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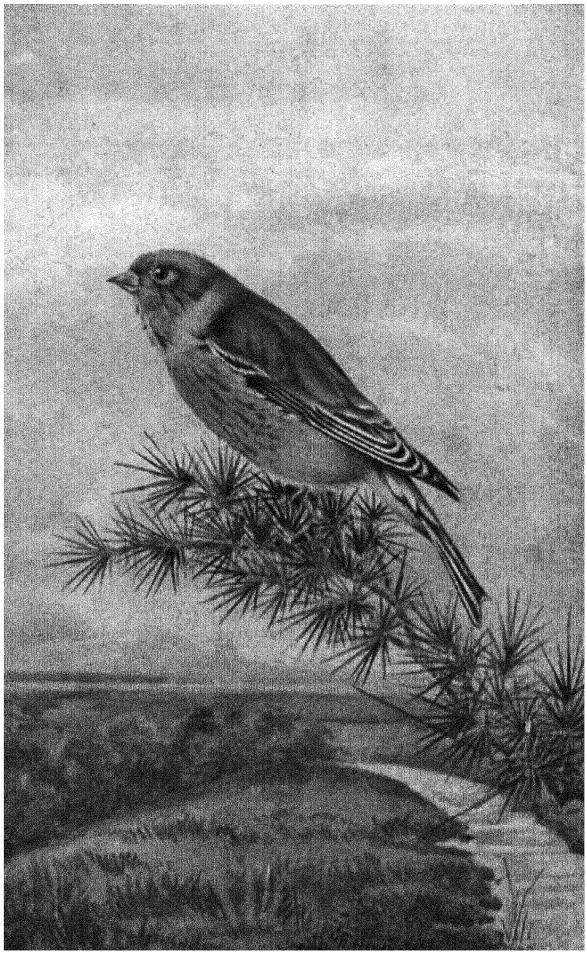
Title Let's Watch the Birds

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LET'S WATCH THE BIRDS!

Mr. Westell, for many years Curator of the Letchworth Museum and a well-known authority on bird life, brings to this book his vast experience of the observation of each and every species of bird which lives in Great Britain or visits our shores as a migrant. The *why*, *how*, and *where* of bird-watching are outlined in preliminary chapters; then the author discusses the problem of bird flight, the development of plumage, the construction of nests, and the shapes and colours of eggs. Thereafter the detailed notes relating to each bird are grouped under its usual habitat—mountain and moorland, field and meadow, garden and park, hedgerow and lane, seashore and lake and river, and finally the woodland.

An index facilitates ready reference for those who follow the author's lure into this fascinating study or pastime.



THE BROWN LINNET

LET'S WATCH THE BIRDS!

by

W. PERCIVAL WESTELL

F.L.S., F.R.S.A., F.S.A.SCOT.

Late Member of the British Ornithologists Union



Illustrated with Coloured Frontispiece and Photographic Field and Museum Studies; also with One Hundred and Ninety-two Line Drawings

by

DORIS MEYER AND MARY BROOKS

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TO

MY FRIEND

RICHARD PERRY

WHO MADE HIS INDELIBLE MARK

AS A FAITHFUL DELINEATOR OF WILD BIRD LIFE

"AT THE TURN OF THE TIDE"

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LET'S WATCH THE BIRDS!

CHAPTER I

WHY GO BIRD-WATCHING?

IN an age which probably more than any other calls for some respite from the workaday world, and relaxation for both mind and body, there is good reason to-day for the cultivation and prosecution of a pure and sensible hobby. As Sir Ray Lankester has written: "'The study of animals can never lose its special hold on the human mind, due to the animal's direct appeal to man, its saying, as it were: 'You are one of us, you know. We are close to you—very close to you: if you can understand my nature, my mechanism and origin—Snail, Robin, Squirrel, whichever I am—you will be near to understanding man's nature, mechanism, and origin —near to understanding—*yourself*.'"

It has been well said that "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her," and if, as I believe after a lifetime spent in the bloodless pursuit of wild life, this is true, then I can unhesitatingly commend the fascinating study of bird life.

True, there are many other branches in the great world of life to which attention might be profitably directed. There are those whose interest is mainly

awakened and stimulated by a knowledge of wild flowers, others delight in the wonders of the seashore, or the hidden marvels of a wayside pond. Others again—fewer in number, it is true—revel in the book of the rocks (geology), or intensive research in the domain of insect life.

Some may be merely collectors—of actual objects rather than notes, photographs, and pictures—but with these kindred spirits we are not concerned in this volume, our main theme being to present to the reader *living* representations of our feathered population.

As a matter of fact birds are universal favourites, and it is not necessary to recommend their winning ways, their wonderful colour and adornment, their voices, their remarkable avine architecture, their solicitude for and devotion to their young, their various methods of flight and migration movements, and last, but by no means least, their economic importance in the great scale of being.

It has fallen to my lot for the past half-century to be brought into intimate contact with all sorts and conditions of people, both young and old, as a result of the numerous books that have appeared with my name on the title page, of popular lectures up and down the country, and as curator for over a quarter of a century of a provincial museum. This ripe and varied experience has taught me many useful lessons, the most permanent of which is the general interest displayed in the bird life of our island home.

With young people the love of birds is, I find, more usually directed to nest-hunting and collecting, rather than watching and listening to them, but

even this instinct of personal possession disappears in many cases, and I have witnessed with much satisfaction several boys who, in later life, have discarded collecting and substituted a field-glass and notebook, and even a home-made camera. More than one has developed into a real naturalist, and an acknowledged authority in some branch of natural science. This is all to the good, especially in these days when any town or city worthy of the name has its regional museum where properly arranged collections of birds and eggs may be seen and studied to advantage.

Urban development—or the war of the town upon the country—has in too many places sadly depleted suitable dwelling-places for many of our bird friends, and several species are not nearly as familiar in their old haunts as when I was a boy. This being so, it behoves all those whose delight it is to watch birds to afford them every protection, especially when it is recognized how useful most of them are in ridding us of injurious insect and weed pests, and thus performing beneficial work in the economy of Nature.

It has been said with truth that " in spite of war, the recurring pageantry of the lanes, the woods, and the hedgerows will not fail, and it is hard to remember that sometimes in the stress of things." Such a truism reminds us to preserve as far as possible our lanes and woods and hedgerows, for, as long as these remain, birds will assuredly stay to cheer us with their happy presence and winning ways. Britain's countryside *must* surely be preserved for posterity, and its feathered life protected.

If I now elaborate a few of the chief reasons

why an invitation is extended to the reader to go bird-watching, it must not be presumed that the list is by any means exhausted, as different observers and listeners (natural diversity of opinion is well illustrated in discussions about the wireless programmes, for instance) see and hear things from entirely different angles.

The songs of birds are, to those possessed of a musical ear, one of the greatest delights of country and even town life, and I shall extend this phase of bird study in the next chapter. Here let it be remarked that most of our song birds are plainly attired, and that fact alone tells us the reason why they sing, *i.e.* to secure a mate. Birds which have fine colours and adornments have no cause to possess good voices, as courtship is carried out by what is called " display " (*e.g.* the Ruff). Other birds—the Pheasant is one—resort to combat like the chivalrous knights of old.

Opinions differ a great deal as to the appeal a certain bird's song makes to the listener. The Blackbird is considered by some people the successful rival of the Nightingale. Others rank the Blackcap as a better songster than his cousin, the Garden Warbler, but these individual comparisons and tastes are somewhat misleading. I myself happen to prefer the Garden Warbler's bubbling melody, but much depends on the condition in which one finds oneself when listening to a feathered chorister, and allowance must at all times be made for this.

Do not let it be thought that I underrate the Blackcap's dulcet madrigal, or the amazing repertoire some of these birds present to listening ears, for I have heard one Blackcap utter the more or less

complete songs of thirteen species of British birds one after the other! At times, then, this sober-clad Warbler with the black crown assumes the character of a mimic or mocking bird, but its more usual, though little varied song, is of itself a joy to listen to. I heard one this very day on its arrival from overseas, and its notes were so rich and plaintive that, as it reached my ear, it was reminiscent of a composer at the piano letting loose the mainspring of his soul rather than of notes produced at will by his fingers as they wandered idly over the high-pitched keys. In a word, it is the way in which we ourselves interpret these bird voices which controls the appeal they make to our finer senses, and it must be left to the individual tastes of the listener to sort out his or her own favourites.

Then there is the wonder of flight and other movements on the part of these feathered bipeds, and it is their variety of motion that helps to make bird-watching such a fascinating pastime. Some birds hover (the Kestrel Hawk), some swoop (the Sparrow Hawk), some walk (the Skylark), some hop, walk, and run (the Song Thrush), the trim and elegant Wagtail walks and runs, but never hops, and others career through the air at breakneck speed (the Swift).

Some have a strong and well-sustained flight (Wild Geese), others have an undulating, jerky flight (the Yellow Bunting), others, like the Swallow, skim through the air, and are able to take off and plane down, to rise and fall with ease and facility. An evacuated city boy unaccustomed to birds told the story of one he had seen (he thought it was a Sparrow!) which, he said, "couldn't get up and

couldn't get down," the bird he had seen being a Skylark hovering just above the ground.

Another interesting phase of bird-watching is to inquire how these creatures are " built up." That is to say, to understand the connection between shape and function in different kinds of bird. This connection has been codified in the so-called law of co-relation of which the French naturalist, Cuvier, was such a master. Thus, a wader (the Redshank and Snipe) has long legs and a long beak, and narrow tapering body. Hawks and Owls have strong hooked beaks and sharp talons. Ducks have spoon-shape beaks and webbed feet. Insect-eating birds (the Spotted Flycatcher) have short, sharp beaks, whereas a seed-eater (the Bullfinch) has a strong, parrot-like beak. So, too, has the pea-loving Hawfinch. Perching birds have three toes in front and one behind, admirably suited for clasping a twig, whereas Woodpeckers have two toes in front and two behind. These aid them in their gymnastics in the tree-tops. Wading birds and other ground-dwellers (the Lapwing) have three toes in front, spread out flat, and merely a stump behind. These few instances will convince the reader of the interest created by this branch of avian study, and set him on the road of inquiry on his own account.

There now arises the question as to how two birds can make up their " minds " to pair and live together even for a brief season. Their great business in life is to rear a family and carry on their race, and this, as everyone knows, they perform with great solicitude and parental care. Yet some birds (the Raven and birds of prey) *pair for life*, which seems a remarkable achievement. What means of com-

munication they have with one another is beyond mortal ken. We human beings are quite incapable of entering into their joys and sorrows, their triumphs and defeats, but few things in birdland are left to chance and caprice, even if one merely considers movements in everyday life. At the moment of writing a pair of Blackbirds have a nest containing three callow young ones in my own garden, and I am quite convinced that these are the same birds who built their family nursery with me the previous year. Indeed this spring (1941) they have actually used their old nest as the foundation for the new home. I am convinced also that the sooty male and his consort are conscious of protection, and I seem to interpret the handsome male's movements as conveying to me by his proud mien the successful rearing of another family within my little plot. Watching birds in one's own garden is a great joy, and to be able to recognize friend from foe is an additional asset.

Of the making of a bird's nest much might be written; of the hidden wonder of its construction there is no doubt. The tragedy is that such remarkable industry on the part of two birds should so often be disregarded, for nest-robbing still takes place. Every twig, root, feather, strand of hair, piece of grass, moss, or lichen, has to be discovered and carried separately to the site. In the nest of a Long-tailed Tit, for instance, I have myself counted over two thousand feathers, each meaning a separate journey.

Of the variety of material and construction exhibited even in the nests of our own British birds little need be related, for those of several species

are quite well known. No two species build a similar abode, although to distinguish between those of the Hedge Accentor and Greenfinch, Chaffinch and Goldfinch, may puzzle the beginner in bird-study. To watch a pair of birds building a nest is an entrancing sight, and when it is necessary to get a move on, speed is employed, as I can personally testify. Thus, when a late spring had delayed the making of a home, I knew a pair of Thrushes who began and completed their plastered cradle in the short space of forty-eight hours.

Further notes respecting this entrancing subject of birds' nests will be enlarged upon later in my story, and it must suffice to say that, to seek for and watch the development of these "homes made without hands," and the life of their subsequent tenants, is one of the potent reasons why I advise those smitten with a desire to watch birds to specialize in this branch of study.

Of the wonders of migration, about which we have learnt so much since the days of Gilbert White of Selborne, the observant and patient parson-recorder of birds and their winning ways, much might be written. Nowadays those of us who have watched birds for the best part of a lifetime are aware not only of the routes followed by our summer and winter visitors, such as the Cuckoo and Field-fare respectively, and of the countries from which they come and to which they unfailingly return, but from many quarters testimony is forthcoming that the same birds—barring accident or death—return to the same haunt, even to the same bush (the Nightingale), barn, cliff, or house (the House Martin, Swallow, and Swift) each year.

The bird's sense of direction and location is something of which we ourselves are not cognizant, and an intensive survey of the marvels and mysteries of bird-travel will amply repay the diligent inquirer.



Chapter II

HOW TO WATCH THE BIRDS

Two essentials are necessary for watching birds. They are the cultivation of the power of eye and of the ear.

Many birds move quickly—they are for the most part restless creatures—and several kinds (the Warblers in particular) are shy, and hide their dapper bodies whenever danger threatens. When the observer cannot get sight of a bird he may often hear it, but full use of this faculty requires constant use and patient training.

During a bird-watching expedition it is often only possible to see birds a long way off, or to catch a fleeting glimpse of them. In such cases, and also to bring them within closer range and thus see them in detail, the eye should be aided by a reliable pair of field-glasses. There are many makes, but I recommend a good British binocular having a magnification of about eight diameters. This means that an object eight miles distant will appear as if only one mile away, or to put it another way, an object one foot high would appear as large as one eight feet high without the glass. Eschew the cheap glass with low light value, as it may have inferior casing that admits damp or dust, and possess colour faults such as rainbow effect on the outlines of the

objects viewed. Better procure a good second-hand glass than a cheap new one, and specks and scratches on the lenses need not deter you from buying, as these are unlikely to affect the vision.

If a camera is added to the bird-watcher's outfit, rich will be his reward, for no greater interest and enjoyment can be obtained than by this pursuit. To acquire success in bird-photography needs much patience and some ingenuity, but is amply compensated for, and this not only by the pictures secured; for by waiting and watching, many notes may be made which would not otherwise be obtained. A Reflex Camera is recommended, on which a telephoto lens can be used; with this addition the difficulty of getting close enough to the subject to secure a satisfactory picture is overcome.

When the bird-watcher is so inclined, a note- and sketch-book can be added. Notes made on the spot are, as has been said, worth a cartload of recollection, and those made when out rambling should be elaborated and written up neatly at home in a diary or journal. By keeping these books comparisons may be made year by year of the dates of appearance of various birds, first nests and eggs, and many other details, and they are also likely to prove useful to kindred observers.

Any unusual happenings in the bird world should, of course, receive special attention and record, and what at the time may appear of no real importance may prove of value afterwards. Such an experience, for example, as occurred to my friend Mr. Edward T. Crosoer, when he was watching a Herring Gull in Cornwall, may here be cited, as it shows patient observance and acquired interest.

The date was 11th February, and in a grass field near a cliff edge my friend espied a Herring Gull. The bird was on a small dried patch of cow-dung about the size of one's open hand. The Gull was "dancing," alternately stamping with either foot as if treading grapes in a wine-press, or dough in a macaroni trough. The feet were directed *inwards*, so that either appeared to occupy the exact spot that the other had just vacated.

Occasionally the Gull very slowly gyrated on the same spot, and for several minutes the performance continued without variation, except that, from time to time, the bird stabbed its beak down to the grass, apparently picking up slugs or worms. To do this it did not move its feet from the same spot, and one can only deduce that the "dancing" was for the purpose of inducing slugs or other creatures to come into view. Thrushes are believed to strike the ground on lawns in order to attract worms to the surface, and it may be that the Herring Gull was doing something on similar lines.

Some birds are tamer and more confiding than others, and much more approachable. The Dotterel is one of these friendly species, and the one shown in Plate I., a remarkable photo of this rare bird taken by Mr. Eric Hosking, was so tame that, when sitting on its eggs, the parent bird permitted itself to be stroked!

Quietness is essential when watching and listening to birds, and one should be alone, or at most with a well-chosen companion who is also a kindred spirit. The motto to adopt is: "See, and yet not be seen," and a friendly tree-trunk is a capital hiding-place.

Beyond this work in the fields a few good books are necessary, and if one can be secured having reliable coloured plates, so much the better. There are now several books to be obtained at a moderate outlay likely to prove useful and interesting, and it is hoped that this particular volume will not be considered among the least of these.

Descriptions of birds are often difficult to follow by themselves, and illustrations of their form and size will prove the beginner's sheet-anchor. In addition, constant visits should be paid to the bird collections in one of our national or provincial museums, so as to become intimately acquainted with the size, form, colour, and markings of these feathered folk. I feel constrained, however—and this in spite of my position as curator of a museum with an important collection of birds under my charge—to utter a word of warning, and it is this: no matter how well a dead bird may be preserved and "set up," the moment that life is at an end it loses the animation indelibly associated with these tenants of the wild. A preserved Kingfisher, for instance, is more or less a caricature of the living jewel as it dashes down-stream like a feathered meteor, or plunges headlong into the water with, on its emergence, a silvery fish dangling from its bayonet-like beak.

If collectors and others persist in killing birds, let us preserve their remains by all means for visitors to our museums to see who are less favourably situated than ourselves for watching them in their natural haunts, as living and, let us hope, as happy creatures. It is far better to preserve the body of an interesting bird than to consign it to the dust-

bin or refuse heap, but no matter how good the taxidermy may be, once the life has left the animate form much of its attractiveness disappears.

By way of offering advice as to how best to watch birds beyond what has already been stated in general terms, the following notes may be offered.

As one comes to study certain kinds of birds they will be found to possess typical characteristics which are bound to assert themselves. Thus, the Spotted Flycatcher, which is an unobtrusive brown bird unlikely to attract special notice, may be identified by the haunt it frequents, how it perches, what position it assumes, and what it is doing when observed. A dead tree-branch, post, or rail—very often in a shadowed position—is a favourite watch-tower for this insectivorous summer visitor, and in such a place it may be seen in a statuesque attitude with arched back. Then, suddenly, the bird darts from its watch-tower, hovers momentarily in the air, snatches at and captures an insect on the wing, there is a distinct snap of the sharp beak, and the clever aeronaut returns to its "look-out" with its capture.

The Redstart, although a much more highly coloured bird with flame-coloured tail-feathers which are well displayed on alighting, chooses retreats similar to those of the Flycatcher, but there can be no confusion between the two species.

Sometimes the Chaffinch, wishing perhaps that he had been born a Flycatcher, tries to emulate the latter's clever antics in mid-air, but fails miserably, as I have more than once witnessed. The Finch, on one occasion, being unused to acrobatics without any means of support, left its resting-place, flew into the

air, turned a series of somersaults, and landed on Mother Earth a sadder but wiser creature! Fly-catching in the air was not its forte.

Questions that the outdoor observer might with advantage ask himself when watching a bird are: Does it hop? Does it shuffle? Does it walk? Does it wade? Does it hover? Can it swim? Of those which swim, certain kinds may be known by their diving for food, whilst others obtain it on the surface.

If, then, a bird hops it may quite well be one of the Finches. If it shuffles, it may prove to be that Mark Tapley among birds, the homely Hedge Accentor, for I still refuse to call this soft-billed bird a Sparrow!

If a bird walks and runs it is likely to be a Skylark, or Pied Wagtail, and if it is wading in pools and creeks, or on the mud-flats, it is almost sure to be one of the many kinds of waders, such as the Dunlin, Redshank, and Ringed Plover, that are so familiar on various parts of the coast.

Some birds adopt various ruses for protection. Thus the rare Stone Curlew runs and squats, rather than takes to wing. When it has squatted the bird can only with difficulty be located, and the field-glass must come into play. Even a young Stone Curlew will crouch and skulk during the first few hours of its life, as also will a young Partridge or Peewit.

