
XXXII. *An Account of a new Species of Gull lately discovered on the West Coast of Greenland. By Joseph Sabine, Esq. F.R.S. and L.S. &c.*

Read December 15, 1818.

I RECEIVED in the last summer, by one of the whaling ships from Davis's Straits, a collection of birds, which had been made by my brother Captain Edward Sabine of the Royal Artillery, who accompanied the late expedition in search of a North-West passage. Among them were specimens of a Gull hitherto unknown and undescribed.

My brother's account of them was as follows: They were met with by him and killed on the 25th of July last on a group of three low rocky islands, each about a mile across, on the west coast of Greenland, twenty miles distant from the main land, in latitude $75^{\circ} 29'$ N., and longitude $60^{\circ} 9'$ W. They were associated in considerable numbers with the *Sterna Hirundo*, breeding on those islands, the nests of both birds being intermingled.

The male and female are nearly the same size, the latter is rather the smallest, but their plumage is exactly similar. The length of different specimens varies from twelve and a half to fourteen inches; the extent of the wings is about thirty-three inches, and the weight from six and a half to seven and a half ounces. The following is a full description. The bill one inch long, the base of both mandibles black as far as the angular projection of the lower mandible, the remainder yellow; the inside
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of the mouth bright vermilion. The irides dark, surrounded by a naked circle of the same colour as the inside of the mouth; a small white speck beneath the eye, scarcely perceptible. The whole of the head and upper part of the neck a very dark ash- or lead-colour; the remainder of the neck behind and before, as well as the breast and belly, pure white; a narrow black collar surrounds the neck at the meeting of the ash-colour and of the white. The back, scapulars and wing-coverts are ash-coloured, very much lighter than the head, but darker than the corresponding parts of the *Larus ridibundus*; the lower ends of the scapulars are tipped with white. The first five primary quill-feathers with black shafts, the whole outer webs of these black, the edge of their upper webs white to within an inch and a half of the tips, the white sometimes continued to the tip; the tips of the first and second of these quill-feathers in some white, in others black; the tips of the third, fourth and fifth white, giving the wing when closed a spotted appearance; the sixth primary quill-feather with a white shaft, having the web more or less black, but principally white, with sometimes a black spot near the end; the other primaries, the secondaries, and the tertials white; the whole under parts of the wings white. The wings extend an inch or more beyond the longest feather of the tail. The legs, feet, and claws black; the thigh feathered to within three-eighths of an inch of the knee; the length of the tarse one inch and a half; the length of the front toes about one inch, the inner one the shortest; the hinder toe small, and placed high. The tail with its upper and under coverts white; the tail-feathers twelve, the outer narrower than the centre ones; the outer tail-feathers about five inches long, the others in succession gradually shortening, so that the whole tail becomes forked by a diminution of nearly an inch.

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This is the description of the bird in its mature and breeding plumage: it is probable, that in its immature and winter state it resembles other black-headed Gulls, in being divested of the dark colour of its head.

This species lays two eggs on the bare ground, which it hatches the last week in July: the young when first hatched are mottled with brown and dull yellow. The eggs are an inch and a half in length, and of regular shape, not much pointed; the colour is olive, much blotched with brown.

