brenton's Reef, Narragansett Bay, and was known in consequence to the crew of the lightship anchored in that locality, I entered into communication with

Capt. Fogarty, master of the lightship asking him to substantiate the report if true, and give me all the details he was able. His polite and full replies to all my inquiries have enabled me to present the story of 'Gull Dick,' as this particular bird is called by the crew of the lightship. The result of my investigation proves beyond any reasonable doubt that the Gull in question is an American Herring Gull. This particular bird is described as appearing old, and not showing the same activity as other Gulls of the same kind which also frequent the neighborhood of the lightship. After it has been absent from the first of April to the middle of October, at which times it usually departs and returns, there are many eyes on the lightship constantly on the lookout to welcome Dick back again. In 1891 the bird arrived October 12 which makes the twentieth winter it is known to have passed in this locality. In 1890 it returned on October 5. Of late the crew has considered the return of this bird problematical, owing to the increasing signs of age and feebleness. On the bird's arrival in 1890 and 1891 several of its wing feathers were missing, but they were regained in a short time. Although the Gull never comes on board the lightship it ventures very close to it, much nearer than any of the other Gulls that are flying about. It is known to the crew not only by this fact, but also by certain marks on its wings, also by its cry. It is fond of and eats boiled pork or fish with voracity, preferring the former, swallowing six or eight pieces the size of a hen's egg when hungry. If not hungry and other Gulls are about at the time of its being fed, it will not let them have any if it can prevent it, although not wishing to partake itself, making the greatest possible fuss all the while if one of the other Gulls attempts to secure an occasional piece. On April 1, 1892, when being given its supper, there were twelve or fifteen other Gulls in the immediate neighborhood, some of which endeavored to secure a share. One of them becoming too bold to please Dick, the latter started for and seized the aggressor by the neck, which resulted in the loss of many feathers by the former, who was only too glad to escape further punishment by an immediate retreat. Every morning at sunrise, when the lights on the ship are lowered for the day, this Gull is perceived coming towards the ship, from the rocks (where it roosts) about two miles away, for its breakfast which it always receives from the hands of the crew. Should the bird

not be noticed flying around near by, one of the crew will call the bird by name, whistle, or wave his hand, and soon the bird appears. The last seen of Dick in the late afternoon is just before the lights are hoisted for the night. When this movement commences, it at once starts for and flies to the rocks near the Beavertail Lighthouse to roost, again reappearing on the following morning to go through the same procedure. In a letter received from Capt. Fogarty, Jan. 30, 1892, he writes, "I have just given him his dinner since I wrote this letter." In another letter, dated April 12, 1892, he informs me that the last seen of Dick this spring was on April 6, 1892. He was fed on that afternoon as usual; since that date nothing has been seen of him, and it is supposed the bird has taken its departure, whether to return again next October remains to be seen. Pause my reader and reflect what this story conveys. Is it not a most interesting portrayal of successful bird life well rounded out? Storms, disease, fatalities, perils of migration, have all been braved and surmounted for twenty years at least, and perhaps for a longer period. Yet still constant, Gull Dick, now a veteran, may nevertheless be seen as of old in his accustomed haunt, — while on board the lightship there is not today a man who was there when this bird first appeared. It is with more than ordinary interest that I record in 'The Auk', for future reference, this most interesting example of the American Herring Gull.

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REMARKS ON A COLLECTION OF BIRDS MADE  
BY WILMOT W. BROWN, JR., ON MONA AND  
PORTO RICO DURING FEBRUARY AND A  
PART OF MARCH, 1892.

BY CHARLES B. CORY.

MR. BROWN after considerable difficulty succeeded in getting to the Island of Mona. He describes the island as having very few trees and no fresh water.

During his stay at Mona nothing of interest was procured with the exception of a specimen of *Conurus chloropterus*, which is