Some birds thrust themselves upon one's attention; of this type well-known garden birds are apt examples, such as the friendly Blackbird, Redbreast, and Thrush. Yet birds closely related to each other will sometimes exhibit entirely different characteristics. Thus, the Lesser Whitethroat is at

most times a veritable feathered scout; it can be heard close at hand, and yet not be seen as it threads its way among the maze of branches in a bramble bush. Nevertheless its close relative, the Greater Whitethroat, comes into the open, dances as on an unseen wire over the hedgerow, and pours out a vehement scratchy song as if intolerant of interruption.

The charming Titmice family all seem to have discovered the secret of perpetual motion, for they are rarely still; one has only to be reminded of the antics of the Blue and Great Tits as they hang upside down on pieces of fat, a string of peanuts, or a suspended coconut put up in the garden.

Town dwellers and those with small gardens would do well, as so many do, to feed the birds in hard weather. This act is not only charitable, but it enables the observer to watch these feathered visitors at close quarters. Even quite young children to-day are learning how to distinguish the common birds, and one boy known to me, who is only five years old, politely informed his parent that the bird he (the boy) had observed on the bird-table outside the living-room window *must* be a Marsh Tit, and not a Coal Tit, as it had *not* got a white patch at the back of the black head!

Early spring is the great time for the bird-lover to be on the prowl, for it is then that our summer migrants—Chiff-Chaff, Cuckoo, Nightingale, and Swallow—appear, and one hardly knows which way to turn for fear of missing a new arrival.

The best way to watch and know birds is, however, to keep it up all the year round, as there are not only summer visitors, but winter visitors too.

When trees and bushes are leafless many birds may be seen to greater advantage than when they are hidden from view by summer's wealth of foliage, and, in addition, many birds—especially sea birds, waders, and their kin—have an entirely different summer and winter plumage. This is so distinct in some cases (such as that of the Dunlin) that the tyro might well be excused if at first he believed he had seen two distinct species.



Chapter III

WHERE TO WATCH THE BIRDS

Birds turn up in such unexpected places, because of weather and other conditions, that, except in the case of birds of prey and other species which keep more or less to a restricted haunt, it is difficult to assign any given habitat to many of them. Possessed of such remarkable power of flight, a feathered traveller is able to change its quarters at will; migratory birds, of course, traverse vast distances over land and sea.

Then, too, there are those which may be reasonably looked for in more than one usual haunt. Thus, the Blackbird and Thrush may be met with in several different places, such as the field, garden, hedgerow, meadow, park, and wood. Some latitude must therefore be allowed in the Chapters that follow; it must be admitted that, in some instances, the arrangement of birds in particular haunts is arbitrary.

Many times when compiling a census of birds—even in the restricted area of a small parish—an observer may fail to see or hear several species which should have been listed during a ramble. Yet, before this field work is completed, a Martin, Swift, or Swallow may be seen in the air far away from its accustomed haunt.



[*Photograph : Eric J. Hosking.*

Dotterel approaching nest

Then, too, many birds fly overhead across the area, journeying from one place to another, and these should all be noted.

Even by the brink of a wayside pond, or seductive stream where the water is shallow, the outdoor observer may watch several kinds of birds which visit such a place to drink and bathe, and on a hot summer day it is a capital idea to sit quietly down to witness the arrival and departure of feathered visitors.

Generally speaking, however, the practised bird-watcher is *au fait* with the kinds of birds likely to be seen in a given haunt; yet one of the joys of noticing birds is the unexpected happenings that add a spice of novelty to the quest. Thus, one day in my garden, I saw with delight a Black Redstart hopping about quite unconcernedly as if in its chosen retreat. This was a winter visitor from overseas, and enabled me to add a most unusual species to my list of garden birds.

Hard weather drives sea and coastal birds inland, as those who have observed the large flocks of Gulls will have noticed, and even such a rare bird as the Osprey (probably an autumn visitor from Norway) was recently brought to me in the flesh; in the month of July a Manx Shearwater was seen waddling contentedly in the main street of a Hertfordshire village, far from its rightful abode.

Accidents occur to birds when voyaging through the air, and a Little Grebe came to grief by colliding with a building, and was found exhausted on a neighbour's doorstep. Others fly against telegraph and telephone wires, or against the wires of wireless poles and of lighthouses, yet the Swallow finds these

wires a favourite perching place, and twitters pleasantly for an hour at a stretch when thus situated.

Naturally enough the places where one can go bird-watching are largely controlled by the observer's opportunities for moving beyond his own district. If such opportunities are lacking, or few and far between, he must be content with a restricted area. In a town there will probably be a public park near at hand, with trees and shrubs that make excellent cover for birds, and it is more than likely there is a sheet of water where various kinds of fowl—both domestic and wild—can be seen to advantage. Frequent visits should be paid to such a place, as these will be amply repaid.

If one lives *in* the country, or by the sea, or in broadland or fenland, bird observation can be very extensive, and one's spare time will be profitably occupied. But visits can be paid *to* the country, and a choice made as to the kind of place most likely to prove suitable. If, for instance, the inquirer is particularly interested in sea birds, then a part of our coast where there are cliffs, or one of the numerous islands, should be chosen, as in such a haunt Guillemots, Gulls, Puffins, and Razorbills may be met with in large numbers.

If wading birds are sought after, then a damp heath or moor, or mud-banks by a lake or the sea, are favourite places for those long-beaked and long-legged species. In winter huge flocks of birds assemble to feed on marine creatures when the tide is out, and on the Norfolk coast, at Wells-next-the-Sea, I remember seeing one bleak December morning just after dawn a large congregation of Pink-footed Geese which I estimated to be at least three thousand strong.

If the quest is for woodland birds, such as Tree Creepers, Jays, Nuthatches, Woodpeckers, and Wood Pigeons, then field-glasses are specially valuable as the foliage and boles and branches of the trees hide them from view, and one may only get a passing glimpse of a tree-dwelling rover. If there is good undergrowth in the selected wood, or if clearings contain bushes and shrubs, many of the smaller birds will there have found a harbour of refuge.

The shy Warblers are very quiet in their movements, and one has to be constantly on the look-out for the slightest quiver of a twig, branch, or even a leaf; these soberly clad birds take cover in a remarkable way so as to successfully hide their frail bodies from view among the foliage.

On the downs and heaths one may expect to see the Meadow Pipit, Skylark, and Wheatear, and from the summit of one of our chalk hills, high in the world, one is almost sure to see a Kestrel Hawk poised in the air on almost motionless wings. As it hovers—hence the name Windhover—this bird holds its head downwards pointing towards the earth, whilst the tail is spread fanwise to act as a balance and rudder. Possessed of acute sight, the Kestrel thus searches for mouse or shrew, and having spotted its prey, pounces down and secures a meal.

On stretches of moorland one may expect to locate among other birds, the Ring Ouzel—like a Blackbird with a white crescent across the throat—the Curlew, Grouse, Snipe, and Twite. Some birds only dwell on the moors in the summer—the Curlew is one of these—and must be sought for elsewhere at other times.

In fields and meadows one may still hear the

"rusty" call of the Corncrake, or Landrail, as it threads its way through the herbage, but now that machinery is so largely used by farmers, and the hay harvest cut and gathered so much more quickly than in the days of hand-reaping, the numbers of the Corncrake are in many districts sadly diminished. This species very rarely takes to flight, although migratory, and its monotonous "kray-kray" alone betrays its presence.

There will be Lapwings and Partridges in this haunt, too, and, of course, the Skylark. If the land has been newly ploughed, Jackdaws, Rooks, and Starlings are bound to attract attention, and if it is hard weather, companies of Gulls will be seen, their silvery-white plumage contrasting pleasantly with the rich brown earth.

On high ground, among the hills and mountains of Scotland, Wales, and elsewhere, the larger birds of prey—such as the Buzzard, Eagle, and Falcon—make their home; but these are often retreats inaccessible to the ordinary watcher.

Birds which resort to the waterside will, of course, receive their full share of attention, and visits to large sheets of water, such as the meres in Suffolk and the broads in Norfolk, the lakes in Lakeland, and the lochs in Scotland, will reveal the presence of many delightful feathered folk. If there are reeds and other aquatic vegetation, smaller birds, such as Reed Buntings, Reed and Sedge Warblers, and Marsh Tits can be sought for. Bobbing about in the water, companies of Little Grebes may be seen playing hide-and-seek; these dapper little birds with lobed feet can swim and remain under water for several minutes, returning to the surface and

poking out their beaks to take in a fresh supply of air.

Moorhens and Coots will also be in evidence, the former clucking as it rides on the water, turning this way and that, and then, at danger, retiring to the reeds with its brood of fluffy chicks, the latter being expert water-babies the moment they emerge from the egg-shell and leave the rush cradle.

At night the Sedge Warbler may be heard uttering his chattering song, for this is one of the few birds that sings under cover of darkness ; if a stone is gently pitched into the herbage, it sets the bird singing more persistently than ever.

In a similar haunt the stridulating and electric notes of the Grasshopper Warbler strike eerily upon the air in the gathering gloom of a sultry evening. This Warbler is rarely seen, being adept at hiding its sober body under cover. House and Sand Martins, Swallows, and Swifts also haunt ponds, lakes, and other sheets of water in summer to secure insect prey, and it is an engaging sight to watch them as they skim as near to the surface as they dare. Sometimes the Swallow dips gracefully to have a bathe, and at the same time to snatch at an unwary insect.

In the old pollard willows—rotten with age owing to the ravages of the larva of the Goat Moth—various Tits are busy foraging for food, and a Wryneck, or Cuckoo's Mate, suddenly makes the welkin ring with its penetrating notes of " pee-pee."

Where there is fen country a few of our rarer birds may be encountered, should fortune and good stalking favour the observer ; if a note is heard which sounds like two pennies chinked together, then one may be sure the sound was produced by the rare

Bearded Tit, or Reed Pheasant, as the marshmen call this handsome species.

There will be Ducks of various kinds to be seen, and perhaps a few Swans, and if, when searching among the marsh marigolds in a damp low-lying meadow near the water, one suddenly sees what seems like a small cluster of the handsome golden blobs of flowers (kingcups they are called in some districts) being blown about by the wind, one can be pretty sure that the motion is caused by a trim and elegant Yellow Wagtail.

Perhaps, after all, the general student of bird life, or one with restricted time and opportunity, will prefer to confine his outdoor expeditions to hedgerows, lanes, and waysides, where for the seeking a variety of feathered people are almost sure to be on show. The Hedge Accentor will be there for certain, and the Yellow Bunting. If there are privet bushes adorning the lane, then look out for the Bullfinch in his black hood and rosy-red breast. Watch, too, for a patch of white as the bird flies away.

Perched contentedly on the tall branch of a hedgerow, or on the telegraph wires, the Red-backed Shrike, or Butcher Bird, may be espied, and if there is a grassy wayside where grasshoppers are tumbling and falling, the bold bird in question will most likely swoop down and secure one in its beak. The desecration of our hedgerows has in recent years meant a noticeable decrease in the numbers of this summer migrant, who often impales upon a thorn bush the prey it catches, and forms a sort of larder.

Where the hedge has been allowed to grow tall, and has not been unmercifully hacked to pieces, the

thievish Magpie often builds its domed abode, and you may, if you are cute, hear its shrill note of "kek-kek-kek" as it flies into the open with a fluttering motion—floating rather than flying—and displays its long tail and dark and light plumage.

From the higher branches of one of the tall trees which stand sentinel-like along the hedgerow, a small brown bird may be seen to throw itself into the air, and then to plane down slantwise, singing lark-like notes as he goes. This will be the Tree Pipit, another species which, in my experience, is not nearly as familiar as in days of yore.

The hungry but handsome Greenfinch will be along the hedgerow, and also his sprightly cousin, the Chaffinch. The former is one of the few birds that sings upon the wing; the latter utters a piercing double note of "pink-pink."

If it is the nesting season, many homes will be found along old green lanes still undisturbed by the ruthless hand of the spoiler; one should find the frail nests of Greater and Lesser Whitethroats, the well-hidden home of the Redbreast in the bank, and the deep structure of the Yellow Bunting.

If it is winter, and there is a plenitude of hips and haws on the bushes, hordes of Fieldfares and Redwings and some of our own Thrushes are almost sure to be there; and very wary these visitors from Scandinavia are, unless emboldened by scarcity of food.

Lastly, I would advise the reader to watch for birds in and around a farmyard and farm. Finches of various kinds and other grain-eating birds will be seen picking up stray seeds that are strewn about the ground; among them the Yellow Bunting,

Chaffinch, and Common Sparrow are almost sure to be recorded. Towards dusk Jackdaws and Rooks may be observed flying overhead after another day's gleaning in the fields, the parting song of a Skylark from an adjacent field reaches the receptive ear, an old Owl comes from its hiding-place and commences to hoot and search for its supper, and then all is quiet and peaceful:

> "Save where the Beetle wheels its droning flight,
> And drowsy tinklings lull the distant fold."



Chapter IV

HOW AND WHY BIRDS FLY

FAR more amazing than the evolution of the aeroplane is the evolution of a bird's wing. The bird is the true aviator. It understands air currents, distances, secures velocity, rises and falls, swings and turns, and can dive from a great height to rest a dainty foot on a twig or clod. We take little notice of the feathered thing that flies before our eyes, yet its hourly stunts are marvellous things. How it can soar and dive and sail and turn! The broad wing of the Partridge or the narrow wing of the Hawk, the leisurely flap of the Heron, or the quiver of the Swallow, are equally astonishing. The position of the wing, its airy grace, its muscular strength, its spread and curve, its repose and speed, its beauty in rest and its majesty in movement, possess a never-failing charm. Our vocabulary bears witness to the wonder of wings. We speak of flying, darting, sailing, soaring, flitting, rushing, flapping, beating, rustling, fluttering, skimming, wheeling, hovering, swooping; all these expressions are employed to describe the movements of birds.

I like to think of wings. They possess and express the poetry of movement. They mean escape, freedom, triumph. The Lark rising from a meadow, the Flamingo flashing across the southern

swamp, the Curlew wheeling over wild and windy spaces, the Albatross sailing above a sea of blue, all suggest elemental freedom. Wings imply daring, swiftness, and adventure. Birds scorn our roads and fences and perch on our notice boards, artlessly claiming the whole round of earth and sky as their proper playground. They ask no right of way, but sail the airy realms, and having nothing, possess all things.

At first birds lived on the ground. Then some took to the trees, and others to the waters to avoid danger. Whichever way they chose to live, in course of time they grew wings. Those birds that swam gradually changed their one-time front legs to flippers, with which they could paddle quickly through the water chasing fish. Those birds that remained upon the ground ran upon their back legs. The front pair of legs became wings with which they flew when they wanted to move fast. The Rhea of South America, however, still uses one great wing as a kind of sail when it runs.

In the Kiwi of New Zealand—that little bird that you see on tins of boot polish—the wings have now almost disappeared. There are not many animals in New Zealand to-day that hunt the Kiwi, so that it now no longer needs its wings. Most of the birds, however, took to a life in the trees. Here for a while they fluttered feebly about from branch to branch. Later their flutterings grew more brave. Their arms grew long feathers. They were able to fly short distances.

How do they fly? This is not easy to explain in simple language. To-day such a bird as the Swift spends almost all its life upon the wing. Its

legs have almost disappeared. The feet are not strong enough for it to stand upon. Instead, all four toes point forward so that it can cling to a ledge very easily. This growing of wings and all that it implied was a process lasting countless thousands of years.

The wing of a bird has two sets of feathers. The upper ones, joined to the arm, are short and very close together. The lower ones that overlap these are very much longer, and are farther apart. You will no doubt have noticed that the wings of the Rook, for example, show many gaps—or are ragged looking—when they are fully open.

The bird's body is built so that the feathers contain a great quantity of air. This makes it buoyant, like a balloon. When the outspread wings are beaten downwards, the upper short feathers press tightly against the longer lower ones. Thus no air can escape through the sheets of feathers thus formed. The strong pressing-down on the air shoots the bird forward. When the wings come up after their downward beat the air passes easily through the gaps between the long open feathers that are above and overlapping the short ones. In this way the upstroke meets with a minimum of resistance from the air, and the force of the downstroke is not lost.

The tail plays a very important part in steering, as it does in an aeroplane. It is also the brake of the flying bird, being composed of very stiff feathers; when spread fan-shape these press very strongly against the air. How strongly can be understood by instancing that strange bird, the Snipe. Instead of singing to his mate in the spring, the Snipe climbs from the marsh, where is his nest, in great

circles. A hundred or two hundred feet above the ground he suddenly plunges earthwards at great speed, spreading his tail feathers like a fan. As the rush of air beats against the stiff tail a humming sound is produced, rather like the bleating of a kid-goat. This is the Snipe's love song! You can make the noise yourself. Fix a fan of feathers into a cork, whirl it round your head on a string, and see what results you get.

All we know about flying has been learnt from watching the birds. We still know little enough about it, although the arts of gliding are teaching us a great deal. But the birds know all about flying and gliding too. Eagles and Gulls hardly ever beat their wings at all. Above the earth are all kinds of currents of air moving in different directions and up and down, and also many " pockets " where no movement of air takes place. The next time you go to the sea, watch how the Gulls sail round and round a ship with never a beat of their wings. They even seem to prefer a strong head wind, against which they glide and turn with perfect ease and smoothness.

You have no doubt noticed that in the spring certain birds appear in the country that were not with us during the winter. The Swallow and the Cuckoo are two that you know well. Where have they been? The Cuckoo left us last July, the Swallow in October. They had flown thousands of miles south to Africa. During our winter it is warmer there, with plenty of insects for the Swallows and caterpillars for the Cuckoos. How did this habit start, which we call migration? As perhaps you know, long ago it became very cold in Britain,

too cold for the birds. They were forced to fly south to escape the cold. When it grew warmer they tried to return to their homes. Another cold period followed, and once more the birds had to flee to warmer lands.

This advancing and retiring of arctic conditions continued for a long, long time, and gradually the corresponding bird movements became habits. Many birds which now leave us in the winter are really quite hardy enough to stay in this country.

Many birds, also, come down from the north to spend the winter with us, such as the Redwing and Fieldfare. These are both Thrushes. The Redwing is smaller than our Song Thrush, and has a yellow stripe over the eye. The Fieldfare is larger, and is grey and dark brown. In March or April they fly north again to nest in their true homes in Norway and Russia. Our summer migrants return to us for the same reason. They will only nest in their true homes, from which they were driven by the severe cold so long ago.

How they find their way for thousands of miles we do not know. Some say that they have a sixth sense that human beings have not. Perhaps you know someone who keeps Racing Pigeons. You know that these birds, removed to a distance and then released, will find their way back home, even though they have never flown over the country before. On the whole the migrants follow special routes : a river, sea coast, or mountain pass. When you find out where such a route exists over this country you can be the first to see the birds which use it in spring. Is it not wonderful that such a tiny bird as the Goldcrest can cross the North Sea

in thousands every year? They probably use those air currents about which we know so little. Lapwings have been known to cross the Atlantic to America—2,400 miles. The Swifts fly to the Cape in South Africa, over 6,000 miles there and back.

Distance means little to the birds, and there is a continual movement among the bird population. Only among fishes do we find anything to compare with it. Almost all birds migrate a little. The Thrush that sang in your garden last March, and the one singing there this March, are quite possibly different birds. The one that sang there a year ago may be somewhere in France now. A young Thrush I knew of, born in Aberdeen, was found five weeks later in Portugal!

Even the tiny Titmice move about the countryside during the autumn and winter, but usually keep fairly near to their nesting-places. Jenny Wren, perhaps, never migrates. She likes to sleep on cold winter nights in one of the many spare nests that Johnny Wren built last spring. But apart from long-distance flights to other countries, all sorts of movements take place in autumn and winter. When the marshes are frozen the Snipe move to the swift-flowing rivers, upon which ice seldom forms. When snow falls, all kinds of Plover move from the moors and hills to the warmer and more sheltered valleys. The Grouse come lower down the mountain-side. The Black-headed Gulls move inland. They haunt the ploughland with the Rooks. The bird population is always shifting. As you know, many birds form into flocks in the winter. They leave the hedgerows, parks, and gardens. They wander in great bands over the fields and stubble. Starlings,

Buntings, Finches, Lapwings, and Rooks all do this.