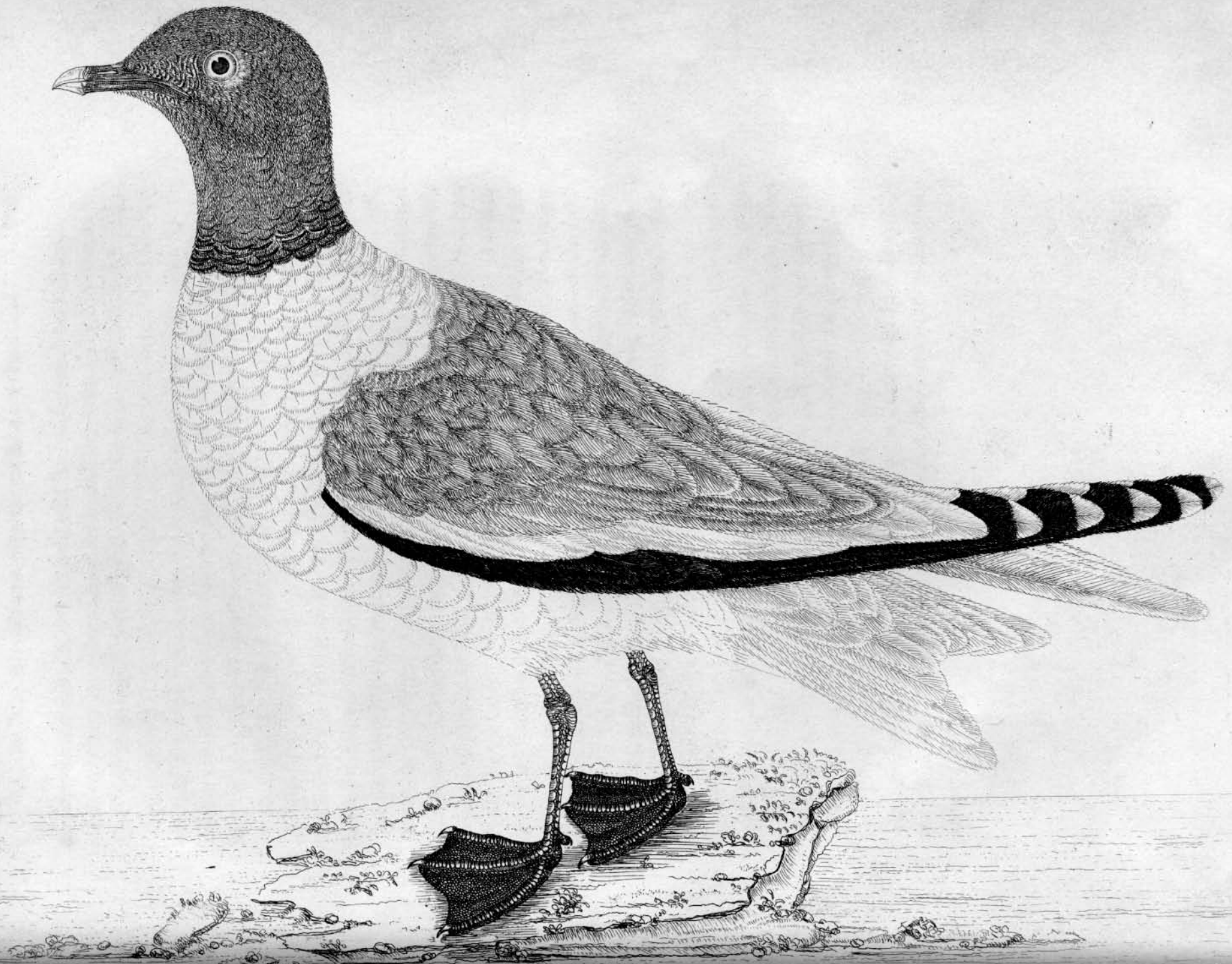
Little of course can be known of the manners and habits of these birds, for they were not seen in any other instance during the voyage through Davis's Straits and Baffin's Bay: the Esquimaux who accompanied the expedition as interpreter, and who possessed some knowledge of the native birds of South Greenland, had never observed them before. They flew with impetuosity towards persons approaching their nests and young; and when one bird of a pair was killed, its mate, though frequently fired at, continued on wing close to the spot where it lay. They get their food on the sea-beach, standing near the water's edge and picking up the marine insects which are cast on shore.

In conformity with the custom of affixing the name of the original discoverer to a new species, this bird has been called *Larus Sabini*. It will naturally fall into the division of the Gulls with black heads, of which there are several species, though most of them are but little known, and it may be distinguished by the following specific character:

L. albidus, capite nigricante, torque cervicali nigro, rostro basi nigro apice luteo, pedibus nigris, cauda forficata.

TAB. XXIX.

The forked tail of the bird will furnish ground, to those who are desirous of increasing the number of genera, to place this in a new
genus



Larus Sabini?

genus intermediate between *Larus* and *Sterna*. If every diversity of character is to become the foundation of a new genus, we shall have as many genera as there are species ; and when multiplied to excess, genera will cease to afford the facility of investigation to the examiner of species which they were designed to give. Between each individual species there will always be some difference of character beyond that of colour of plumage, which may be made to constitute what with some modern ornithologists is so improperly called a generic distinction. In the present instance the forkedness of the tail is very remarkable ; but if the want of an even termination of the tail-feathers is to constitute a generic distinction, then the *Larus tridactylus* must be removed from its present place and become a new genus ; for the tail of that bird, though slightly forked, is certainly uneven, and more distinctly so in the younger birds.

Since I received the specimens which I have described above, I have obtained one from Hudson's Bay of another black-headed Gull bearing a strong resemblance to the *Larus Sabini*, except that it has an even tail, and is without the dark collar round its neck. It is certainly an undescribed species, and must be placed in the genus *Larus*, although its bill approaches more to that of a Tern than that of any other Gull with which I am acquainted. Such instances, I think, satisfactorily prove that, if every existing species were before us in one view, we should find individuals so approaching each other in particular points, as to make it very difficult to determine where to place the boundaries of genera.