

# BRITISH BIRDS

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## THE COLONY OF LITTLE TERNS AT SPURN POINT, YORKSHIRE.

BY

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(PLATE VII.)

I DO not propose to enter here into the peculiarities of the Little Tern (*Sterna minuta*) in general, but merely to give a few facts relative to the last Yorkshire breeding colony, which at present is, I am glad to say, in a flourishing condition. Spurn Point, at the mouth of the

continued ...

Humber, is an isolated spit of land, bordered on one side by the North Sea and on the other by the vast mud-flats of the Humber. It has been a happy hunting ground of mine for many years, in autumn and winter, wild-fowling along the river and coast and in the marshes, and spending nights in the lighthouse to view the enormous flocks of birds that pass on migration, and in the summer watching and photographing the Little Terns and other birds that breed there.

The Little Terns have bred there as long as living

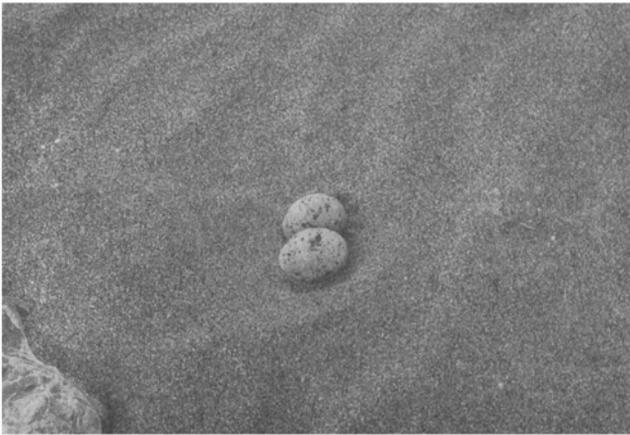


FIG. 1.—The Eggs in a Slight Scoop on Fine Sand.  
(*Photographed by Oxley Grabham.*)

memory goes back, and doubtless for a great many years before ; but a decade or so ago the birds were in danger of extinction owing to the raids made upon them by collectors, and also owing to the thoughtlessness of excursionists who used to pick up the eggs and throw them at one another for fun !! We did not mind anyone taking a clutch of eggs for scientific purposes, but this sort of thing was too much, and so a few of us, with Mr. W. H. St. Quintin, of Scampston, at our head (than whom no one living has done more to preserve the birds of our

county that needed protection), subscribed together and put on a watcher. We also received great assistance from Mr. Consett Hopper, Mr. J. W. Webster, the lighthouse keepers, and others who live at the Point. Things had got so bad that the colony had dwindled to about a dozen pairs, and these few were so harried and disturbed that they hardly ever came near their eggs during the daytime, and had to trust to the heat of the sun and the sand, only settling down when night fell.

The birds arrive at their breeding grounds almost



FIG. 2.—Newly-Hatched Young.  
(*Photographed by Oxley Grabham.*)

to a day at the end of April. In the cold spring of 1907 they did not appear till May 1st, the latest date that Robinson, our watcher, has ever known, and most of them leave at the end of August. They sit on their eggs for about seventeen days, and the young can toddle away as soon as they are out of the shell, which the old birds remove at once. I have noticed two types of chicks: one much yellower than the other. High tides often do much damage to the eggs, which are placed too near the

ordinary high-water mark. But Robinson, if he scents danger, moves the eggs a considerable distance inshore, and the birds easily find them. If the first clutch be destroyed the Little Terns always lay again, and occasionally even when they have hatched off one clutch they will lay again. Sometimes just at hatching time we have had two or three days of very cold rough weather, and then I have seen the poor little chicks, just out of the shell, huddling together under the lee of a big stone, an old boot, piece of wood, or any flotsam and jetsam



FIG. 3.—Little Tern calling to her Mate.  
(*Photographed by Oxley Grabham.*)

washed ashore by the sea that will afford them protection and at such times a few always succumb to exposure. But, as a rule, there is very little mortality amongst either the old or young birds, if the weather is propitious. They have few natural enemies here, and their eggs are very fertile—one seldom comes across a bad one. The young are fed largely on very small plaice about the size of a penny, sand-eels, sprats, etc. During 1908 between fifty and sixty pairs of birds bred here, and in spite of some very cold weather, just at hatching time, a good

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percentage of young arrived at maturity. There is nothing peculiar to this particular colony in the nests of eggs. The usual clutch is two, occasionally three, and rarely I have found four. Owing to the drifting sandstorms to which this coast is exposed, the eggs frequently get covered up to the depth of several inches, but the old birds almost invariably scratch them out again, and make all right.

In connection with our Spurn colony one further item of interest may be mentioned. The late John Cordeaux,



FIG. 4.—Little Tern on the Nest.  
(*Photographed by Oxley Grabham.*)

who took a very great interest in the birds of the Humber, told me that a good many years ago he sent some eggs of the Little Tern—as this species is wanting in those otherwise Tern-favoured islets—to the Farne Islands. They were put in the nests of the Common and Arctic Terns, but although they hatched out all right, and eventually went away with their foster-parents, they never returned to the scenes of their youth; and so the attempts to introduce this pretty little species into the Farnes resulted in failure.



LITTLE TERN ON THE NEST, SPURN, YORKSHIRE.

*(Photographed by Oxley Grabham.)*