As time has gone by, various birds have developed that type of wing best fitted to the life they lead. The Eagles have great broad wings. Upon these they soar and wheel thousands of feet above the earth for hours at a time. Compare these huge wings with the thin, crescent-moon-shaped wings of a Swift. Yet, slender as these are, they are longer than any other in proportion to the size of the bird. With these pointed wings the Swift can dash through the air, turning sharply at one hundred miles an hour.

Then there are the strong rounded wings of the Grouse. With these this bird of the moors can get up speed very quickly, and whir down-wind at a tremendous rate. The wings of the Lapwing are also very broad and rounded. With these he can do all kinds of freak flying, turning over on his back, falling headlong to earth, and "banking" this way and that.

From these fine fliers we can turn to the feeble wings of Jays and Magpies, which can only flutter across a field, or from tree to tree. Then again, look at the feeble tiny wings of Robin or Golden-crested Wren. Yet, as we have seen, the latter crosses the North Sea every year!

If you are interested in birds it should not be long before you can pick out a certain type by the way it flies. You will not need to be near enough to see its colour, or size, or to hear its call. The way it moves its wings, and their shape, will help to tell you its name.

CHAPTER V

BIRDS' FEATHERS, AND THE REASON WHY

HAVE you ever wondered why there are so many kinds of birds' plumage? When you stop to think, it occurs to you that nearly every bird you know has different-coloured feathers. In some cases even the male and female are not alike to look at. This is especially so with the British Ducks. Only the Sheld-duck—that rare and beautiful black-and-white duck with the scarlet beak, green head, and brown shoulders—has the same plumage as his consort. Even in this case she is smaller than her mate, and the scarlet knob on her beak is very tiny when compared to that of the drake.

Thus, though the male and female Song Thrushes look exactly alike, the male Blackbird is black with yellow beak and iris, while his partner is sober brown. In addition to the difference in size, the Mistle Thrush differs from the Song Thrush in having white spots on the edge of his tail, and is a much greyer bird. Indeed, in some places it is called the Grey Thrush.

There are, as you know, different-coloured races of men, women, and children: black, brown, red, white, and yellow. But these changes in colour are more a matter of climate and weather than anything



Skylarks, with nest and eggs
(A Museum reconstruction.)

else. You know yourselves how soon the summer sun " bronzes " you at the seaside and in the country, turning your skin brown or red, according to whether you have a naturally fair or dark skin.

But this is not the reason why the feathers of birds are different. In certain cases it is true that climate does alter a bird's plumage. For example, high up in the mountains of Scotland is a bird of the Grouse family, the Ptarmigan. In the summer this bird is brown and grey and black, with white feathered legs and a scarlet comb. But in the winter, when the mountains are covered with snow, the Ptarmigan changes its plumage to pure white, except for the black on the tail and wings, and the scarlet comb. Thanks to this change, the bird looks like his snowy background, thus being well hidden from the sharp eyes of his enemies.

Occasionally " freak " plumages occur when an ordinary bird hatches out pure white, for no apparent reason. We call this condition *albinism*—you have probably seen albino or white rabbits with pink eyes. The Blackbird very often turns up slightly albino. One often sees the male birds with a few white markings.

In another case a bird will turn completely black. This change is known as *melanism*. It seems usually to be brought about by a special kind of feeding. The grey, white, scarlet, and black Bullfinch, for example, turns as black as coal after a year or two if fed on hemp seed.

But all the different-coloured plumages are for the most part due to what we call *natural selection*. This means that for thousands of years the male birds have been growing those special feathers whose

colouring attracted the females. The males with the most pleasing colours had most success in the winning of mates. Their particular glories would be handed down to their sons and daughters. And so, as time went by, there came into being the smart but simple plumage of the Blackbird, or the wonderful fan of the Peacock. Remember that many male birds depend chiefly upon the beauty of their plumage to attract the females, though some have also songs or " dances."

In some cases, especially amongst the ground birds who depend for their safety upon the nature of their colouring, the feathers are coloured to match the ground upon which they reside. Even so, the male bird usually has more striking marks or colouring that the female finds very attractive. The Partridge, for example, is very hard to see when it is feeding in the stubble fields, and quite invisible on ploughed land. Yet close at hand you will see that it is a beautiful bird. You will notice, too, that the male has a large, chocolate-coloured horse-shoe shape on its breast, which at once catches your eye, and no doubt his mate's too. The French Partridge has a red beak and legs and black breast, yet he too is very hard to pick out as he runs over the cornfields.

The first feathered bird was probably of one plain colour all over, perhaps a dull brown. British birds are not on the whole so brightly coloured as those that live in countries farther to the south. But almost endless ages, and very gradual changes, must have been needed to produce such a gorgeous bird as the Kingfisher. Here is a bird with a sea-blue back and red breast. Yet so much does it alter

according to the brightness, or otherwise, of the light, that the back will change through every shade of green and blue, and the breast from orange to deep red. When it flies down the river in the sunlight it glitters like a jewel, so lovely is the colouring of its feathers.

Or, as a bird better known to you, perhaps, count all the pale colours of a Chaffinch. Pale-blue, olive-green, white, pink, yellow, and brown are all to be found in the plumage of a single bird, and in many different shades. You must, too, have seen the vivid colouring of a Goldfinch: black, brown, golden, scarlet, and white, all of a wonderful brightness.

To increase the attraction of their colours all birds display them to show off their best points. They open their wings, showing the bright-coloured bars. They spread their tails to show off the coloured spots and centre markings. In little darts and rushes they advance towards the female, with shuffling wings and fanned tail, doing their utmost to impress her with their beauty. You can see the Blackbird doing this any day in spring. The golden ring about his eye grows larger and larger in his excitement.

Not many British birds have a very wonderful display. None, for example, can compare with the Peacock. The most beautiful and interesting is that of the Ruff, whose mate is known as the Reeve (Figs. 1 and 2). Once common British nesting-birds, they are now rare in this country. Unless you go to Holland you will be unlikely to see their display in the wild state. But you can see them in the Zoological Gardens in London. Next time you go to the Zoo in spring or early summer go over

to the aviary between the lion house and the bison paddocks. This aviary has a pond in the middle. You will see there various black Crows with scarlet or yellow beaks; these are British and Alpine Choughs. There are also Oyster Catchers and some wading birds present. Amongst these are the Ruffs. Now, in the autumn and winter the Ruff is quite an ordinary bird to look at, just a brown-spotted bird with long thin legs. It is about the size of a Mistle Thrush on stilts. But, when the nesting season comes, this strange bird grows a wonderful ruff or mane of feathers about the neck, and long tufts of feathers about the ears. This mane varies widely in colour between bird and bird. Some are pure white, others dark blue, and others again a glossy brown. Often the mane is spotted or barred with different colours. Some Ruffs at this season have orange legs, and others brown or green.



FIG. 1. Ruff

So much for the bird's appearance. In the spring, the Ruffs meet in the early morning in some flat place. They are in a great state of excitement. With heads bowed down so that the manes and ear-tufts fall forward covering the face, wings drooping,



Young Barn Owls
(A Museum reconstruction.)

PLATE III

and short tails fanned and pressed to the ground, they rush about in all directions without any particular reason. After the Ruffs have been in the arena or circus for some time—perhaps an hour—the Reeves come in. The Ruffs become quiet and anxious. They crouch tightly against the ground, and are selected as mates by the Reeves, apparently without choice on their own part. Presumably the mane is of importance in this process.

These manes of the Ruffs are, of course, nothing like so wonderful or beautiful as the Peacock's fan. This, by the way, is not the Peacock's *tail*, which is short, sticking out behind the fan. The lovely fan is a great enlargement of the feathers above the tail. The so-called " eyes " on the fan are the joinings of many little feathers.

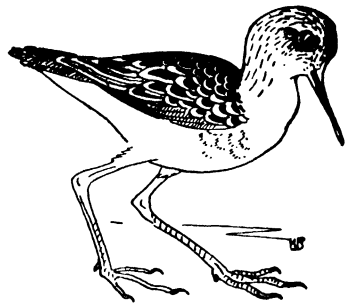


FIG. 2. Reeve

At certain times of the year birds moult, usually when the nesting season is over. At this time, if they are song birds, they stop singing. At moulting time they either lose and grow their feathers gradually, so that they are never completely featherless and always able to fly, or the feathers are worn away, and they get new ones. During the moult they look, and are, very sorry for themselves. The Blackbird at such a time looks just like a scarecrow !

The Ducks, however, moult in a different and rather strange way. In the first place, they moult twice during the year. There is the ordinary moult

after the nesting period in late summer. But about May the Drakes moult and lose their flight feathers: this at the season when the Ducks are looking after the young. Not being able to fly, the Drakes have to hide away in the thick beds of reeds. To make them safer still, in addition to moulting their flying feathers, they change their ordinary bright plumage to one that is almost the same as the Duck's. This change is among the most wonderful of all Nature's ways of protecting her children.



Chapter VI

THE MAKING OF A BIRD'S NEST

Long ages ago, before birds lived in trees or swam upon the water they had no nests. They laid their eggs upon the bare ground. Some birds still do so —the Nightjar, for example. This strange bird comes to us from Africa in the month of May. At dusk it flies silently over the tree-tops, catching moths and other insects. Its two creamy, brown-spotted eggs are laid quite simply on a path in the bracken. They look just like round balls of marble.

No doubt the birds found their eggs were eaten by snakes and other animals, and so some started to lay them in holes, as does the Sand Martin. The shells of other eggs became coloured so that they could not be seen against the ground upon which they were laid. The eggs of the Peewit, that are placed in a hollow in a field, are very hard to find, even if you mark the spot from which the bird flew away. Other birds covered their eggs with grass and leaves, and this precaution was the start of the first real nest. To-day a Robin builds a very well-hidden nest in a bank, and you must search for some time before it can be found.

Those birds that took to a life in the trees naturally found it very much harder to build a nest.

This difficulty was slowly got over in many different ways. The Mistle Thrush placed its nest of grass and roots, with an inner lining of mud, in the fork of a tree; and most tree birds found ways of building upon twigs or branches.

The Golden-crested Wren—the smallest bird in Western Europe—is a very clever builder. Its tiny nest of moss is hung beneath a branch of a fir tree held by strands of twisted cobwebs. No wonder that the Goldcrest is supposed to be the steed of Puck, the Fairy!

The Jackdaw finds a hole in a hollow tree and drops sticks into the hole until a platform is made upon which his nest can be built. The pink-breasted, grey-backed Nuthatch, who whistles so cheerily in spring, finds an old Woodpecker's hole. The female plasters up most of the hole with mud. The entrance is then just big enough for them, but too small for the Starlings to get in.

Many birds that once built in trees now use our houses instead. The Sparrow and the Starling make their untidy nests of straw and feathers in any odd hole in our roofs, barns, and walls. The House Martin—he can be distinguished from the Swallow by the white patch upon his back—builds a wonderful nest of mud beneath our eaves. He plasters his cup-shaped nest to the wall, leaving just enough room to enter. Once he nested in the city of London; now, as our roads are so well made, there are no longer the mud and puddles to supply him with material in built-up areas.

The Swallow and Swift also nest among the rafters. The Barn Owl builds no nest; she lays her eggs in some bare corner of a church tower,

belfry, or old ruins. The Barn Owl screeches; the Tawny or Brown Owl, who lives in the woods, hoots. Many readers will have heard the latter at night.

Birds that took to the water learned to build floating rafts or cradles upon which they build their nests. The Moorhen sets his mass of weeds close to the bank, but most waterfowl place their dwellings on land. Some, such as the Kingfisher and Sand Martin, dig long tunnels into the sides of banks, and lay their eggs at the end, perhaps three feet from the entrance.

Most sea-birds build no nests. They lay their eggs upon the bare ledges of cliffs, or among pebbles on the seashore. Many of the diving birds nest underground in burrows on the islands around our coasts.

We do not know how a bird learns to build a nest; and are therefore compelled to describe its ability as " instinctive "—that is, handed down from parent to child in some way unknown. Perhaps the generations slowly improve upon the art of their ancestors. Only in this way can we explain the wonderful building of the nests of some birds.

Let us take the nest of a Long-tailed Tit as an example. The building takes about fourteen days. The nest may be placed in a bush, or high in a tree. Tiny shreds of wool, green moss, and cobwebs are woven together into a thick soft wall and dome. The entrance is almost invisible. The outside is usually covered with black and white mosses and lichen taken from tree-trunks. In the lights and shadows of a hedge this outside covering makes it very hard to see the nest. The latter is filled with

a large collection of feathers, and in this soft cradle the female packs herself and twelve or more babies. She has so little room for herself that she has to stick her long tail over her back through the entrance hole; yet at night the male somehow crowds in too.



Chapter VII

THE SHAPES AND COLOURS OF BIRDS' EGGS

Everyone has seen a Hen's egg, and will know that it varies very little except in the ground or self-colour of white or brown. It is without any markings. This is also true of a good many eggs of wild birds, such as the pure white eggs of the Ring Dove, or Wood Pigeon, Turtle Dove (a summer visitor from overseas), all the Owls, the Kingfisher, the Dipper (or Water Ouzel), the Swift, and the Sand Martin.

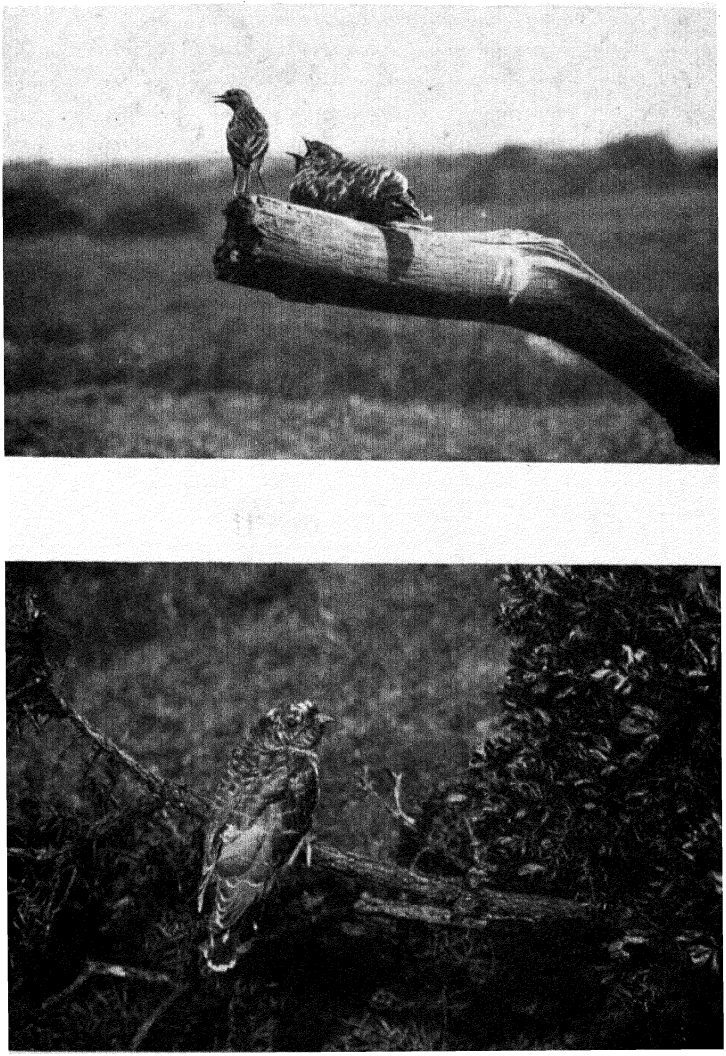
Eggs of water birds, such as Ducks, Geese, and Swans are also self-coloured and without markings. The Mute Swan lays the largest egg of any British bird. It is light green in colour, and shaped like a Rugby football. Indeed, it might well be compared with a boy's green football of "rugger" shape. The smallest egg laid by a British bird is that of the Golden-crested Wren. The egg of this mite in feathers is not much larger than a pea, although not so round.

Now, in addition to these self-coloured eggs of our British birds, there are a great number that are not only of different colours and markings, but also of different shapes. Let us consider a few examples. The homely Redbreast produces a round egg with

light-brown freckles. Sometimes a pure white Robin's egg is found, looking strangely out of place in a nest with four or five other eggs of the usual type. One day I discovered a Robin's nest which contained four of the rightful owner's eggs and two laid by a Wagtail. I wondered why the Wagtail placed her eggs in the Robin's home, whether she had no nest of her own, and what the Robins thought about the two strange eggs, if indeed they realized them as strange. I watched the nest until all the eggs were hatched, and I am pleased to record that Cock Robin and his wife brought up their own family and the two little strangers! I even fancied that they seemed more proud of the two young Wagtails than of their own young.

We know, of course, that the Cuckoo places her egg into another bird's nest, but with this exception the egg of a second kind of bird is not often found in the nest of another species. Mention of the Cuckoo's egg reminds me to tell you how small its egg is for the size of the bird. Have you ever seen a Cuckoo? It is about as big as a Pigeon, yet this mysterious bird only produces an egg the size of a Sparrow's. Why? If the Cuckoo laid an egg as large as that of the Sparrow Hawk or Pigeon—about the size of a golf ball—the small birds in whose nest the Cuckoo places her egg would have a fright. The probability is they would forsake their home, and neither the strange egg or their own would hatch out. All would be lost.

The Skylark lays a small pear-shaped egg—that is, the egg tapers to almost a point at one end. The reason for this is that, as the Lark's shallow nest is built on the ground, and very little attempt is



Above : Meadow Pipit with young Cuckoo
Below : Young Cuckoo alone

made to construct a snug abode like that of the Thrush or Blackbird, the three or four freckled eggs must be well covered by the parent bird when she sits upon them.

When eggs are laid in a well-built nest it is easy for the bird to cover her treasures ; but on the bare ground the pear-shaped end enables the parent bird —the Lapwing, or Peewit, for example—to arrange her eggs with the small pointed ends facing one another. Try an experiment. With a knife cut four pieces of chalk into four make-believe birds' eggs, the same pear shape and size as those of the Lark or Peewit. Having done this, then place the four of them together so as to take up the least amount of space. If you place your chalk models in such a way that they take up less room than eggs arranged by the birds I have mentioned, then you will indeed be a clever person.

If a Lark's or Peewit's egg was round like that of a Hen, it would likely enough roll about, or be moved by the wind. That is why the Guillemot's egg is shaped like a large pear. These sea birds live in large colonies on rocky islands, and lay only one egg in a season. There is no attempt to build a nest, and whilst accidents must happen, and some of the eggs must tumble into the sea, the pear shape enables the egg to spin round when moved, rather like a boy's top on its side, and so to remain in or near its place.

Thus it can be stated that birds which lay their eggs on the ground, and make little if any attempt to build a nest, mostly produce pear-shaped eggs, enabling them to cover the clutch with an equal distribution of warmth, so that all may hatch, and

also to keep the eggs in position. There are a few exceptions, such as the marbled eggs of the Nightjar, a summer migrant to Britain, whose curious song, like a spinning-wheel or fairy's sewing machine, may be heard in some country districts on a warm summer evening. This bird, with its wide mouth and short legs, lays two round eggs on the bare ground among stones or bracken fern. There is no nest, and this makes it all the more difficult to see the eggs. A few pieces of twig, straw, dead grass, or other material would surely attract attention. The bird seems to know this. And as the Nightjar lays only two eggs, the parent bird can easily cover and keep them in position. Unlike the young of most other birds that nest on the ground, young Nightjars are born naked, blind, and helpless. So also are young Skylarks. This being so, it is a wonder that they escape from stoats, weasels, rats, and other enemies, as the young of most ground-nesting birds are able to run about as soon as they are hatched. Young chickens can, of course, do this ; so also can fledgling Partridges and Pheasants, Peewits, and Snipe.

A young Moorhen can dive straight out of its rush cradle a moment or two after it is born. It takes to the water at once, and is one of the bravest little swimmers in birdland. We can therefore take it as a general rule that the young of birds hatched in a well-built nest are mostly blind, naked, and helpless, whilst those from eggs laid on the bare ground are fully feathered, and able to run about directly they are hatched. Water birds, too, are able to move about and even swim untaught. They are hatched in a cradle or nest. You should therefore

be able to recognize the type of a bird fairly well from the shape of its egg.

Hole-nesting birds, such as Woodpeckers, produce a white egg. Colour is unnecessary in eggs hidden from sight, and perhaps the birds are better able to see white eggs in the dark.

