NOTES ON BIRDS SEEN IN WINTER BETWEEN THE ENGLISH CHANNEL AND THE WEST INDIES.

BY

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The observations here recorded were made chiefly during a winter crossing of the Atlantic from Barbados via Madeira to Plymouth on the s.s. Crijnssen in February, 1939. In the period 1925—39 I crossed the Atlantic ten times, seven voyages being between the Channel and West Indies passing the Azores, and three between the Channel and Dutch Guiana or Barbados calling at Madeira. All were on ships not exceeding 7,500 tons, and the fastest had a speed of about 15 knots. Relevant notes from these other voyages have been included in this paper. Transects of the Azores route were made by the Nicholsons (1931), and Philipson (1930) has contributed notes on it, but little seems to have been written on the eastern half of the Madeira route; the western part is well covered by Jespersen (1930). All the many crossings of Wynne-Edwards (1935) and Rankin and Duffey (1948) followed more northern routes than mine, but their papers contain the fullest and most up-to-date accounts of the distribution and habits of birds in the North Atlantic.

GANNET (Sula bassana).

On February 22nd, 1939, two adult Gannets flying north overtook and passed the ship in the Bay of Biscay (45° N., 8° W.) a little before noon. This was about 80 miles from the nearest land, the north-west corner of Spain. On 23rd, a fine day with a strong N.W. wind, Ushant was passed and the Channel entered at 6 a.m. From 10 a.m. onwards Gannets were seen, and by the early afternoon they had become frequent with up to four in sight at a time. They were flying low with long glides, mostly between 15 and 50 feet above the water, an occasional bird being higher. Near the Eddystone Lighthouse they became abundant, some being constantly in sight flying singly and in strings of three to six very fast and low, often almost skimming the waves. A few were soaring at a great height. None were seen fishing all day. On other voyages I have seen Gannets only in ones and twos, never in a concentration such as this. On this day all that could be recognized were adult with only one exception.

SHEARWATERS AND PETRELS.

On only one of six winter crossings were shearwaters seen, and then only two individuals: a large one, too big for a Manx Shearwater (Puffinus puffinus), about 100 miles west of the Lizard on January 17th, 1930; and a probable Manx Shearwater (a species I know well) north-east of the Azores a few days earlier. Neither was seen satisfactorily for identification. The large one was, perhaps, a Great Shearwater (Puffinus gravis), the species most likely to be seen off the English Channel at that time of year:
according to *The Handbook* it is seen in British waters "occasionally Dec. and Jan." The only storm-petrel seen in winter was a Leach's Fork-tailed Petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*) which came on board at night on January 18th, 1934 (noon position next day 16.57° N., 55.04° W.). No Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*) were seen on any of my West Indies voyages. In the second week of October, 1925, my only autumn crossing, large shearwaters and storm-petrels were both numerous all the way from the Channel approaches to the Azores, but unfortunately none were definitely identified. Shearwaters and storm-petrels were both more numerous than the Nicholsons (1931) found them in this area in October, 1928.

**Black-headed Gull** (*Larus ridibundus*).

There were twenty or so Black-headed Gulls in Funchal harbour, Madeira, on February 19th, 1939, only one of them being adult: it was in winter plumage.

**Herring-Gull** (*Larus argentatus*).

Herring-Gulls were present in large numbers at Funchal, Madeira, on February 19th, 1939. They were all dark-mantled and yellow-legged, and I noted that the colour of the mantle was intermediate between that of *Larus a. argentatus* and *Larus fuscus graellsii*. The ship sailed at 1 p.m., and many followed till dusk, but there were none next morning. All were undoubtedly *atlantis*.

We were well into the English Channel on February 23rd before Herring-Gulls were seen again. It has been my experience that they are usually abundant in the Channel, and I have seen a few beyond on several occasions within 100 miles of the entrance.

**Lesser Black-backed Gull** (*Larus fuscus*).

In the Bay of Biscay (noon position 45° N., 8° W.) on February 22nd, 1939, Lesser Blacked-backed Gulls were numerous all day, up to a dozen being in sight at a time. In the evening when we were fully 150 miles from the nearest land one or two were still with the ship. No immature birds were noted. It seems probable that their presence in considerable numbers over so great an area was due to their being on migration. The weather was rough, the wind being S.W. to W.

