



RECURVIROSTRA AVOCETTA, Linn.

Water & Color, 1890.

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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

as far south as the Cape of Good Hope. It is an inhabitant of the salt lakes of Tartary and the shores of the Caspian Sea; and Mr. Swinhoe observed it both in Formosa and China, in which latter country he saw it on the banks of the Peiho in November, and frequently met with it in the market at Tientsin; it also occurs in Lower Bengal and other parts of India.

The genus to which this bird belongs is very limited in the number of its members, only four species being known; these are the European *Recurvirostra Avocetta*, the *R. americana* of North America, the *R. rubricollis* of Australia, and the *R. occidentalis*, if the bird so called be not identical with *R. americana*.

Latham states that the Avocet is said to feed on "worms and insects collected from the mud, chiefly *Cancer pulex* and *Locusta* (the sea-flea and locust)," and that it is "often seen to wade far into the water; it will also occasionally swim, but always close to the shore, is very bold in defence of its young, and, when disturbed in the breeding-season, hovers over the sportman's head like a Lapwing, and flies with its legs extended. Its note is sharp, and resembles the word *twit* twice or oftener repeated; hence it has received the trivial name of Yelper. Its actions and the form of its bill have also obtained for it in some counties the names of Butter-flip, Scooper, Picarini, Crooked-bill, and Cobbler's Awl."

"At the beginning of this century," says the Rev. Mr. Lubbock in his *Observations on the Fauna of Norfolk*, "the Avocet used to breed constantly and in considerable numbers at Horsey, but has not done so of late years. On the authority of an old and respectable fen-man, it bred regularly forty years ago near the Seven-mile House, on the North River; occurs still sometimes upon Breydon. The last I know of, positively, in the fens was a small flock which visited Sutton Broad in 1828. Avocets used formerly to breed at Salthouse, near Holt, but are extinct there. The provincial name is 'Shoeing-Horn.'"

Mr. Yarrell states that "some years ago I was told that more than twenty specimens were received at Leadenhall Market for sale within one month, but now scarcely an example appears once a year; the last I heard of was in the spring of 1837."

After mentioning that Avocets are occasionally, but rarely, met with in the north of England or in Scotland, Mr. Selby says, "They assemble in small flocks, and frequent oozy and muddy shores, particularly those of the mouths of rivers, where they obtain a plentiful supply of food, consisting of small worms, marine insects, and young univalve and bivalve Mollusca. Their mode of feeding is by scooping, or in appearance beating the soft mud with their flat and upturned bill; and when thus engaged, they frequently wade up to their breasts in the pools left by the receding tide. They are never seen to swim voluntarily, although furnished with feet so extensively palmated as to constitute an admirable provision for enabling them to traverse the soft and yielding substance in which they find their food. Their legs also are formed for wading, being laterally compressed and thin, and thus offering the least possible resistance to their progress through the water. They are quick and active birds; and their flight, from the form and dimensions of their wings, is powerful and rapid. In spring they resort to those marine marshes which are only occasionally or partially covered by the tide, and select the driest part for the purpose of nidification. If disturbed at this season, particularly when the young are first excluded, they fly round in repeated circles, uttering at the same time without intermission their peculiar cry, which resembles the word *twit* twice repeated."

The eggs (which are said to be deposited in a small depression of the surface in the drier part of the marsh, either on the bare ground or on a small quantity of dry grass) are two and sometimes three in number, of an ochreous brown, spotted and speckled with black, some of the spots appearing as if beneath the surface of the shell; they are about two inches in length by one inch and a half in breadth. "Some specimens," says Mr. Hewitson, "are larger and more irregularly and closely covered with unequal blotches of colour, a good deal like those of the Peewit, from which they may always be distinguished by the greater quantity of ochreous yellow in the ground-colour."

The sexes present little, if any, difference in the colouring of their plumage; neither am I aware that the bird is subject to any seasonal change; having attained their full dress, they are ever after distinguished by their black and white livery.

The young, until they are clothed with feathers, closely resemble the young of the Summer Snipe (*Actitis hypoleucos*). It will be seen by the accompanying drawing, that at this early period their legs and toes are very similar to those of the adult in colour, except that they are tinged with green; they are, however, disproportionately large, and very tumid at the joints.

Crown, occiput, nape, back of the neck, scapularies, lesser wing-coverts, and primaries black; the remainder of the plumage pure white; beak black; irides reddish brown; legs and toes pale blue; webs dark brown; nails black.

The young at about three weeks old, when they are beginning to assume their stub-feathers, have a dark line before and behind the eye, and the upper surface of a pale creamy brown, crossed by irregular bars of dark brown, and a wash of rufous on the scapularies; some of the more elongated feathers are said to retain a reddish-brown tint on their ends until the autumn moult of the bird's second year of existence.

The Plate represents an adult and two young birds about three weeks old, of the natural size.



Gould, John. 1873. "Avocet, Recurvirostra avocetta [Pl. 52]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324009>.

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