Ground-nesting birds, on the other hand, generally lay eggs marked so that they match the place in which they are hidden. The Ringed Plover is one, the Meadow Pipit is another. Even if one of the last-named birds is flushed from its nest in a tuft of grass on a moor or heath, it is not easy to find the dark-brown eggs hidden among the herbage. In addition, the parent bird, when she flies off her eggs, pretends that she has got a broken wing. What happens? Your attention is drawn to the bird; when, after watching her, you begin to search for the exact spot from which she got up, you find you have lost it—as the Meadow Pipit intended.

Peewits will scream overhead as you walk across a field where their eggs or young are secreted. The nearer you approach the more they swoop and scream. Although you may be sure of the spot by watching the parent birds, your eyes have been taken off the hiding-place of egg or baby, and it is only with difficulty that they are discovered.

Remember, then, that birds' eggs have as a rule a certain shape and colour for a certain purpose. The beautiful greenish-blue eggs of the Song Thrush provide an example of how the eggs of one species vary. I have in my collection a series of twelve Song Thrushes' eggs which, beginning with an unspotted specimen, gradually increase in the number of the spots until the twelfth egg in the series

is well spotted almost all over. I have mounted another card of eggs *to show contrast of colour*, and I cannot do better than describe this card of twelve eggs to you.

There is the light-yellowish egg of the Quail, with bold splashes of dark brown; the light greenish-blue of the Song Thrush with jet black spots; the stone-coloured egg of the Tern (a sea-bird) with a large number of dark-brown spots; the white egg of Philip Sparrow with a great many dark spots; the chocolate-red of the Tree Pipit with dark wavy lines; the polished light green of the Redstart; and the duller greenish-blue of the Hedge Sparrow. (Note that the Hedge Sparrow is not a Sparrow but a Warbler. Also that some specimens of Blackcaps' eggs resemble varieties of the Tree Pipit. They are smaller, and whereas the Pipit nests on the ground, the Blackcap builds a frail nest in the bush.) Next I have the Reed Bunting's egg, dull fawn in ground colour, with dark-brown markings like a child's scribbling. (Indeed, this bird and its cousins are, because of those curious markings, sometimes called Scribbling Larks. Of course they are not Larks, but Buntings.) Next again, the round egg of the Nightjar, resembling grey marble, and one of the most beautiful objects in nature; then the egg of the Merle, or Blackbird, which varies in size and colour, but is here of greenish colour, spotted or marked with brown; the egg of the Magpie, greenish-yellow in colour, and well dotted all over with light and dark brown; and lastly, the Kestrel's reddish egg with darker markings.

The above are the twelve kinds of eggs on the card I mentioned, but a few more colours may be



Magpies and nest
(A Museum reconstruction.)

described. The smooth glossy eggs of the English Partridge and the Pheasant are mostly yellow, though green and other varieties do occur. The eggs of Grouse are often handsomely marked, and very difficult to detect among heather on moors and mountains; whilst the large round eggs of the Sparrow Hawk are whitish, boldly splashed with a reddish tint. The Starling's egg is pale greenish-blue; so also are those of the Jackdaw, Rook, and Crow. The eggs of the last three birds, however, have dark markings.

Small birds, such as Jenny Wren, the Tits, the Chiffchaff, and Willow Warbler, have white eggs containing many small spots. Some of them are puzzling, unless one knows the kind of nest or place in which they occur. Last, but by no means least, the Common Sparrow is capable of producing such a variety of eggs that I have collected over fifty different kinds. The rarer Tree Sparrow, on the other hand, does not vary its five dark-brown eggs to any great extent, although curiously enough there is, I find, almost always one light egg in the clutch.



Chapter VIII

BIRD-WATCHING ON THE DOWNS, HEATHS, MOORS, AND MOUNTAINS

SNOW BUNTING – BUZZARD – HOODED CROW – CURLEW – DUNLIN – GOLDEN EAGLE – PEREGRINE FALCON – GREENSHANK – BLACK AND RED GROUSE – BLACK-HEADED GULL – LINNET – MERLIN – RING OUZEL – MEADOW PIPIT – GOLDEN PLOVER – PTARMIGAN – RAVEN – REDSHANK – GREEN SANDPIPER – SNIPE – STONECHAT – TWITE – DARTFORD WARBLER – WHEATEAR – WHIMBREL – WHINCHAT.

THE birds named in this Chapter will be those which resort to wild, open country. Some, as has been mentioned in the last Chapter, are summer dwellers only, such as the Curlew and Golden Plover ; others may be birds of passage, travelling farther north or south according to the time of year.

Thus the **Snow Bunting** (Fig. 3) frequents moors and mountains in the north and nests there, but in winter many flocks travel south. This Bunting is an elegant bird, and, with the Corn Bunting, is our largest British species. In summer the plumage of the male is black and white, but the winter dress is a mixture of black, brown, and grey on the head, back, and outer tail-feathers, with the rest pure white. The female is duller all over. As with other Buntings this species has a jerky flight ; it runs and walks, and does not hop. The nesting period is May to

July, and the home, placed among rocks or stones, is composed of dry grass, moss, and roots, with a lining of down, feathers, or hair. There may be five, six, or more eggs, and these are somewhat similar to those of the Greenfinch, being greyish-white, blotched and spotted with light and dark brown. The song is a low, sweet warble, and during courtship the male rises in the air, and with tail and wings spread, planes down to earth singing as he goes. The Snow Bunting feeds on insects and seeds.



FIG. 3. Snow Bunting

As showing how keen some schoolboys are to study birds, the following extract from a letter received by me from St. Bees, Cumberland, will be read with interest. My schoolboy friend writes: "On February 20, 1941, I saw queer, jerky-flying little Thrush-like birds, with beautiful twittering song, flying over after a storm on the Head. One crowd was over a hundred strong. The whole time I could hear their twittering, even though I could not always see them. The next day I saw them again, and distinctly noticed the white under parts and wing-bars. I managed in the afternoon to get close to them with our headmaster, and through glasses found them to be Snow Buntings. Their song was lovely. They seemed far more active than most Buntings. On 24th February they were far more tame, coming from outside Seacote, and letting us see them clearly

without glasses. They had queer tails. To-day (25th February) they have gone, worse luck. They were lovely, the song especially."

The **Buzzard** (Fig. 4) is one of our larger birds of prey, and a lover of solitude. It resorts to cliffs, moors, mountains, and large woods, and nests in May. It builds a large nest of sticks, with a lining of grass, leaves, wool, and sometimes heather. Occasionally the old nest of another bird is chosen. The three eggs are greenish-white, with pale-brown markings. The Buzzard is mostly wholly dark and lighter brown in colour, with lead-coloured beak, and the cere (the wax-like membrane at the base of the beak), irides, and feet yellow. Its habit is to soar high in the air, and from a Cornish window I have often seen several birds sailing slowly round and round together until almost lost to view in the clouds. Individual birds use favourite look-out positions; they are possessed of unlimited patience. The food consists of small birds, hares, mice, rabbits, rats, reptiles, and worms, and on them the bird pounces with great swiftness. Its note is a mournful, piercing whistle, resembling *pee-yeou.*



FIG. 4. Buzzard

The **Hooded Crow** (Fig. 5) is only known in many

districts as a winter visitor. At such time it mostly resorts to the coast, and there searches for garbage thrown up by the sea. Other ingredients of diet are berries, birds, carrion, fruit, grain, grubs, and shell-fish. It may at once be known from the Carrion Crow by having the head, throat, tail, and wings black, with the rest dark grey. It assumes an arched-back position, has a large, strong beak and black legs and feet, and is known also as the Grey Crow, Saddle-backed Crow, and Royston Crow. In

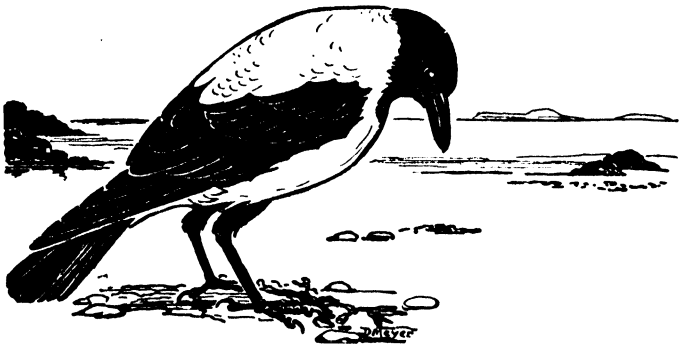


FIG. 5. Hooded Crow

summer the haunts chosen are rocky cliffs and woods, and the nesting period is March to May. The large nest is placed in low as well as tall trees, and on cliffs, and is made of sticks, cemented together with cow dung, clay, or mud. The lining consists of hair, leaves, moss, wool, and other materials. The four or five eggs are greenish, blotched, mottled, and spotted with faint brown and greenish-ash. The deep bass cry resembles *honk-honk*. It is more social in its habits than the Carrion Crow, and in winter several may sometimes be seen in company

on mud-flats by the shore, in search of any stray provender that may be found.

The **Curlew** (Fig. 6)—The poet who wrote :

> " Over the marshes crieth the Curlew.
> Weird is its music, wild is its home,"

undoubtedly knew his subject. This long-beaked and long-legged bird is one of the few that tells its name, using the double-call of *cur-lee-curlee*. It also utters a pleasant and long-drawn-out bubbling note. That keen and accurate observer and recorder of bird life, my friend the late Arthur H. Patterson, has stated that the Curlew has a very varied vocabulary of cries impossible to reproduce in words. He was right in stating that no two persons would give them the same inflection, and claimed that a practised listener can easily distinguish the notes of alarm, anger, anticipation, caution, satisfaction, etc. This is important to note, as Patterson relates that, by getting to know these various utterances, he found it no difficult matter to judge what a Curlew was doing. It is a social species, and many may often be seen in company. The flight is well-sustained once the bold bird has got

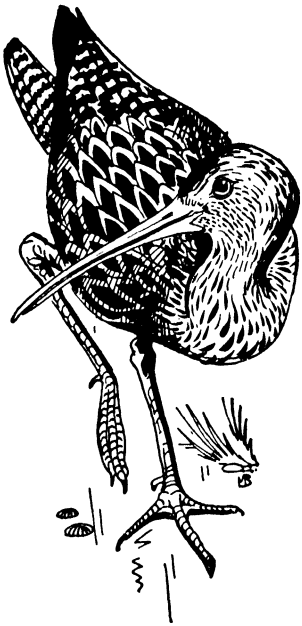


Fig. 6. Curlew

well on the wing; as it flies, the long legs are carried in a horizontal position at the rear. Being a wading bird, it walks sedately, and is a good swimmer. This latter point is interesting, as its feet are not lobed or webbed feet like those of a Grebe or Gull; in fact, many—probably most—of the waders swim well. The Moorhen and Phalarope are well-known examples; the latter lives mostly on the water. The Snipe is another good swimmer, as also are the Oyster Catcher and many of the Sandpipers. The Curlew has a well-groomed appearance, and is dressed in dark and light brown, with the rump and under parts whitish. When courting it resorts to dancing, and becomes very excited; and it is a first-rate sentinel of the moors. A night as well as day feeder, it searches for berries, crustaceans, insects, molluscs, and worms, being well aided in the search for provender by its long, curved beak. The concealed nest is often merely a depression in the ground; but when a home is made on moors and heathery hills, dry grass, heather sprigs, and leaves are used. The four pear-shaped eggs are greenish, with dark-brown and dark-green blotches. The nesting period is April and May. If the nest is approached when there are eggs, the Curlew feigns injury, but will also defend its home bravely against an invader.

That dapper little wading bird the **Dunlin** (Fig. 7) frequents fens and moors in summer, and also estuaries, mud-flats, salt marshes, the seashore, and damp places at other times. In winter it is, like the Redshank, to be seen in large flocks, and once when the tide was out on the River Ribble near Lytham, Lancashire, I saw such a concourse of these

gay feathered sprites flying hither and thither over the exposed sand-banks that the effect was as of smoke from a passing steamer. A member of the engaging Sandpiper family, it measures only a few inches in length. In summer the plumage is rufous-brown above, with speckled throat and upper parts of breast, and a large black patch below. In winter a great change takes place; the plumage is then mostly made up of grey and white. The Dunlin nests during May and June, the site being a depression in the ground, where the four pointed eggs are well hidden among the surrounding herbage. Bents, dry grass, and roots, with perhaps a little moss and a few twigs, are used. The eggs are pale green, blotched with reddish-brown. The bird has a hoarse cry, but in the mating season the male uses a pleasant love-call. The food consists of insects and their larvae, small crustaceans, sandhoppers, and marine worms, obtained by swimming as well as by wading.

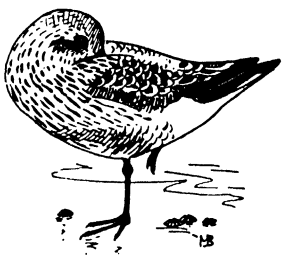


FIG. 7. Dunlin

The **Golden Eagle** (Fig. 8) is one of our rarest British birds, but owing to protection its members are not now diminishing. Nesting among inaccessible mountains in the Scottish highlands, it dwells amid eternal solitudes, wandering southward very rarely. The only personal record I have of this magnificent bird relates to a fine dead specimen I saw in Hertfordshire, acting as a scarecrow in a keeper's garden! The keeper was so scared at having shot this rare creature that he even refused to

let me have one of its wings as a memento of its occurrence in my native county! Possessed of great strength, this grand bird of prey has, in the adult state, dark-brown plumage, with yellowish colour on the head and nape. It may be distinguished at once from the White-tailed Sea Eagle, having feathers on the legs; the adult White Sea Eagle

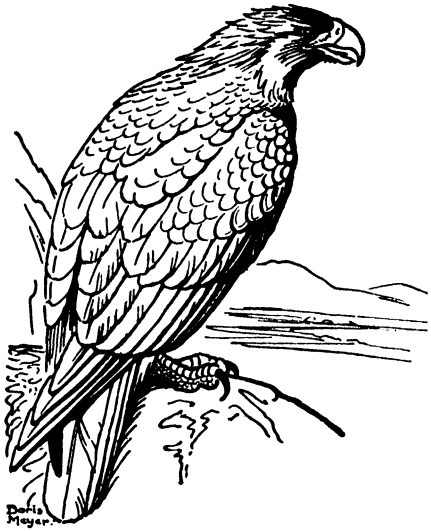


FIG. 8. Golden Eagle

also bears a white tail. The powerful talons are bluish-black, and the toes rich yellow. Its leisurely, well-directed flight is sustained by powerful wing-beats; its soaring and gliding evolutions are full of the poetry of motion, yet on the ground it has a clumsy gait. Individuals use favourite perching places, where they will sit for hours apparently quite contented. They haunt crags, rocky precipices,

mountains, and wooded fastnesses, and nest on cliffs, as well as in trees. The bulky nest is composed of heath, rushes, sticks, and twigs, and the one or two eggs (rarely three) are whitish, with blotches of reddish-brown. The nesting period is March and April. The prey consists of carrion, grouse, and other birds, with hares, young lambs, rats, and other mammals. The food is carried in the talons. The voice is best described as a shrill yelp ; the bird also emits a whistling note and a bark.

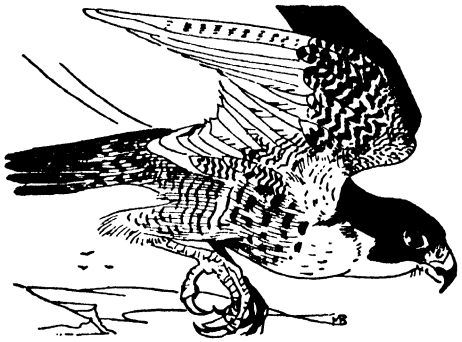


FIG. 9. Peregrine Falcon

Another grand bird of prey, found in haunts somewhat similar to those of the Golden Eagle, next claims attention; this is the **Peregrine Falcon** (Fig. 9). High cliffs near the sea are a favourite habitat, as well as mountainous country, where the Grouse, Pipits, and Twites are almost the only other bird-tenants likely to be encountered. This very fierce and very handsome bird of prey is slate-grey on the upper parts, with darker bars, and has a bluish-black head, with moustaches from the gape. It is white, with black bars, below, and there is a

tinge of buff on the breast. The legs and feet are yellow. The wings are sharp-pointed. Ledges of rocks and sea-cliffs are chosen for its nesting site; if a nest is made it consists of bents, rabbit-flick, sticks, and straw. Sometimes only a few sticks are used, at others an old nest of another species is appropriated. The two to four eggs are profusely speckled with reddish-brown; the egg resembles a larger edition of that of the Hobby Falcon. The nesting period is April and May. The prey of this

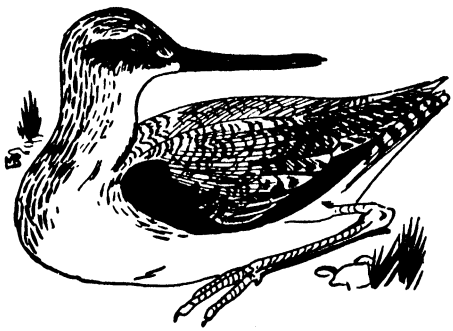


FIG. 10. Greenshank

bold feathered warrior consists of sea and other birds, such as grouse, pigeons, and snipe. It will also take mammals, pursuing its victim with great pertinacity, dashing flight, and unerring aim. The squeaky note of its voice reminds one of the Sparrow Hawk, and is likened to a sharp *kek-kek*. It also utters a hoarse quack and plaintive cry. The young are called Eyasses.

Another wading bird is the **Greenshank** (Fig. 10), our next tenant of moors, mountains, and coast. This species is larger and much less common than the

Redshank, having much longer stilt-like legs. Sometimes it may be seen on mud-flats and the sea-shore consorting with other closely allied birds. But as a nesting species it is only found in the north of Scotland. It has a dark-brown back in summer, with head and breast spotted the same colour, but in winter the back is greyish, and the under parts white. When the bird is flying away from the observer, the white rump is a distinctive feature. Nesting operations take place during May, and a mere depression in the ground is used for the reception of the four eggs. These may be near or far away from water. These eggs are stone-colour, with brown or grey blotches and spots. The voice is a three-syllabled musical cry, not unlike that of its red-legged cousin, the Redshank. The diet is varied, and is made up of crustaceans, small fish, insects, shellfish, and worms.

Where there are heather-clad moors one associates with such a health-giving space the **Black** and **Red Grouse** (Figs. 11 and 12), and these two game birds are next upon our list. The Black Grouse resorts to mountains, heaths, moors, and woods, and is often referred to as the Black Cock. It nests from April to June, and places its nest on the ground among herbage. Little attempt is made to build a nest, but if materials are used, they consist of fern, grass, heath, or ling. The seven to ten yellowish eggs are prominently marked with dark brown. The male has bluish-black plumage ; it has white underneath the lyre-shaped tail and scarlet wattles above the eyes. The female is altogether lighter in colour, being grey and light brown, and is known in some parts as the Grey Hen. The male has a cooing note, and the female makes a somewhat similar response.

In addition, the male has a hissing note, and crows. The food is made up of berries, buds, grain, and insects, and I have seen the handsome male perched on the pliant branch of a birch tree in spring greedily devouring the catkins.

The Red Grouse is noteworthy as the only bird found in Great Britain and Ireland which is not an inhabitant of any other part of the world. It is a



FIG. 11. Black Grouse

lover of the open moor, and when rambling across one of these open tracts of country, the alarm notes of *cock-cock*, and *go-back-back-back*, are among the chief bird voices the listener is likely to hear. The hen utters a nasal *yow-yow-yow*. The male has a reddish-brown head and neck, with chestnut-brown and bars and specks of black on the upper parts. The breast is nearly black, tipped with white. There is a red comb above each eye. In summer the colour

is lighter, and in winter the under parts are frequently mottled with white. The hen is more reddish-yellow. A slight hollow in the ground serves as a nesting-place, and there may be a few sprigs or moorland plants and a few feathers. The six to fourteen eggs are red, blotched and mottled with rich brown, and are produced from March to June. The food resembles that of the Black Grouse. In autumn and winter Grouse form coveys like the Partridge, and as they proceed down-wind, just skimming the ground with a slanting, whirring flight, they suit their surroundings so well that the high moorlands would lose some of their charm without them.