The next morning in the Channel two were seen early with some Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*), and they became numerous later, associated with a few Herring-Gulls. After land was sighted at 11.30 a.m., the Lesser Blackbacks soon disappeared and Herring-Gulls increased. In crossing the Channel from Ushant to Plymouth there were three very definite zones, the outer dominated by Kittiwakes, the middle by Lesser Blackbacks, and the inner by Herring-Gulls.

These observations support Wynne-Edwards's (1935) statement that the Lesser Blackback frequents the offshore zone more than any other species of *Larus* occurring in the North Atlantic. On other voyages I have not found this to be the case, my experience
being that Herring-Gulls and Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*) are both consistently seen well away from land, in summer as well as in winter. It may be, therefore, that it is mainly when migrating that Lesser Blackbacks frequent the offshore zone.

**Kittiwake** (*Rissa tridactyla*).

A solitary adult Kittiwake was seen on February 17th, 1939, in 30° N., 26° W., about 500 miles west of Madeira. The next day one was with the ship all day, and in the evening was joined by another. On the 20th (noon position 36° N., 15° W.) an adult and a “tarrock” were in sight most of the morning, but seemed to have been left behind before noon. One adult was seen early in the afternoon, and from the late afternoon till dusk there were six, adults and immature birds, following the ship. At 9 a.m. next morning more than a dozen were noted, and six or more remained with us all day. I noted that the adults were in winter plumage. On the 22nd in the Bay of Biscay none were seen till the afternoon, when at first there were two; in the evening there were more than a dozen. In the Channel on the 23rd there were about 20 for the first half of the morning, and some continued to follow us in the zone where Lesser Black-backed Gulls were the most abundant species, and for half an hour or so after land was in sight. One was still with the ship to within a few miles of Plymouth, long after all the Lesser Black-backs had been left behind.

In January, 1930, I travelled from the West Indies to the Channel by much the same route as E. M. Nicholson (Nicholson and Nicholson, 1931) did about three weeks before. He noted the first Kittiwake at 35°39' N., 37°06' W. On January 8th three appeared in 25° N., 52° W., and from then onwards Kittiwakes followed the ship in gradually increasing numbers, and had become very numerous before we reached the Azores: a few were still with us in the Channel on the 18th. On a westward voyage in January, 1933, none followed beyond where Nicholson noted his first in his transect of December, 1929. The only record I can find of a Kittiwake farther to the south and west than the three I saw on January 8th, 1930, is of an immature bird seen by Alexander (1927) off the east coast of Jamaica in March, 1926. Jespersen (1930) has, however, shown that they range in small numbers to the Tropic of Cancer, his most southerly record being 23° N., 42° W., and mine only extends his group of records in the Sargasso sea a little on the south-west side.

**Great Skua** (*Stercorarius skua*).

Two Great Skuas were seen at 9 a.m. on February 20th, 1939, (noon position 36° N., 15° W.), and a little later there were four following the ship: they were present until midday. They flew with steady wing-beats and occasional glides, mostly between about 30 and 80 feet above the water, but also just skimming the surface. They kept up with the ship easily, and had time to settle fairly frequently on the water. They did not take any notice of two Kittiwakes which were also following the ship most of the morning.
The next day (noon position 41° N., 12° W.) off the coast of Portugal one was seen at 9 a.m. and one early in the afternoon; they were probably different birds. On the 22nd, in the Bay of Biscay, one was seen at midday and in the early afternoon, and in the evening there were probably three, though only one was in sight at a time. In the three days at least 8 and probably 10 different individuals were seen, which seems to indicate a rather less sparse population in this area than in most of their wide range in the North Atlantic. I have not seen them elsewhere, but I saw Great Skuas again off the coast of Portugal in February, 1945, when I was travelling on a ship in convoy. Owing to war-time restrictions the precise locality is not known.

REFERENCES.