

BREEDING OF THE ROSEATE TERN IN  
IRELAND.

BY

GEORGE R. HUMPHREYS.

FOR a considerable number of years the Roseate Tern (*Sterna dougalli*) has been excluded from the list of Irish breeding birds. The late Mr. Ussher, in his report on the birds of Clare Island (*Proc. R. Irish Acad.*, Vol. XXXI., part 20, page 39), stated that the Roseate Tern had been rarely met with in Ireland for the last fifty years, but referred to a specimen shot in Clew Bay on the 3rd August, 1904, which would rather lead one to suppose that the species was breeding in Ireland at that time. The only other specimen I can find recorded is a male which was killed by striking Hook Tower Lighthouse, co. Wexford, on the 30th April, 1897. This bird is in Mr. Barrington's collection, having been sent him in the flesh.\*

It gives me much satisfaction to be in a position to put on record the nesting of the Roseate Tern in Ireland this year (1913). Unfortunately the time at my disposal was very limited, and my observations were confined to two visits to the colony, both of short duration.

During the third week in July, while visiting a breeding-colony of Common and Arctic Terns, I was attracted, almost immediately on my arrival, by the alarm-note of a tern which was flying around with the commoner species. This note was a harsh "crake," and quite different from the note of any tern I had previously heard. The bird kept uttering its harsh note the whole time it was flying overhead, and consequently I had not much difficulty in picking it out, when I at once noticed it had a decidedly lighter coloured plumage than the rest, and appeared of a more slender build. By the aid of a pair of prism glasses I examined it more closely, and now noticed the apparently black beak. Although the

\* *Birds of Ireland*, Ussher and Warren, p. 319.

inclination was to put the bird down, there and then, as a Roseate Tern, I was not quite satisfied that the beak was black, owing to the poor light due to an overcast sky. In a short time, when the clouds had lifted and the sun shone out I returned to the spot. The bird was again flying about, uttering its harsh "crake." Lying down on the ground, I waited for it to come within close range of the glasses. In a few minutes I was rewarded with a clear view of the bird as it flew past, and was able to satisfy myself that the beak was quite black except for a small portion at the base, which was orange-red. I now noticed distinct white lines extending down the primaries while the wings were expanded. During the whole time the tern was in the air it kept watching me very closely, and a peculiar twisting movement of the head attracted my attention. In about ten minutes the tern alighted on the ground within a few yards, when I saw that the tail-feathers extended well beyond the tips of the wings. I was perfectly satisfied now that this was a Roseate Tern, notwithstanding the fact that the rose-pink of the breast appeared to be absent. While watching this Tern I distinctly heard two others uttering a similar harsh "crake" as they flew around.

Soon after alighting, the Tern ran a short distance and was lost sight of. Creeping up quietly I had the pleasure of seeing it rise off an egg. On comparing this egg with those of the Common and Arctic Terns, I found it was of the distinct elongated type ascribed to the Roseate Tern, but remarked nothing peculiar as regards the colouring.

Two days after the discovery another visit was paid to the colony. I was now surprised to find a considerable number of Roseate Terns. After going over the ground carefully I came to the conclusion that there were about eighty Roseates in the colony, the great majority of them displaying the rose-pink on the under-parts. One bird exhibited a much larger portion of orange-red on its

beak than any of the others. I examined from twenty to twenty-five undoubted nests of this rare species. These were spread over five different sites, each accommodating a nesting-colony of Roseate Terns only. The largest number of nests in any one of these colonies was seven. The only exception to the foregoing was that of the Tern recorded on my first visit. This bird had its nest nearer the edge of the general colony than any of the other Roseates, and amongst the nests of the Common and Arctic Terns. Out of the total number of nests examined one contained two eggs; one a nestling and an egg just chipping; two or three single nestlings; and the remainder one egg each. In practically every instance where there were eggs, incubation was well advanced. It will be seen from this that the tendency was to hatch out one egg, although the full clutch is stated to consist of two eggs (*British Bird Book*, III., p. 66). It was also apparent that the Roseates were later breeders than the other species. I have mentioned "nests," but really no nesting-material was used by any of the birds.

As regards the colour of the eggs, there was little, if any, marked variation, the ground-colour being light stone, spotted, and speckled with shades of brown, with underlying blotches or spots of ashy-grey. Although in most cases the eggs were more elongated than those of the Common and Arctic Terns, it was difficult to find very much difference in some.

With regard to the nestlings, these were *quite distinct* from the nestlings of any of the other species. In the first place the upper-parts were streaked with dark on a buff ground-colour, whereas the dark markings on the nestlings of the Common and Arctic Terns are in the shape of blotches, and are not so freely distributed over the surface. There is, however, another most important distinguishing feature, namely the colour of the legs and feet; these were of a dark purplish-flesh, but there was a certain amount of transparency about this colouring giving it the appearance of pink tissue-paper smeared

with black ink. The nestlings examined by Mr. Mackay (*Auk* XIII., p. 47) which had black legs and feet, were no doubt more advanced in age than those examined by me, none of which were more than two days old. Dr. Louis Bureau says (*Ornis.*, Vol. XIV., p. 302) that the feet are blackish-brown during the first days, and afterwards black.

[Mr. G. R. Humphreys kindly showed me the nestlings of the Roseate Terns, and certainly the difference in the colour of the legs between this species and the Common and Arctic Terns of the same age was very remarkable.—R. M. BARRINGTON.]