FIG. 12. Red Grouse

The **Black-headed Gull** (Fig. 13) may be met with in several different haunts, but as it nests on damp marshes and moors, among other places, it may rightly be included here, and further detailed notes elsewhere will be unnecessary. It is really a misnomer to call this common species black-headed, as it is more brownish-black than black, and this description only applies in summer. Hence, when the autumn moult takes place and the characteristic dark patch on the head is lost, confusion is bound to occur. Moreover, Gulls are so often met with in immature

plumage that this confusion is increased. Mostly the dress is grey on the wings, with black at the extremities, the rest white. The beak and legs are red. The haunts are fields, lakes, marshes, moors and rivers, and the sea and seashore, and in recent years numbers have come inland far from their more usual abode. The nest is built on moors, around lakes and other sheets of water, and is always on or close to the ground. Not much attempt at construction is made, dead grass and sedge being the only constituents. The three eggs vary in ground colour, such as blue, brown, dark and light green, and yellow. The markings, too, exhibit much variation, some having many dark blotches and spots, and others very few. This Gull breeds in colonies during April and May, and is at all times very social in its habits. The note is a mournful scream frequently repeated. The diet is varied, consisting of carrion and other garbage found floating in the sea or lying on the shore, and of fish and insects and their larvae. On ploughed land the bird no doubt performs useful work in ridding the soil of insect pests. In severe weather it becomes very tame, and a flock of many hundreds of these birds visited a gypsy caravan pitched along one of Hertfordshire's green lanes (a Roman road in bygone times), and actually took scraps from a gypsy's

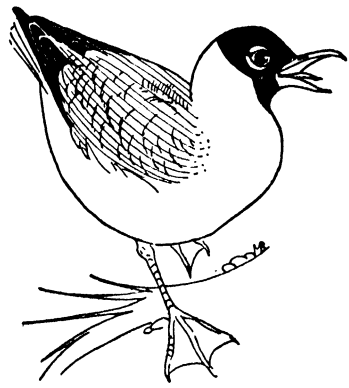


FIG. 13. Black-headed Gull

hand. In Norfolk this Gull breeds in large numbers at Scoulton Mere, and there are other large colonies elsewhere.

It is high time we had a peep at a downland and heathland bird, and wherever these inviting haunts are found there one may reasonably expect to see the Linnet (Fig. 14). This is one of our commoner Finches, and one of our few British birds which sings both on the wing and in chorus. The male in his best spring livery is a really handsome bird, the light and darker brown plumage being relieved by a crimson forehead and breast. The female is duller, and lacks the crimson. Her markings are also more striated than those of her mate. The Linnet delights in a furze-clad heath, and when disturbed twitters pleasantly on the wing. It cannot be ranked in the highest class of our songsters, but perhaps the seriousness with which its sweet and varied notes are uttered makes a particular appeal. When several birds engage in chorus the effect is very charming. The neat nest is placed in a bush, or hedge, and little colonies are sometimes found close together. The nesting period is April to June, and the four or five pale blue or white eggs have dark specks. Although a hard-billed bird, the Linnet feeds on insects as well as weed seeds, and when the dandelion "clocks," or "drowsy domes," as they have been called, are in full array in our fields and waste places, flocks of these birds find a happy hunting-ground,



FIG. 14. Linnet

and perform good work in ridding the land of the seeds of this plant warrior.

When heath fires occur in spring and summer much destruction of bird life takes place. As the fire rushes along, terrified fledgelings, unable to leave the nests, are burnt alive. In one such fire a female Linnet was found still sitting on her nest after the flames had died down. Her charred body was lifted, and underneath it crouched her chicks, alive, saved by her devotion.



FIG. 15. Merlin

A somewhat rare and small bird of prey is the next object of our quest. This is the **Merlin** (Fig. 15) which haunts cliffs, dunes, moors, and mountains, mostly in the north. It is our smallest British Hawk. The male is greyish-blue on the upper parts, with the tail barred with black. The under parts are reddish-yellow, with dark striations. The beak is bluish, the cere yellow, the iris dark brown, and the feet yellow. The claws are black. The upper parts in the female are brownish, the under parts yellowish-white. Three to five reddish-brown eggs are laid during May and June on a cliff, rock, or among herbage, and if any attempt is made to fashion a home, pieces of heather are used, with a lining of dry grass or rootlets. The bird has the habit of sitting on a rock, or stone, and because of this is known in

some parts as the Stone Falcon. The voice is heard in a shrill chatter and a quivering scream. Possessed of swift powers on the wing, this small Hawk is well capable of preying upon birds of various kinds, and will also take insects.

The **Ring Ouzel** (Fig. 16) is a characteristic bird of northern moors, and is known also as the Moor and Mountain Blackbird. The handsome male might well be mistaken for a cock Blackbird from the rear, but the Ouzel is a larger bird, and may at once be known by having a white crescent on the throat in both sexes. It is not jet-black like the male Blackbird, being brownish-black with a rusty tinge. The feathers have whitish edges. The female is lighter, and the crescent on her throat is less conspicuous, being narrower and not so white. This species is a summer migrant only, and makes its appearance by the end of March or early April. Delighting in wild, desolate places among the hills, it places a well-built nest of coarse and fine grasses on a bank, in a clump of heather or other herbage, or in the crevice of a rock. The four or five light green eggs, marked with rufous blotches, are rounder than those of the Blackbird. Two broods are reared. Some observers describe the notes as akin to the Blackbird, but to my ear they are more broken up, and remind me of the wild exultant song of the Mistle Thrush. The Ring Ouzel is, however, a very

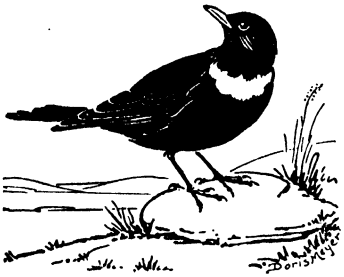


FIG. 16. Ring Ouzel

silent bird, a fact which seems to emphasize its love of solitude. The food consists of moorland fruits, as well as insects and their larvae, slugs, and snails. When alighting, the Ring Ouzel has the Blackbird's habit of cocking up its tail, and when courting, both sexes have a dancing habit which affords much entertainment to the bird-watcher.

A much smaller bird which resorts to downs, heaths, and moors will be constantly heard uttering its shrill alarm-note as one rambles over the hills and far away. This is the **Meadow Pipit** (Fig. 17), or Heather Lintie, as it is called in Scotland. It is also known as the Titlark, but this is rather confusing, as a near relative, the Tree Pipit, has also had this local name conferred upon it. The Meadow Pipit utters its song with great persistency as it mounts the air and planes earthwards in a slanting direction. The notes are rather thin, and not nearly as powerful as those of the Skylark or Tree Pipit. For all that one would not be without the rise and fall of the Meadow Pipit's call as the bird darts from almost beneath one's feet. Perhaps it is best to describe it as a tinkling song, more welcome because of the absence of song-birds in the haunts frequented by this active and engaging little species. Active it most assuredly is as it walks and runs over the ground, threads its way through dense herbage, or mounts the air. In winter a southern movement takes place, and one

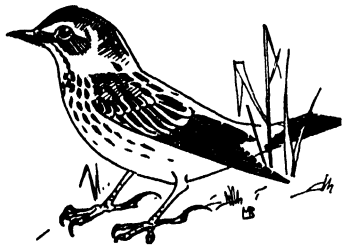


FIG. 17. Meadow Pipit

may look for the bird around sheep-folds, on the seashore, and even in the country garden. In old-time haunts of this bird which have been altered beyond all recognition since I was a boy, I still find one or two pairs lingering on, but in such places its days are numbered, and urbanization will sooner or later drive it away altogether. The nesting period is May and June, and the site chosen is among grasses or heather, or at the base of a bush. The nest is a neat structure of dry grass and roots, lined with fine grass, hair, or wool, and may sometimes be discovered by a grassy wayside. The five or six eggs are light and dark brown, or yellowish, profusely covered with brown or chocolate. In Scotland the Meadow Pipit is the favourite foster-parent of the Cuckoo, and it was in the nest of one of these birds in Ayrshire that, in 1895, the first photographs were taken of a young Cuckoo bundling out of the nest the rightful tenants of the family nursery. These photographs were exhibited by me before the Royal Society in 1905, and set the seal upon a happening in birdland which had been in dispute for many years. When flushed from the nest, this species feigns a broken wing, and thus lures the intruder away. The food consists of insects and seeds of weeds. It is a small brown bird of trim appearance, with dull buff-white on the under parts, well spotted with Thrush-like markings of dull brown. The long curved hind claw is a characteristic feature.

The moors signal to us again to search for the **Golden Plover** (Fig. 18), which, when seen in its best golden-mottled plumage in the heyday of spring, is a joy to behold. It is difficult to ex-

aggerate the loveliness of the attire of this inhabitant of the moors in summer, and the fields, mud-flats, and seashore in winter. The rich golden head, back, and wings picked out with black, the black patch stretching from the base of the beak and round the eye, together with a line of white over the eye and black-and-white breast, make a remarkably beautiful combination of colour and marking. This is the summer dress; in winter the black under parts are lost, but the golden tint above becomes even brighter than in spring. Large flocks travel south in autumn and consort with Lapwings, and in a mixed assembly of the two species, whether standing sentinel-like in the fields, or on the wing in the air, it is easy to distinguish one from the other by the smaller size of the Golden Plover, as well as by his wild musical cry contrasted with the mournful ditty of his larger cousin. Watching the birds when on the wing affords a good example of the influence of the light as it strikes upon the dappled bodies of these northern visitors, for now they appear all dark, and then, as they turn and wheel round, the light catches them and they appear all light colour. This bird nests on northern moors and also in the west country; if any attempt is made at building a home, just a sprinkling of grass or heath is used. The four pear-shaped eggs are laid on the ground, and have a much warmer yellow-

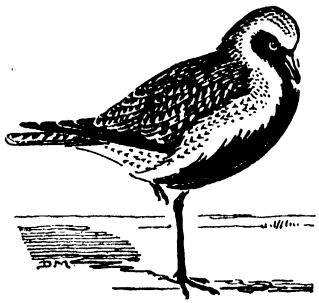


FIG. 18. Golden Plover

ish tint than those of the Lapwing, with prominent blotches of blackish-brown. The food taken consists of berries, seeds, insects, slugs, snails, and worms, and there is no doubt it is a beneficial bird to the farmer. When resorting to the mud-flats in winter it eats various marine creatures.

To find the **Ptarmigan** (Fig. 19) a visit must be paid to the higher mountains of Scotland, and even if the hills are still snow-covered in spring, and there seems small chance of finding a clutch of eggs, I have more than once discovered one nesting in a hollow in the snow. Under such wintry conditions the seven to ten yellowish eggs, blotched and spotted with rich dark brown, looked strangely beautiful. Little, if any, attempt is made to build a nest. If materials are used, a few twigs of heather and dead grass are requisitioned. This handsome game bird undergoes three moults during the year, in spring, autumn, and winter. The white plumage of winter—there is also a sprinkling of black on the tail and wings at the latter season—is replaced in spring with brown, buff, and grey bars on the upper parts and breast of the male, and his mate is more sandy. The autumn dress is grey on the upper parts of the male, and browner in the female. Both species possess a red comb above the eye. To pick out this bird in winter, when the

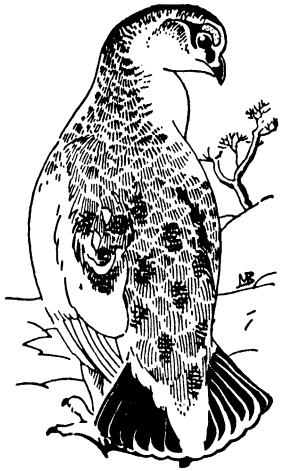


FIG. 19. Ptarmigan

rocky mountains it frequents are covered with a mass of snow, is a difficult proposition; when, as sometimes happens, these birds burrow under the snow, observation of them develops into a game of hide-and-seek. If one hears this bird of the highland solitudes giving voice, one might be reminded of a frog's prolonged croaking at a pond during its courting days. At other times it utters a low *ug-ug*

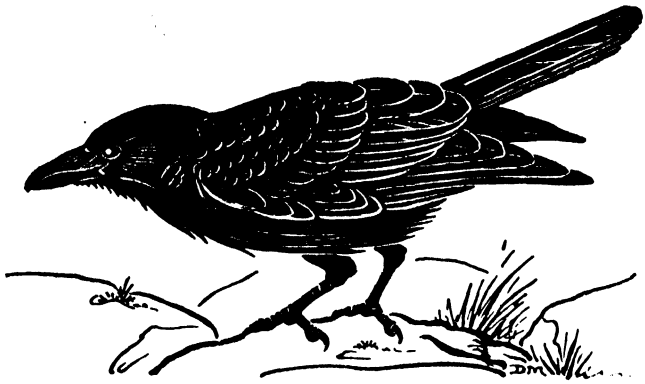


FIG. 20. Raven

on taking to flight. The food consists of berries, buds, leaves, lichen, moss, and shoots.

Another bird which dwells far from the haunts of men is the **Raven** (Fig. 20), a large, all-black bird with a very powerful beak, and strong legs and feet. Its haunts are mountains, precipitous cliffs, and large woods. It is a solitary species, and the largest member of the Crow tribe, as the quarrelsome Starling is the smallest. It is an early nester, a commencement often being made in February, and an end, as a rule, in April. The big and untidy nest is placed on rocks, ledges of cliffs, and in tall

trees, and is composed of roots and sticks, with a lining of grass, hair, and wool. The four or five greenish eggs are blotched with dark brown. The note is a hoarse croak; when the bird is in a temper it sounds like *howk-howk*, and when it is hungry it sounds more like *ark-ark*. I once heard a Raven which had been kept as a cage bird actually whistle a deep-throated but pleasant little tune—which reminds me that I have heard a cockney Sparrow at the London Zoo suddenly burst into song! All is fish that comes to the Raven's net; in other words, it will not disdain almost anything worth eating. Birds and other animals, carrion, eggs, fruit, grain, grubs, and worms go to make up its varied diet. Its flight is slow, measured, and strong. It soars to a great height, and wheels about in the air in a nonchalant manner delightful to notice. Its wings are at times motionless, the bold bird seeming to revel in its complete mastery of the air; yet it is cautious and shy, and has been known to show fear when attacked by such a small bird as the Lapwing.

Once again we visit the broads, fens, marshes, meres, moors, mud-flats, saltings, or seashore to discover another wader, the **Redshank** (Fig. 21). This is a fine upstanding bird, and its long red beak and legs help to identify it. It is one of the chief sentinels of the seashore; and when—as frequently—it feeds in company with Oyster Catchers and Ringed Plovers, the unison of the alarm-cries of these three species is delightful to hear. Even when the bird is migrating inland, the notes of the Redshank sound loud and clear under cover of darkness. More than once I have challenged a flock as the birds

passed overhead, whereupon the feathered travellers have changed their course, apparently wondering from whence came the shrill and piercing imitation cry of *toodle-oodle-oodle*. On another occasion, when near Heacham in Norfolk, I observed a Redshank flying towards me over a hedge near the sea. I challenged it, and the bird, quite nonplussed, suddenly pulled itself up, lit in the roadway in front of me, and commenced to bob up and down in its characteristic way. It is a restless bird, for ever on the move, and as it flies away from the observer, the white rump is prominently displayed to view. The summer plumage is greyish-brown, the tail barred, the throat and upper breast streaked, and the under parts white. In winter the plumage is greyer on the upper parts, and whiter below. The nesting period is April and May, and the nest is usually well hidden among a dense mass of herbage on marshy ground. Dry grass, a sprinkling of moss, and perhaps a few heather twigs, may be used in nest-building, but quite frequently surrounding plants are just trodden down to form a rush cradle, and that is all. The four pear-shaped eggs are yellowish, handsomely blotched and spotted with dark brown. As the Redshank walks and runs along the shore or mud-flat it presents an engaging sight, and when it takes to wing it flies low, just skimming the surface of the water. It is a very

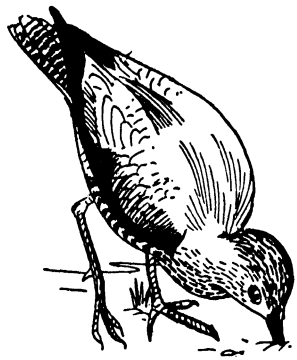


FIG. 21. Redshank

fast flier, and its wings are very clear cut. Of late years I have found this bird nesting in two of the home counties, where it is certainly a new-comer. When it is disturbed, I have noticed with interest how quickly the Redshank can mount high in the air, to fly round and round in ever-widening circles. The food sought after consists of insects, small crustaceans, shellfish, marine worms, and other creatures. It is a good swimmer.

Strange to relate, not only has the last-named species recently occurred in places where it had not previously been noted, but a near relative, the **Green Sandpiper** (Fig. 22) is decidedly on the increase in certain districts known to me. Nevertheless, it is still an uncommon bird of passage and winter visitor. I can now locate it almost any time in winter on a marshy common near a river, in company with Snipe. It is a larger bird and has longer legs than the Common Sandpiper. The upper parts are olive-brown on the back and wings, decorated with white flecks; the head and breast are spotted, and the outer tail feathers are barred with brown. One sure means of identifying this species is the conspicuous white patch as the bird rises and flies away. It rises quickly on the wing, and will proceed quite a distance high in the air, but often returns to the place risen from if the observer has patience enough to wait and watch. Search should be made for this Sandpiper on a damp moor where there is a



FIG. 22 Green Sandpiper

stream, as well as along the margins of lakes, ponds, and rivers. It has a shrill alarm-note like *too-ee*, or *too-o-lee*. The food is made up of aquatic insects and other water creatures, including molluscs. Curiously enough, this species normally usurps the deserted drey of a squirrel, or old bird's nest, and there deposits its eggs. Many of the Sandpipers perch in trees; this is the only one that nests in them, although not in our own country.

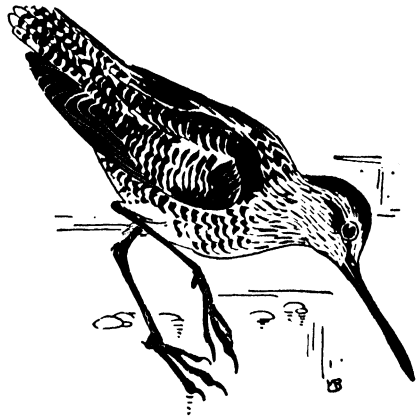


FIG. 23. Common Snipe

Where there is a swampy heath or moor one may be fairly certain of flushing one or more Snipe (Fig. 23), and as the bird rises and flies away at breakneck speed, screaming as it goes, it is engaging to watch its zigzag course. This bird squats so closely that it may almost be trodden on, and will rise hurriedly from beneath one's feet. Sometimes, in a good Snipe season, several birds may be disturbed, and I have seen as many as thirty rise, one after the other. The nest is placed among herbage in marshy

places during April or early May, and consists of a few pieces of grass or sedge. The four greenish-olive eggs have blotches of dark brown, and taper, pear-like, at the smaller end. It has a mottled black and chestnut-brown plumage, with white and dusky bars on the flanks, and white under parts. It has a long beak well suited for probing after food, which consists of insects and worms. In spring the curious bleating or drumming noise made by the vibration of the wings and tail is a feature on a warm evening at sundown; by day the Snipe remains hidden among the herbage it frequents. The sound has an eerie effect in the twilight, and for some time it was a disputed point as to how this was produced.



FIG. 24.
Stonechat

On a breezy heath, where furze bushes are lit with a blaze of gold, is the spot *par excellence* in which to find that cheery little bird the **Stonechat** (Fig. 24). This is an impetuous and restless bird, but, like the Whinchat, it perches on the topmost branch of a bush, and does not mind being watched. When its nest is in close proximity, the bird becomes still more agitated; and as it flirts and jerks its wings, and utters a frequent harsh alarm-note of *wee-chic*, *wee-chic-chic*, it thrusts itself, as it were, under one's notice. It also has a low sweet song. All this performance is heightened by the gay colouring of the male bird, with his black head and throat, brownish-black back, and black tail, relieved by a white collar. Although favouring the summit of a bush for perching, and

as a look-out place, the Stonechat hides its nest craftily among herbage, or at the base of a bush. An intensive search is required to find this well-made home in the month of May. It consists of grass, moss, hair, and wool, and perhaps some feathers. The four to six bluish-green eggs have a faint speckling of red-brown at the larger end. Insects and their larvae constitute the bird's chief food, but seeds, spiders, and worms are also taken. It is worthy of note that the Stonechat is also found amid sand-dunes or bushes near the sea.



FIG. 25. Twite

The familiar Linnet of our downs, heaths, and waysides is represented on the moors of the north and midlands by its near relative, the **Twite** (Fig. 25). This bird and the Meadow Pipit may be numbered among the few small species found in such a haunt; thus the observer is not likely to be puzzled concerning their identity—as, for example, he may be puzzled to distinguish the various kinds of warblers and waders that occur elsewhere. Two other names for this slim-built bird are Heather Lintie and Mountain Linnet. It is plain-looking, being dark and light brown above, has a tawny-brown throat, dull white breast and belly, and is streaked with dark brown on the flanks. There is a red tinge on the rump of the male. The bill is light yellow. The nesting period is the end of May or early June; the nest—placed among herbage on or close to the ground, and sometimes in dwarf bushes—is made of

bents, down, feathers, hair, heather sprigs, moss, and wool. The four to six eggs resemble those of the Linnet, but are rather smaller, and have a bluer tint. The call resembles the bird's name of "twite," which may be cut short, or long-drawn-out; it has also a shrill song, less agreeable than that of its commoner cousin. Weed seeds form the staple diet, but insects may be taken in summer. Some Twites leave their high moorland home in winter, and resort to fields, marshes, and the seashore; others come to us in autumn and leave our shores in spring. When courtship rivalry is at its height, the male Twite is given to sexual display, opening and closing its wings, and thus showing its red rump.



FIG. 26.
Dartford Warbler

Now we have to consider the **Dartford Warbler** (Fig. 26), one of our rarest warblers; discovery of an example of this species marks a red-letter day for the observer. It is a resident, sparingly distributed on commons and heaths in the south of England. It is a shy, pert, and active little bird, and the observer has to keep a keen watch to follow it as it flits about furze and other bushes, taking cover at every available opportunity. The male has dark greyish-brown plumage on the head, back, and tail, with chestnut-brown below. The wings are short, but the tail is long. The female is browner, with lighter under parts. The nest, made of furze, dead grass, and roots, with a lining of hair or wool, is usually placed in a furze bush, or among heather. The four to six

greenish eggs are closely mottled with brown and grey, and there is a zone of markings at the larger end. This bird has an impetuous song, a scolding note, a clear and musical *pitchoo*, and a triple call-note. It is an insect-eater, but does not disdain berries in winter. It is a matter for regret that this, our only resident warbler, should have disappeared from several of its former haunts, and it is to be hoped that those remaining will receive every protection. Fires, the spread of jerry-building in the countryside, and the undiscriminating egg-collector, are jointly responsible for decrease in the numbers of this delightful little bird.

Unexpected happenings occur when one is watching wild nature. An example befell me several years ago; I was seated on the close-cropped turf on the highest point of St. Bee's Head, Cumberland, when, to my surprise, I noticed hundreds of Oil Beetles gathered there, as if that were a meeting-place for this solitary and slow-moving insect. Why at this spring festival such a great number of these Beetles should have assembled I cannot surmise, but as I watched these insect legions crawling laboriously about, I suddenly espied half a dozen long-legged birds which I at once knew were **Wheatears** (Fig. 27). These are early summer migrants to our shores, and their presence did not surprise me, but I was attracted by their large size and handsome appearance. Then it dawned upon me that the birds I was looking at were Greenland Wheatears, which are only passage migrants, and do not stay to nest with us. This latter species is more brightly coloured than the typical form which inhabits our downs, heaths, and moorlands, and

breeds in Greenland and north-east America. These rarer visitors seem to travel northwards overland by easy stages, and appeared quite at home on the springy turf of the breezy headland mentioned. Our own Wheatear is also a most attractive bird, the male especially being of elegant appearance and sprightly gait. It is pale grey above, and cream colour below. The wings and wing coverts and tail are black. There is a black patch near the eye and a white stripe above it, and a warm tinge on the white throat and breast. The distinguishing feature, however, is the flash of white which is displayed on the rump as the restless bird rises from the ground. Indeed, in some country districts it is known as White Rump. The female is not so gaudy as her mate, but she too has the white patch. Wherever there are sandy or stony places, a look-out should be kept for this remarkable bird. I have frequently found it miles from any habitation in the famous Breckland wilds of Suffolk, and when, on occasions, it has been accompanied by the elegant Yellow Wagtail, the sight is one to bring joy to all who behold it. The Wheatear is for ever on the move, shifting from clod to clod, or from stone to stone, like a living jack-in-the-box, and its long legs add to its attractiveness. As it moves about, it cries incessantly *chik-chak-chak*, but in the pairing season the gay-clad male displays himself in the air with outstretched wings, and utters a pleasant little song. The nest is built from April onwards, and is



FIG. 27. Wheatear

well hidden on the ground, in crevices of walls, at the base of a shrub, under stones, and in similar places. The four to six eggs are pale greenish-blue. The main food supply consists of insects, but small snails and other soft-bodied creatures are also eaten.

A smaller edition of the Curlew next deserves notice. This is the **Whimbrel** (see Fig. 110), whose haunts are moors in summer, and mud-flats, saltings, and the seashore at other times. This species resembles its larger relative in many respects, but has not such a long and curved bill, and is a migrant. The dark-brown head has two broad pale streaks down the centre, and the rest of the plumage on the upper parts is darker than that of the Curlew. The nest is placed in a hollow of the ground, and is composed of a few pieces of dry grass, heather, and moss. The four olive-brown eggs are marked with darker brown. The call is a shrill *curlee*, a whistling and constant *titterel*, and *tetty-tetty-tit*. The diet is made up of berries, crustaceans, insects, very small fish, shellfish, snails, and worms.

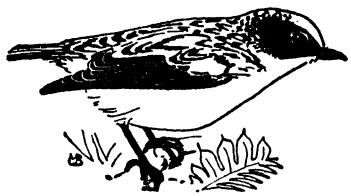


FIG. 28. Whinchat

The last resident of the high grounds is the **Whinchat** (Fig. 28), another summer visitor, which haunts commons, downs, heaths, and waste places, and like the Corn Bunting and Red-backed Shrike, is very partial to railway banks in the same way. The male is a handsome bird adorned with a black cheek, a prominent white line over the eye, a white bar on the wings, and white on either side of the tail. It is

dusky brown above, with reddish-yellow edgings. The throat and neck sides are white, and the neck and breast are yellowish-red. The belly and flanks are yellowish-white. The female is duller, and lacks the black and white. The nest is placed on or close to the ground in May and June, and the materials used are coarse and fine grass, moss, straw, and, on occasions, hair and roots. The four to six eggs are greenish-blue, sometimes sparingly speckled with faint red. Insects and their larvae, and worms, constitute the bill of fare. This is another restless species; when moving about it constantly cries *utac-tac-tac-tac*, and *chee-tic*, *chee-tic-tic*, but also sings a low warbling song which, when listened to intently, has a very pleasing effect.



Chapter IX

BIRD-WATCHING IN THE FIELDS AND MEADOWS

CORN BUNTING – CORNCRAKE – STONE CURLEW – TURTLE DOVE – GULLS – JACKDAW – LAPWING – ENGLISH PARTRIDGE – FRENCH PARTRIDGE – GOLDEN PLOVER – QUAIL – ROOK – SKYLARK – WOODLARK – STARLING.

An observer is quite likely to see in fields and meadows a number of different kinds of birds not listed at the head of this Chapter. For example, Ring Doves or Wood Pigeons are almost sure to be there, although their rightful haunt is in the woods. The Green Woodpecker, again, may spring a surprise on the observer, and for a moment puzzle him. This lovely bird's appearance in field or meadow is probably due to ants' nests ; this woodland rover is very fond of ants. Indeed, there is hardly a limit to the different species likely to be encountered, for many birds are attracted to fields and meadows as feeding-grounds or resting-places. Again, there are fields and meadows which, owing to the decay of British agriculture, have been untilled and left in a wild state. Bushes and shrubs spring up as the result of seeds carried by birds or wind ; it is remarkable how, in a few years, a field left in the rough becomes covered with scrub and a host of wild

plants. One such field I have in mind is on a sloping hillside. It is difficult to plough and cultivate, and although it is derelict land and brings no return to my farmer friend, it is a happy hunting-ground for the botanist, entomologist, and ornithologist. In seed-time charms of Goldfinches find the thistle heads a delicacy, and earlier in the year flocks of Linnets feast ravenously on the seeds of dandelion. Other birds are also attracted to such a retreat, so that some latitude must be allowed in selection of the more usual residents. The hedgerows surrounding the fields also, of course, attract birds for purposes of feeding, nesting, and roosting, and through these main arteries the feathered population ebbs and flows.



FIG. 29. Corn Bunting

Although a local species, one of those most likely to be seen is the **Corn Bunting** (Fig. 29) whose wheezy little song, uttered with much seriousness, constantly greets the ear. It is our largest British Bunting, and has the habit of sitting contentedly upon the topmost branch of a bush, a stone wall, or a clod of earth, as it emits its persistent song. It is a solitary species, and each pair seem to have their own restricted territory. It is a plain-looking bird, having yellowish-brown on the upper parts, with dusky spots. The under parts are lighter colour, with dusky spots and streaks. One means of knowing this Bunting in flight is its slow and laborious progress through the air,

with legs hanging down. It nests in May and June, and delights in a grassy situation at the base of a hedge or bush, or in a tussock of coarse herbage. The nest is made of dry grass, moss, and straw on the exterior, with a lining of fine grass, roots, and occasionally hair. Four handsome eggs are produced as a rule, dull white in ground colour, with blotches and streaks of liver-colour to black. They vary in shade and markings. The diet consists of insects, grain, and seeds. If there are telephone or telegraph wires near the field or meadow, it is more than likely that this Bunting may there be seen. In winter fresh arrivals reach our shores from the Continent, and some of our breeding birds leave us in autumn and return the following spring.

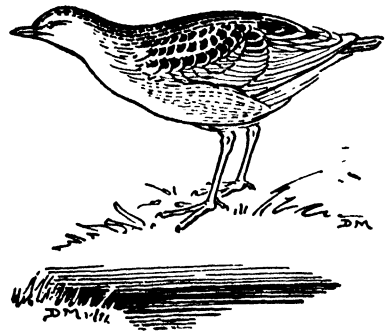


FIG. 30. Corncrake

As already noted, the **Corncrake**, or **Landrail** (Fig. 30), is now much less common than it was a few years ago. When the corn-fields and hay meadow took longer to cut, and farming was not such an intensive operation as now, this summer migrant was often to be heard throughout the summer evening in many haunts from which it has now disappeared. Rural development, too, has deepened the death knell of this most interesting bird. Of secretive habits, it keeps to the ground, skulking among the corn or grasses; it is thus true that by remaining silent the bird can quite easily go un-

recorded, but this by no means accounts for its unfortunate decrease. It runs swiftly, taking advantage of cover, threading its way through the long grass with head held forward, and its body is well adapted for the terrestrial life it leads. It is yellowish-brown above, with darker markings. The white throat merges into a greyish-buff breast, the belly is white towards the centre, and on the flanks there are bars and other markings of brown and buff. It is a late migrant, and nesting does not begin in earnest until the end of May and in June. Little attempt is made to build a nest; a shallow structure, composed of dry grass and leaves, with finer grasses for a lining, is placed on the ground. The seven to twelve or more eggs are buff colour, blotched or spotted with reddish-brown and ash-grey. Among grasses in a bank, or hedge, is a favourite site for a home. The harsh cry of *kray-kray* is often repeated, and my chief memory of this kind of bird is of a chorus set up by many of them when I first visited Ayrshire one June evening many years ago. It is strange how such red-letter days among birds remain indelibly inscribed upon one's memory, but they constitute one of the charms of outdoor life. The Corncrake is a beneficial bird, feeding chiefly upon insects of various kinds, as well as slugs, snails, worms, and weed seeds. It is largely nocturnal, and if a specimen is captured, it is said to simulate death, "hanging limply with closed eyes, but recovering instantly if opportunity of escape presents itself." Thus writes that most accurate recorder of birds, the late T. A. Coward.

Some birds' names are misleading to those with only a superficial knowledge of them; the Oyster

Catcher does not catch oysters, and the Stone Curlew (Fig. 31) is certainly not a Curlew. It is a Plover, and is called in some districts the Norfolk Plover, as well as Thicknee—for the long legs of this rare and most interesting bird are thickened at the knee. Its haunts are waste commons, downs, heaths, and wolds, but I am also acquainted with large cultivated fields where it returns from its southern journey to breed every year. One of our rarest summer migrants, it normally reaches us by the end of

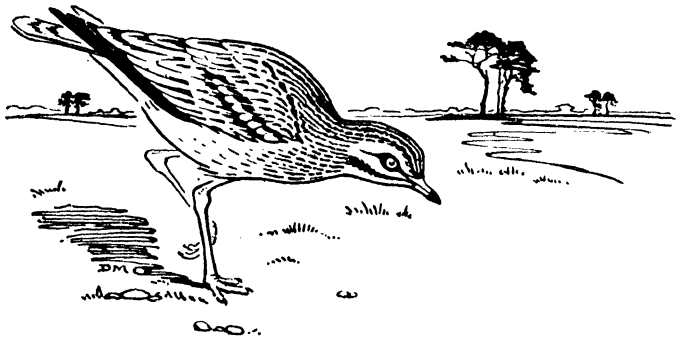


FIG. 31. Stone Curlew

March. Although a large bird, its detection needs a practised eye, as it not only keeps to the ground during the day, but also squats so close to the earth that the light-reddish-brown and dark-brown plumage, with lighter under parts, harmonize perfectly with its surroundings. The Stone Curlew has large prominent eyes and yellow legs. If disturbed, it will run along a furrow, or thread its way among the herbage, with head and body carried well forward, reminding one of the Corncrake. Rarely taking to wing by day, it comes from its

hiding-place to seek for food at night, and in the quietude of the evening the bird may be heard uttering its musical piping cry which at times reminds me of that of the Golden Plover. Time and time again within range of my country home I have tried to stalk this species by daylight, but its wariness is such that, even if once plainly seen, it disappears before one's eyes as if by magic, and cannot again be located.

During a recent nesting season a farmer friend showed me one of these birds sitting on its two eggs in the furrow of a ploughed field, but long before we got within easy distance the bird slipped quietly off her eggs, ran stealthily along the furrow, and was lost to view. Not far away we found two more eggs of this shy bird, which it had for some reason deserted in favour of the second clutch. Only two eggs are laid. There was no cover in the field, and as we wanted to photograph the sitting bird on the two fresh eggs, we placed some dead branches within a few feet of it so that the bird could get used to the new addition before we returned a day or two later with our camera. It was with trepidation that we next approached the nest, but careful and patient stalking enabled a successful picture to be obtained.

The eggs are buff colour, blotched with dark brown, and can almost be trodden on without being seen, so nearly do they match the place where they are laid, little or no attempt being made to build a nest. When the young are hatched they possess, even during the first few moments of their life, the habits of their parents in squatting low and remaining perfectly still. This inherited trait is very interesting and worth noting. The nesting period

is May and June, and there is no doubt that the same haunt, even the same field, is resorted to each year. In the autumn—although I have only once witnessed such an event, when I saw thirty of them on a heathery warren in Norfolk—these birds gather in company preparatory to migration. As many as two hundred have been seen together, a great sight. A few birds may possibly stay to spend the winter with us. The Stone Curlew is a farmer's friend, its food consisting of insects, snails, and worms. Other things may be taken, such as frogs and mice, but of this I have no direct evidence. Perhaps it would have been wiser to have given the Stone Curlew a place in the last Chapter, since it occurs on commons, downs, and heaths; but it is in wide open fields, separated in many cases by the old Saxon baulks instead of by hedgerows, that my first-hand studies have been made, and thus the bird finds mention here.



FIG. 32. Turtle Dove

There is no doubt that the next species, the **Turtle Dove** (Fig. 32), is a field-loving bird. It is another summer visitor, a later arrival than the Stone Curlew, usually appearing in mid-April, and soon spreading over the countryside to become one of our chief bird-tenants during summer and autumn. It is our smallest Dove, and cannot be mistaken for any of its larger relatives. It has a light-brown back,

marked with black; an ash-coloured head; a black space on the neck-sides is tipped with white. Neck and breast are a pale wine-red, belly and under tail-coverts white, and the dusky tail has all, except two central feathers, tipped with white. The legs and feet are also red. This bird feeds in the fields; for cover and nesting purposes it chooses a tall hedge, copse, or wood. It nests from May to July, constructing a mere platform of dead twigs. The two creamy-white eggs can be seen from underneath the nest. The bird's note is very unlike that of the Ring Dove, being a soft agreeable *kroo-oo*, often repeated, and making one of the pleasantest of rural sounds in the heyday of summer. To me the Turtle Dove mostly appeals by reason of its fascinating love-flights. The bird mounts in the air from the topmost branch of a tall bush, and then planes down with outstretched wings and fan-spread tail. This operation is repeated time and time again, and is one of the most engaging sights in birdland. When the Turtle Dove takes to flight, be on the look-out for the spread-eagled tail and prominent white tips. Numbers of these birds seek for provender together in the fields, and there seems little doubt that here is another farmer's friend, as the food is made up of insects, snails, young plants, and seeds. It may take grain when that diet is available, but, judged on the balance, there is little doubt that the good done far outweighs the harm. In any case, this bird is extending its range in the west and north. The young are known as Squabs.

Any account of the bird-life of the fields would be incomplete without brief reference to the various kinds of Gulls which, during hard weather, and for

that matter at almost any time after nesting operations are over, resort to cultivated inland districts, searching for food. Of late years, too, London, among other places, has been regularly visited by numbers of Gulls, and very tame and confiding they become when fed; for, after all, the easiest way to win a bird's confidence is through its stomach. Our chief visitor is the Black-headed Gull, but, as already mentioned in a previous Chapter, the black feathers on the head are absent in winter. The rarer Herring Gull may also be seen, as well as the so-called Common Gull, and details concerning these will be found in Chapter VIII.



FIG. 33. Jackdaw

In company with its larger cousin, the Rook, the **Jackdaw** (Fig. 33) may often be seen, and in a mixed assembly it is not difficult to distinguish one from the other. The Jackdaw is a much smaller bird, its flight is less heavy and laborious, and its shrill call of *jack-jack* contrasts sharply with the deeper and well-known *caw* of the other species. This bird makes a good pet, and is a capital mimic. When thus kept, the bird is almost invariably christened Jack, in the same way as the Magpie nearly always answers to the name of Maggie. Both these birds are possessed of keen intelligence, and can repeat words and sentences with much cleverness. Both, too, have a mania for bright objects, and it does not do to leave anything within easy reach, or it may be missed. Even a wedding-ring has been hidden away by one of these birds.

The Jackdaw is one of our more familiar species,

and although it haunts church towers, cliffs, ruins, and woods, it gets its living in the fields, and there I recommend the bird-watcher to seek for it. Although it has more or less all-black plumage, it may be known by the grey on the back of the head and neck. It has, unlike the adult Rook, feathers at the base of the beak, and a light-greyish eye.

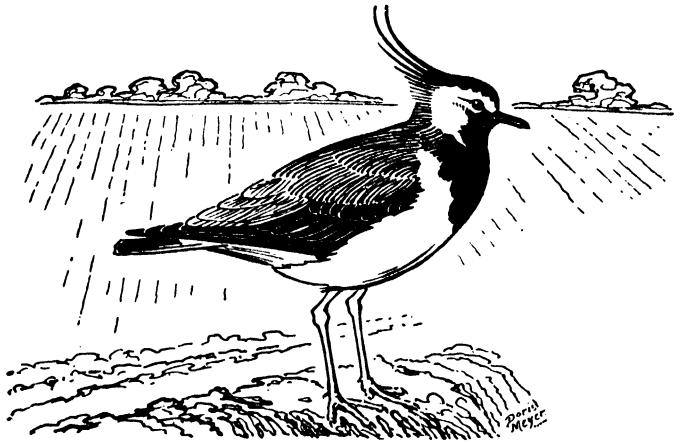


FIG. 34. Lapwing

The nest is built in May and June, and is placed in a hollow tree, among ruins, old buildings, or on a cliff, and as a rule in a colony. This nest is a bulky home; feathers, dry grass, leaves, sticks, straw, and wool are used in its construction. The three to six light-bluish eggs are spotted with ash and brown. The diet is varied, consisting of earthworms, grain, insects and their larvae, young birds, mice, molluscs, reptiles, and any available odd morsels. The Jackdaw has a sedate but none the less jerky walk, and delights in performing aerial

evolutions accompanied by much vocal clamour. Like the Starling, this bird may often be seen near a sheepfold, perching on one of the animal's backs to search for the ticks which so sorely infest the sheep.

In some winters huge flocks of what are described to me as "large black-and-white birds" are to be seen in our fields and meadows, many of these flocks being made up by invaders from abroad. The bird in question is the **Lapwing** (Fig. 34), also known as the **Peewit** and **Green Plover**. In Norfolk it is called the Hornpie, and natives there say "he carries a crest or horn, and is pied to boot." These old country sayings often contain an element of truth, and should not be disdained. Some of our poets were accurate observers of birds; among the most scientific was Tennyson, who writes in the opening lines of *Locksley Hall*:

"In the spring a fuller crimson comes upon the Robin's breast,
In the spring the wanton Lapwing gets himself another crest."

Tennyson's description of the Lapwing is very appropriate. When the four pear-shaped eggs are hatched, and the young are about, the Lapwing performs the most wonderful aerial manœuvres; it wheels overhead, tumbles and falls, retains its equilibrium, and endeavours to entice the observer away from its treasures. During this process the parent birds cry incessantly *pee-wee*, *pee-wee*, a piercing and rather mournful note as of distress. A musical whistle is indulged in during courtship. When a company are seen upon the ground, run-

ning hither and thither in a most engaging way, it will be noticed that the birds all face the same way, that from which the wind is blowing. In some fields the birds so match their surroundings that unless an occasional note is uttered they may easily be overlooked; but when they take to flight a surprising number of birds may come into view, appearing much larger on the wing than when at rest on the ground. At a distance the Lapwing looks black and white, but closer inspection reveals that it is greenish-black on the crown and crest, with whitish neck-sides, and a back metallic green with a purple gloss. The tail-feathers are white with a broad black band; the face, throat, and upper part of the breast are bluish-black, the belly is white, and the tail-coverts are fawn. Very little attempt is made to build a nest; a depression in the ground, such as the hoof-print of a cow or horse, serve as a suitable place in which to deposit the four greenish-yellow and very pointed eggs. These are blotched with dark brown. As soon as hatched, the fluffy chicks—like small bird toys on stilts—can run about and take care of themselves. We must not dismiss this familiar species without emphasizing its immense usefulness to the farmer, as it feeds upon earthworms, injurious insects and their larvae, slugs, and snails.

A typical sporting bird, the **English Partridge** (Fig. 35) is our next study, and I have given it a Christian name to distinguish it from its French relative. The English bird has a grey and reddish-brown plumage, speckled with black, and there is a horseshoe patch of chestnut on the lower breast of the male. Its haunts are fields, hedgerows, and

meadows, chiefly where the land is well tilled. Being a game-bird it is protected, and as it rises from almost beneath one's feet its noisy, whirring flight is quite startling. It sounds a deep, grating, complaining note as if in pain. Nesting begins as early as April, in a flat structure composed of dead leaves and grass, and placed under a hedge, or in an open field, or among herbage at the base of a bush. From six to twenty olive-brown or bluish-green eggs are produced, and these are covered over until incubation commences. The food consists of buds, grain, grass, green leaves, and many kinds of insects. The young are fed on insects and their larvae. In autumn coveys of these birds are formed by family parties wandering about together, and according to the number in a covey, sportsmen are able to tell whether it has been a good breeding season. In a wet spring many nests and young are forsaken, or the latter are drowned, and gamekeepers watch with anxiety for favourable weather, so that the nests they have found and marked down are safe from harm.

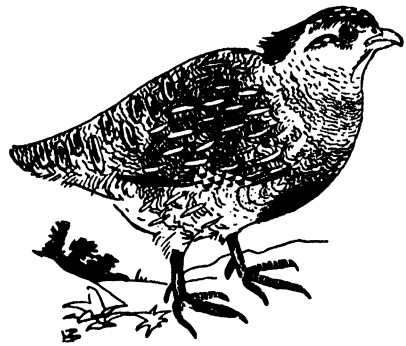


FIG. 35. English Partridge

The **French Partridge** (Fig. 36), also known as the Red-legged Partridge, is a handsome and larger species than the English bird, but is not in such favour with sportsmen, owing to its habit of keeping

more to the ground. Less common than the other species, it has a much more extensive vocabulary, consisting of various calls and cries. Among these may be mentioned the alarm notes, *a-shuck-a-shoe* and *clik-clik-clik-ee-o.* Its call may be likened to *cocileke*, whilst the male at pairing time cries *lasibio* and *er-chuck-er choo.* It is a plump, well-groomed bird of a brownish hue, with the flanks prettily barred with black, chestnut-red, and white. The cheeks and throat are white, and the breast is spotted with black. The bill and legs are bright red. Fields, meadows, and coppices are its haunts, and the nest of dead leaves and grass is placed in a hedge or field. The twelve to eighteen cream-coloured eggs are marked all over with reddish or cinnamon brown, and are much larger than those of the English Partridge. The French bird has the habit of temporarily leaving its own nest and eggs and depositing eggs in the nest of a Partridge or Pheasant. It afterwards returns to its own abode and duly rears its chicks. A restless bird of wandering habits, it feeds upon clover, grain, grass, insects, and seeds of weeds.



FIG. 36. French Partridge

We have already made the acquaintance of the **Golden Plover** in our description of another habitat, and little need be added to what was previously

stated. When a company of these birds are on ploughed land it requires a seeing eye to pick them out, so nearly do they match their surroundings. This is mostly a silent bird when at rest, only giving utterance to its clear call when on the wing. That call may often be heard at night, and some of these birds have been observed flying at a height of over six thousand feet. Search should be made for the Golden Plover in the fields in winter, and, as already pointed out, it often consorts with the Lapwing or Peewit; when they take to flight, the smaller bird with the sharp wings soon out-paces the slow-motion movements of the round-winged Peewit.

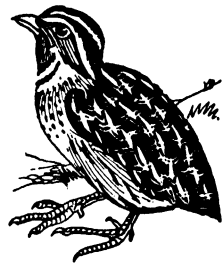


FIG. 37. Quail

One among several species which were, it seems, much commoner in days gone by, the Quail (Fig. 37) has certainly disappeared from many of its former haunts. It is a red-letter day in many districts when this small and plump little game-bird is recorded. It is a summer visitor only, and arrives in May (at about the same time as the Swift), after spending the winter in Egypt and northern Africa. It resorts to fields and uplands, and recently, when I was listening to the welcome call of the Stone Curlew on a Hertfordshire farm towards dusk, I was cheered to hear from a corn-field near by the shrill piping cry of *wet-my-lips* or *wet-we-wit* constantly repeated by a Quail, the first time I had heard the welcome notes for many a long day. This bird has been likened to a small edition of the English Partridge, and the comparison is not fanciful. The

reddish-buff plumage has streaks of black and cream colour, with a mottling of darker brown on the upper parts. The bill and feet are yellowish-brown. There is a double dusky-brown crescent on the neck of the male bird, but this is lacking in his mate. The nesting period is May and June, and if the nest is placed in a hay-field or among corn, and it is an early harvest, no time must be lost to attend to the occupants of the family nursery. The home may also be located among clover or in a hedgerow. This is a poor structure for a nest, merely consisting of a few dead leaves, and perhaps other materials. The Quail, like the Corncrake, is a ground lover, not easily put to flight; if it remains silent it can easily be overlooked. Its food is made up of buds, grain, green leaves, and weed seeds, but the young are fed on insects and their larvae. The seven to ten or more eggs are yellowish, blotched or speckled with brown. There are good and bad Quail years, and although some naturalists are of opinion that the species is less abundant than formerly, other competent authorities doubt whether this is the case. As the late Mr. T. A. Coward pointed out, "The numbers of the Quail are known, historically, to ebb and flow."

Confusion still exists as to the difference between a **Rook** (Fig. 38) and a Crow, and it is high time we called a Rook a Rook, and a Crow a Crow. In appearance the adult Rook differs from his relative by having a bare whitish patch round the base of the bill. The Rook is a social species, nests in rookeries, and travels about in flocks. The Crow is solitary. The Rook has a deep purple sheen on its black dress, the Crow is all black. In flight the wings

of the Rook are more ragged than those of the Crow. Whilst the Rook frequents trees for nesting purposes, one is almost sure to observe companies of them in the ploughed fields searching for food. They do some harm to growing crops, but the balance is easily in favour of its good deeds as a destroyer of harmful grubs, especially leather-jackets and wire-worms. It also takes the larva of the cockchafer,



FIG. 38. Rook

earthworms, eggs, and seeds. On several occasions I have known a Rook to pounce upon a golf ball lying upon the ground, evidently mistaking it for a hen's egg! It builds a bulky nest as early as March; this may be a new structure, or an old one repaired. The most curious site I ever knew was in a chimney in a public building, the usual nest-trees having been blown down in a gale. Sticks and twigs are plastered together with mud, and lined with

grass, hair, straw, and wool. The four or five greenish eggs are usually blotched and mottled with a brownish hue, but the markings vary in number and intensity. The familiar call of *caw-caw* is well known, but other notes are uttered from time to time.

Some Indian visitors to the museum of which the author is in charge expressed a wish to see some of our British birds, and on being asked which ones they would like to see, at once chose the Nightingale and Skylark. On my inquiring as to the reason for this selection, the visitors replied that they had read so much about these song birds in works by English poets. This leads me to remark that the Skylark (Fig. 39) is a universal favourite, and its rich lyrical voice and manner of utterance endear it to us all. The fascinating song-flights of Shelley's "blithe spirit" are known to all who live in the country; and the bird can be heard in song for at least three-quarters of the year. It soars and sings with its head to the wind, and acts as a feathered compass. The plumage is made up of various shades of light and dark brown. The wings are large, the male has a crest, and the white outer tail-feathers are prominent when the bird takes to the wing. It walks and runs, and does not hop. Flying leisurely just above the ground, the Skylark utters a pleasant trilling note, distinct from the wonderful song in the air. The nest is built on the ground, and con-



FIG. 39. Skylark

sists of dry grass. The four or five greyish or yellowish eggs are closely freckled with dark brown, and are pointed at one end. There seems no doubt that, in taking newly planted seeds and young blades of corn, this renowned songster does perpetrate a great deal of harm, but its food also consists of insects and weed-seeds. The nesting period is from April to July, and two broods are reared each season.

The **Woodlark** is a rarer and smaller bird than its relative, and has a much shorter tail. It perhaps rivals the better-known species in the rapturous measure of its song, and is the only bird that sings during full flight in darkness.

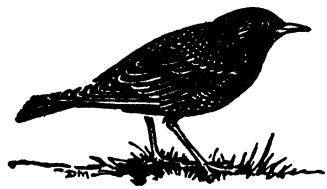


FIG. 40. Starling

The last species in the haunts under review is the **Starling** (Fig. 40), one of our best-known birds. Its immense flocks in winter (immigrants from the Continent) always attract notice; the din set up just before dusk, as the birds choose a roosting site, has to be heard to be appreciated. This is another characteristic bird of the open fields, but it resorts to old trees and buildings in which to build its untidy nest. Feathers, grass, moss, sticks, straw, wool, and other materials are used, and the four to six pale-blue eggs are pointed towards the smaller end. In Norfolk this species is called the Chimney-pot Plover, but it is actually the smallest member of the Crow tribe, and has no relationship with the Plovers. The plumage is glossy, with green and purple reflections, but the young, called Stares, are brown. Seen in a good light, the Starling at its best

is really a beautiful bird. It waddles, walks, and runs in a most engaging way, and searches with immense patience for insects and their larvae. I feel convinced, too, that it feeds on spiders; I have watched a company of these birds on my lawn in early autumn, snatching hither and thither at the small ground spiders which cover the grass with their silky webs at this season. As to its vocabulary, the absurd chattering set up as its bill rapidly vibrates to and fro, the long drawn-out whistle, and the ability as a mimic, are all worthy of notice. I have often been deceived by this bird when it has uttered the plaintive call of the Peewit, and was much disappointed one spring, when I was hoping to record the first call of the Cuckoo, only to discover that my old friend on the chimney pot was the culprit!



CHAPTER X

BIRD-WATCHING IN GARDENS AND PARKS

HEDGE ACCENTOR – BLACKBIRD – CHAFFINCH – RING DOVE – SPOTTED FLYCATCHER – HAWFINCH – JACKDAW – HOUSE MARTIN – REDBREAST – HOUSE SPARROW – STARLING – SWALLOW – SWIFT – MISTLE THRUSH – SONG THRUSH – BLUE TIT – GREAT TIT – PIED WAGTAIL – ORNAMENTAL WATERFOWL.

ALMOST every garden in town and country has its bird visitors, even if the latter are only Sparrows and Starlings. Much depends on the situation and size of a garden, and whether there are bushes, shrubs, and trees to afford the feathered rovers cover and concealment. In my own garden in an urban district over sixty different kinds have been recorded as a result of intensive observation—this list including those that fly over, as a Cuckoo did the day on which this was written. Perhaps the most amazing bird-sight associated with my own garden was a skein of nine Wild Swans, apparently migrating south, on a starlit and wintry night in December.

The homely **Hedge Accentor** (Fig. 41) is a great lover of gardens, and a friendly little bird at all times. You may know it from the House Sparrow by its trim steel-grey and brown plumage, its more aristocratic bearing, and the way it shuffles sideways

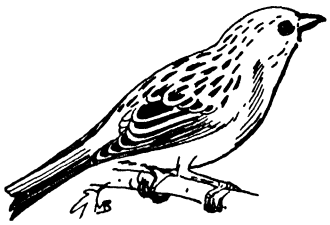


FIG. 41. Hedge Accentor

as it searches for small insects and other morsels. This is an insect-eating bird, and not a Finch like the Sparrow. Then, its simple but pleasing warble, uttered with much seriousness and persistency, at once distinguishes it. It also utters a piping squeak. It reminds one in some ways of Jenny Wren, creeping along the ground among bushes mouse-like, and dropping its wings ever and anon. This accounts for one of its many local names of Shuffle-wing; another popular one is Dick Dunnock. We shall find this species again in the next haunt, and there, too, I had better treat of the **Blackbird** (Fig. 42), although as a garden bird this fine songster is a prime favourite. I am of opinion that this species has increased perceptibly during recent years, and as if to remind me of its presence in my own garden, one is actually singing his vesper song as I pen these lines on a May evening. I am a great admirer of the Blackbird's boxwood fife, but I do not think it rivals that of the Nightingale, as some would have us believe. The male in his black uniform and golden bill is a well-groomed and finely proportioned bird;

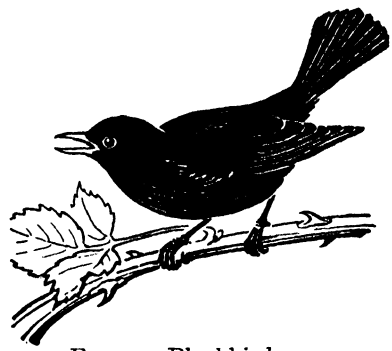


FIG. 42. Blackbird

his mate is much more sober in her attire. Curiously enough, pied Blackbirds (and wholly white specimens) are by no means uncommon, but this variation of plumage seems to be confined to the male bird. This albinism, as it is called, is due to the partial or total absence of black pigment in the feathers and other parts. Incidentally, the Blackbird is fond of ripe tomatoes when it can get at them grown out of doors.

Strictly speaking, the birds of gardens and parks are, with few exceptions, visitors and not residents, and as such we must regard and consider them here. The Chaffinch (Fig. 43) comes under this category. Both an insect-eater and a seed-eater, it will unexpectedly turn up in the garden at almost any time, but especially when scraps are put out for the birds in winter. This feeding of birds during hard weather is one of the prime reasons why several unlikely kinds of bird visitors appear in gardens ; the reader has only to be reminded of the Tits, who find a coconut, ham-bone, monkey nut, or tasty piece of suet, most attractive. In summer a pan of water, too, will be much appreciated, as birds are far more fond of bathing and drinking than is generally recognized. Sparrows and Skylarks are also fond of dusting themselves in sandy and other fine soil, as my freshly sown vegetable seed-beds ably testify. Nesting boxes put up provide an additional attraction in a garden, and berry-bearing bushes and



FIG. 43. Chaffinch

shrubs such as cotoneaster, dogwood, elder, hawthorn, privet, and wild rose might be planted, as the fruits of all these trees and plants are much relished by birds when other provender is hard to secure. The tramp-poet, W. H. Davies, must have been a great lover of birds, as is shown by the lines:

> "What happy hearts those feathered mortals have,
> That sing so sweet when they're wet through in Spring!
> For in that month of May when leaves are young,
> Birds dream of song, and in their sleep they sing.
> . . . . . .
> Oft have I seen in fields the little birds
> Go in between a bullock's legs to eat;
> But what gives me most joy is when I see
> Snow on my doorstep, printed by their feet."

The **Ring Dove** or **Wood Pigeon** (Fig. 44) is really a woodland-loving bird. Nevertheless, it must find mention as a parkland bird—and indeed as a town visitor too, for it still nests in London, and can be regularly seen there among the hordes of Domestic Pigeons. Many years ago a pair of these handsome birds had their nest and reared their young within sound of Bow Bells in the City. It almost reminds one of poor Susan's waking dream:

> "A volume of vapour round Lothbury glides,
> And a river flows on through the Vale of Cheapside."

Whether a river flowed through Cheapside's Vale merely in Susan's dream I do not know, but we are aware that the River Fleet now flows underground to find its way into the Thames. The Ring Dove does nest in trees in the parks, and one cannot quite understand why such a wild bird should leave its

woodland fastness and prefer the noise and bustle of London. Tremendous numbers invade our shores in autumn, and do much damage to crops in the fields. I have known a hatful of young turnip-tops to be taken from the crop of one bird. Two items of interest concerning this species should here be chronicled. One is that, unlike most other birds, it takes a draught of water like a horse; and the other is that the young are fed by regurgitation, or bringing

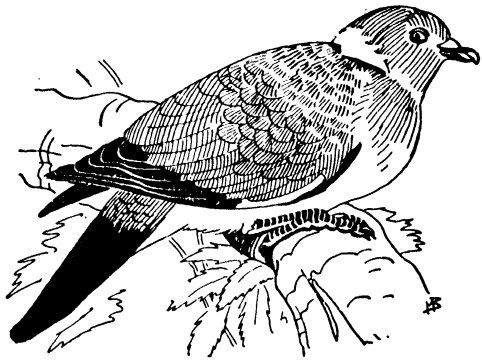


FIG. 44. Ring Dove

back from the parents' crop, the soft portions of swallowed food. There is a curious saying in Norfolk about this bird which is worth recording. Here it is: "Drop down the deke [dyke], Bor [boy], hinder [yonder] come a Dow [Wood Pigeon]."

A plain brown bird with spotted breast and short sharp beak may be seen in a garden, or in the shade of a large tree in a park; it darts from its watch-tower, hovers for a few seconds in the air, snatches at an insect, and returns to its look-out place. This is the **Spotted Flycatcher** (Fig. 45), a summer visitor



FIG. 45. Spotted Flycatcher

which arrives early in May. Fond, too, of orchards and plantations, especially where there are old gnarled fruit trees, it lives exclusively on insects, and is one of our most beneficial birds. The nest is placed among creepers on a building, in holes in trees and walls, between old posts, and other odd sites. The most curious site I know of was an old tin can hung on a farm-stead wall, and to this "shelter" the birds returned year by year. Leaves, grass, hair, and moss are used, and the four or five eggs are greyish-white with orange-red freckles. The Spotted Flycatcher is said to utter a low song, but the characteristic note is a complaining *u-tik, u-tik-tik.*

Large gardens, too, are the haunts of that very shy bird the Hawfinch (Fig. 46), and if there are rows of vegetable peas, woe betide them, as this handsome species considers them a delicacy. Its strong beak is capable of ripping open the pods lengthwise to get at the tasty seeds, but one can seldom catch the culprit in the act. Berries, fruit stones, insects and their larvae, and seeds are also eaten. This is our largest British Finch, but is by no means common. Doubtless, owing to its shyness and comparative quietness, it is often overlooked. The note is low and plaintive. The male has a dark reddish-brown back, with black



FIG. 46. Hawfinch

wings marked with white at the shoulder. The cheeks and crown are reddish-brown, the neck is ashy grey, the throat has a prominent black patch, and the under parts are light purplish-red. The tail is short and straight-ended. The loosely made nest is built in a bush or tree, and is composed of fibres, roots, and twigs. The three to five eggs are greenish-grey, with bluish-black streaks and brown spots. The large bold head and massive beak are good means of identification. We have already recorded the **Jackdaw** as a haunter of fields and meadows, but as it is also found in parks where there are old trees, and chooses a hole or broken limb in which to place its nest, it is entitled to mention in this section.

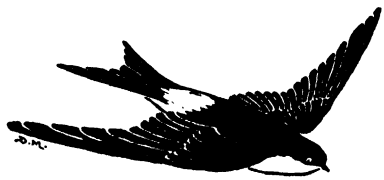


FIG. 47. House Martin

We now turn to the **House Martin** (Fig. 47), which although not strictly a garden bird builds its plastered nest under the eaves of buildings, and is often seen over the garden hawking for food. I recently saw an old thatched house in a quiet Norfolk village where the thatch had been cut short so as not to form an overhanging eave, and had been wired up to keep Sparrows from nesting among the straws. Yet underneath the gable, little wooden platforms had been put up to attract the House Martins, and there were several nests to be seen *in situ* plastered underneath (not on top of) the platforms. This was without doubt the home of a bird-lover, and I wish here to put on record the consideration of this resident of Hockwold.

People still confuse the Martin and Swallow, and indeed the Swift also. The House Martin is blue-black on the upper parts, snow-white underneath, has a catapult-shaped tail, and shows clearly a white patch on the rump when flying away from the observer. The legs and feet bear white feathers. The flight is slower than that of the Swallow, with much less swooping and turning and twisting; and the House Martin utters a pleasant twittering note, and warbles sweetly when on or near the nest. This is built of wet mud, reinforced with hair and fibres, and lined with feathers, hay, and straw. It is cup-shaped, with an entrance hole just large enough for the parent birds to go in and out. Sparrows try to commandeer the Martin's abode, sometimes successfully, but, as Jerome K. Jerome once said, "We no more understand Sparrow nature than we do human nature!" The four or five white eggs are oval, and this distinguishes them from those of the Sand Martin. Insects constitute the only food, and these are captured on the wing. As is well known, the House Martin, like the Swallow, is only with us in summer. It winters in Africa.



FIG. 48. Redbreast

There seems little doubt that the **Redbreast** (Fig. 48) is the best-loved bird in the world, and although its nest is still robbed by predatory boys, one rarely hears of the bird itself being killed. It occurs most frequently in our folk-lore and literature; one

of the most familiar of all rhymes is the well-known "Death of Cock Robin." There are many superstitions connected with this bird, one being that it bodes ill for a sick person to hear it; another is that, if a Robin comes into a house, it is a sign of death. My garden Redbreast certainly comes into the house and follows my wife upstairs into the bathroom; but, so far, we have escaped any fatality! A Suffolk rhyme is:

> "If the Robin sings in the bush,
> Then the weather will be coarse;
> But if the Robin sings on the barn,
> Then the weather will be warm."



FIG. 49. House Sparrow

The tameness of this bird and its consciousness of protection are well known. Of all the curious places in which I have found its well-built nest, that of a pair which built their home on a pile of books in a country house should be mentioned; incidentally, the title of the top book was *The Lays of Ancient Rome*! We shall meet with the Redbreast again in the lane, so that, except to remark that it is almost impossible to distinguish the sexes, we can pass on.

The **House Sparrow** (Fig. 49) is found in almost every haunt one could mention, and as a garden bird it is a great nuisance. It has a nasty habit of picking off my yellow crocuses, pink and yellow primroses, polyanthuses, and other flowers, and this apparently for sheer mischief. Then, too, it dusts itself in fine soil where seeds have been sown and

dislodges them, if it does not devour them. It is true that the House Sparrow feeds on greenfly on the fruit and rose trees, but its bad deeds I am afraid far outnumber the good. It stuffs up eaves and water-pipes with its bulky, untidy nest in which five or six eggs are laid of almost every available marking. The male in his dark grey crown, brown upper parts, lighter breast, and black bib is not a bad-looking fellow in the country, but becomes drab when he lives in a large town. The female is all brown, and does not wear a bib. Perhaps the cheek of this bird—or is it courage?—should receive mention; I have seen Sparrows at the Zoo searching for scraps almost within grasp of lions and tigers and other wild beasts.

We watched the Starling in the fields and meadows, but it is also a constant garden visitor, and I welcome it at all times. It fights for scraps put out for the birds, but searches with almost incredible patience for insects and their larvae, and is no doubt a farmer's and gardener's friend. In Shetland it is called the Starn, and in other places the Starnil and Starnel.

The **Swallow** (Fig. 50), like the House Martin, flies over our gardens and parks, especially in country districts and round farmyards. It delights in placing its shallow plastered cup on beams in buildings—even in the waiting-room of a modern railway station—a stable, fowl-house, chimney, quarry, under bridges, and other places.

I have only known the Swallow to place its mud nest in an exposed *outside* position on two occasions. Once I found it, much to my surprise, fastened to the spreading branch of a horse-chestnut tree; the

other time it was fixed in the corner of the open verandah of a cricket pavilion. Compared with the finished home of the House Martin, which has just a hole left for the entrance and exit of the parent birds, the Swallow's shallow cup is a poor imitation. Its nest is open all round and not fixed at the top, and a day or two ago, when I was watching a cricket match, the parent birds—in spite of the presence of many persons underneath and much clapping and shouting—took no notice, but flew in and out feeding their four stream-lined and open-mouthed young which crouched perilously near the brim of the shallow cup. I wondered how long it would be before these callow fledgelings would be ready to leave the nest and be advanced enough to undertake their first long journey to South Africa, for they had only a month in which to develop sufficiently to accompany the adult birds to their southern home so far away.



FIG. 50. Swallow

Since I wrote this a week ago this pair of Swallows have, I find, enlarged the brim of their nest so that the young are more secure in the shallow mud cup, a wise provision in view of their growth and eagerness to receive food.

The four to six long and narrow eggs are white with brown spots. Of its amazing powers of flight everyone is aware, but few who have not seen this

bird close to are acquainted with its appearance. It is blue-black on the head, wings, and long forked tail, dull chestnut on the forehead and throat, succeeded by a band of dark blue, with dull white underneath. The legs are not feathered as in the House Martin. The Swallow is entirely beneficial, as it feeds exclusively on insects captured when flying, and where these congregate over the surface of ponds and other water this familiar harbinger of summer is sure to be found. One of the loveliest sights of rural England is the swooping of fairy Swallows over the buttercup meadows when they are a living sheet of gold in the month of May.



FIG. 51. Swift

I do not hesitate to admit that the Swift (Fig. 51) is the most amazing bird I have ever studied. Perhaps this is accounted for by the fact that for several years I have lived in a high dwelling like these aerial wanderers. They return unfailingly every year in the first week of May to my high dwelling-place, and build their nest under the roof. Their small sooty-coloured bodies, very wide sickle-shaped wings, short tails, and very dwarf legs, are seen by me daily for hours at a stretch from May to August. Then they leave for South Africa to pass the winter. I never tire of watching their evening gambols in the air, as they rush round pell-mell, falling, gliding, swooping,

turning, twisting, almost hovering, now upwards, now downwards, now shooting with immense rapidity like an aerial torpedo. They have a wonderful power of judging distances, and of avoiding collision with the building they frequent to the fraction of an inch. As they rush through the air, screaming as they go, one or more may become detached from the feathered company, but they soon join up again, whereupon there is further screaming and great sociability. The Swift indeed seems to enjoy life to the full, in spite of pitfalls and dangers, and I regard it as the most remarkable bird of my lifelong experience. This bird's proper home is the air, over which it has complete mastery, and whilst it is well known that it obtains its insect food during flight, it is not so well known that its nesting material is thus gathered! The bird never intentionally comes to ground. If by accident it does light on the ground, it cannot rise again owing to the shortness of its legs and the length of its wings.

During normal flight the wings are held either at half-circle, or sickle-shape, or they are moved rapidly up and down with quickening beats in the more usual way of birds in flight. After the latter motion, the sickle attitude is resumed, and the bird shoots through the air at an acute angle as if free-wheeling. In reality, it is of course gliding. This rapid beating of the wings up and down is presumably to maintain height, and not to carry the bird forward, as is more usual with most other birds. It is akin to the hovering of the Kestrel. Now and then a hawking movement takes place, the wings being extended upwards to form almost a V-piece,

which gives the Swift a most unusual appearance whilst it lasts. When the bird is thus engaged there is a sudden drop, and with wings still extended upwards it shuts off its living mechanism, falls downwards, and reminds one of a Hawk darting earthwards for its prey, or a winged paper dart such as boys throw in the air.

I have noticed, too, that as the Swift flies it moves its tail feathers according to whether it is cutting or gliding through the air, or temporarily hovering, bat-like, for a second's respite from its amazing aerial manœuvres. In the former case, the tail feathers are all closed tightly so as to form a narrow rudder in line with the body, but when the bird is slackening speed and hovering, the tail is forked, or divided like a catapult; and then, when quick flight is resumed, the tail feathers are brought close together again.

Since writing the above I have again been watching my four pairs of Swifts during their evening flight with their young as, in a few days from now (mid-July), they will be leaving for their winter quarters. I find, on further observation, that the tail feathers are not only held entirely closed and overlapping each other, so as to fall in line with the torpedo-shape body, and that, when performing special evolutions in the air, the tail feathers are on occasions divided into equal halves, and then resemble the evenly forked tail of the Martin, but that very occasionally the feathers of the tail are all spread out like an open fan. This I have never noticed before. I also observed that, when there is a wind blowing towards the high building where my Swifts have their nests under the roof, the birds

hunt unceasingly for food near the building, and no matter how far away they may temporarily fly, they invariably return to the tall red-brick pile. This proceeding is apparently carried out because the wind, when in an easterly direction, drives the insects towards the building, and this the Swifts have discovered. Sometimes they dash so close to the building that they have to pull themselves up abruptly to avoid collision, and just for a second or two they cling on to the framework of the open window as a precautionary measure. A few mornings ago one of these gaunt aerial pirates flew into my bedroom, became very alarmed and agitated, fell on to the floor, recovered itself, scuttled under the bedstead, and then, with a superb upward sweep, glided safely out of the open window to freedom again. This incident shows that, in spite of what I and others have stated, the Swift *can* on such an occasion rise again from the ground, although in this case the "ground" was slippery oilcloth and rugs. It is certain, too, that as the time for departure approaches, Swifts become more excited than ever at the prospect of a long journey over land and sea, though I should like to believe that they do not readily leave the precincts of my own home in and around which they yearly bring to me so many happy hours of bird-watching. When a low-flying aeroplane crosses their path, they swoop and quite easily escape contact with it, showing no fear.

Other than a light patch on the chin the Swift is brownish-black, with a small and low-set head. When caught it is bad-tempered, and reminds one of the bat in this respect. The two or three rather long white eggs are laid in June in a nest made of

feathers, grass, and straw, fastened together with saliva from the bird's mouth.

The Mistle Thrush (Fig. 52) may be found in woods as well as large gardens and parks, and I believe its numbers are increasing. It is a fine handsome bird, much larger and bolder looking than its melodious-voiced cousin, and commences to pour out its own broken melody as early as February. It is a greyer bird than the Song Thrush, with a whiter breast much more prominently marked. The young, too, are most attractive when first out of the nest, and are remarkably tame. The nest is usually placed in the fork of a tree, and resembles that of the Blackbird, being lined with dry grass, and not plastered like that of the Song Thrush. The four or five whitish eggs are marked with reddish- and greyish-brown, and the nest is often completed, and the full clutch produced, early in March. As the bird flies away it utters a harsh "churr," and I have noted that the young also give vent to their feelings in this way when requesting a visit from one of the parents. The diet consists of berries, insects, and grubs, slugs, snails, and worms. There seems no doubt that the name of Mistle Thrush is correct, and not Missel. The word is a contraction of Mistletoe. Another popular name is Storm Cock, because of the bird's habit of singing when perched on the topmost bough of a tree during a gale.



FIG. 52. Mistle Thrush

The **Song Thrush** is a constant and useful garden visitor, devouring snails, slugs, earthworms, and insects. It does not damage fruit, as does the Blackbird, which samples more than it eats, and thus causes the grower to grumble. As a song bird the Thrush is almost unrivalled, and one may get to know and to look and listen for an individual bird in the same place day by day. We shall meet with this favourite bird again in our next chapter, so that we can pass on to the **Blue Tit** (Fig. 53) and **Great Tit** (Fig. 54), both of which should be seen in the garden. The former is a cheery little fellow,

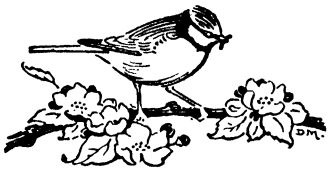


FIG. 53. Blue Tit



FIG. 54. Great Tit

who utters a tremulous song; the latter's vocal efforts are louder and more blatant. Both are acrobats, the Blue Tit especially, and many happy hours may be spent in watching them suspended outside the living-room window, if food is put out for them. Both species will inspect nesting boxes as suitable "houses to let," and in one of these in my own garden a pair of Blue Tits and a pair of Great Tits each deposited a clutch of eggs, which were eventually reared by the larger species. The Blue Tit may be known by its smaller size, as well as by its greyish-blue upper parts, blue-and-white head, and light-yellow breast. The Great Tit is dressed in blue, green, and yellow, with a conspicuous black head, throat, and band down the



FIG. 55. Pied Wagtail

centre of back, and white cheeks. Both are useful birds; the larger one is pugnacious and hates to be interfered with. Both species hiss when the nest is approached.

Running over the lawn or among the grass in the park, the trim and elegant **Pied Wagtail** (Fig. 55) may often be seen. This is a black-and-white bird with a long tail which is constantly in motion when the bird is on the ground; its flight is jerky and not well sustained. This is the smallest bird that walks, and although often called the Water Wagtail, it is frequently found a long way from water. It is at all times a most engaging bird and a welcome visitor to the garden; we shall meet it again when bird-watching by the water-side.

If there is a lake in the park, different kinds of waterfowl will probably be seen there. Domestic as well as Wild Ducks of various species and varieties are sure to be found, such as Golden-Eye and Tufted Ducks, Pochards, Teal, and Wigeon. There may also be Ornamental Waterfowl from foreign lands, among which may be mentioned the Carolina Duck, Muscovy Duck, Mandarin Duck (our artist has drawn for me the remarkable ornate head of a drake of this species (Fig. 56)), and Brent and Canada Geese. These are only a few, but the mixed assembly is always worth watching and noting.



FIG. 56. Mandarin Drake

Chapter XI

BIRD-WATCHING ALONG THE HEDGEROWS AND LANES

HEDGE ACCENTOR – BLACKBIRD – BULLFINCH – CIRL BUNTING – YELLOW BUNTING – CHAFFINCH – FIELDFARE – GOLDFINCH – GREENFINCH – MAGPIE – TREE PIPIT – REDBREAST – REDWING – RED-BACKED SHRIKE – SONG THRUSH – LONG-TAILED TIT – GREATER AND LESSER WHITETHROATS.

An ideal place in which to find a wealth of bird life is a quiet country lane, where brambles and rose bushes have been allowed to encroach unhindered upon the greensward. It may be a prehistoric trackway, or a one-time Roman highway now disused, but a happy hunting-ground for bird lovers. There, sure enough, the mossy cradle of the **Hedge Accentor** will be found. The nest is composed of grass, hair, moss, twigs, and wool, and although a large structure, the actual cup is comparatively small. This bird is an early nester, and eggs are often laid in March. They number from four to six, and are bright blue. I have given the Cuckoo a place in Chapter XIV, but it is frequently disturbed along a hedgerow, where it not only searches for hairy caterpillars of the Drinker Moth, but is also fond of depositing its egg in the nest of the Hedge Accentor.

When one is near the nest of the **Blackbird** the male bird almost proclaims that its dwelling is not far away by flying out of the bush or hedge and uttering a *clink-clink-clink* of alarm, and a screaming, clucking note. The nest consists of coarse dry grass as a foundation, lined with finer grasses and firmly fixed together with mud. It does not have a mud lining, as has the nest of the Song Thrush. The four or five eggs (I have known as many as seven) are bluish-green, with patches or spots of brown. They vary a good deal in colour, shape, and size.

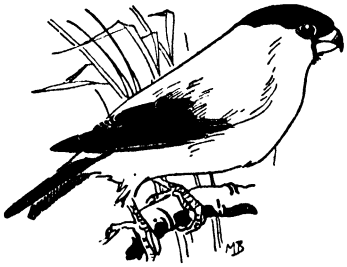


FIG. 57. Bullfinch

The **Bullfinch** (Fig. 57) is a great lover of hedgerows and lanes, and when the very handsome male—with his black head, grey back, rosy-red breast, black tail, and white rump-patch—is seen perched on a pliant branch, it is almost certain his less gaudy mate will not be far away. This is one of our British birds which pairs for life; unlike many of the Finches, it does not flock in winter. I have one record of fifteen of these birds being seen together, but this is unusual. As a rule the Bullfinch is a silent species, like its cousin the Hawfinch, and only utters a plaintive and subdued note which often escapes notice. It is said to have a low mellow song, but I confess I have not been fortunate enough to hear it. For such a plump bird the nest is very small and shallow, composed almost entirely of roots and twigs, with a sparing

lining of hair. The four or five greenish-blue eggs are blotched or spotted with dark brown in the form of a ring at the larger end. The Bullfinch nests from May to July, a bramble or wild-rose bush being a favourite site. A local name is that of Budpicker, not inappropriately, as unfortunately this bird does a great deal of damage to fruit buds, for the destruction of which its strong parrot-like bill is well suited. It also feeds upon berries, hips and haws, and weed seeds, but in summer insects and their larvae is the staple diet.



FIG. 58.
Cirl Bunting

The **Cirl Bunting** (Fig. 58) is either a rare species, or it is confused with the much more familiar Yellow Bunting, and is therefore overlooked. Unlike the latter it is a shy bird, and the best means of identification are the slightly smaller size, olive-green head, chestnut back, lemon-yellow cheeks, with a black band through the eye and black chin and throat. There is a yellow stripe above and below the eye. The Yellow Bunting lacks the black markings. The haunts of the Cirl are similar to those of its better-known cousin, being commons, hedgerows, lanes, and stackyards. When watching and listening to birds be on the *qui vive* for the opening notes of the Yellow Bunting. If the scratchy song stops short before the *and no cheese* is reached, then it is probably the Cirl that is heard. Some authorities compare its song to that of the Lesser Whitethroat. The nest is made of grass, hair, moss, and roots,

and is placed in a low bush, or on the ground. A furze bush is a favourite site. The three to five eggs resemble those of the Yellow Bunting, but are more strongly marked. Insects and seeds are eaten in summer, grain and weed seeds in winter. This very local species is found in the more southerly parts of Britain, and records of its breeding in the north are doubtful.

The **Yellow Bunting** (Fig. 59) is a much commoner species than the Cirl Bunting, and although haunting similar places, and almost always to be located where hedgerows are allowed to flourish, it seems to thrust itself under the notice of the observer. The male bird, with his bright yellow head and breast, striated with brown, and chestnut-brown back, is fond of perching near the top of a hedgerow bush, or on a telegraph wire —to which position several of the Buntings are partial. There it pours out its wheezy little song which has been likened to a *little bit of bread—and no cheese*, and this long before the days of rationing! In watching its flight, look out for the white outer tail feathers. Note also that, when the bird is flying, the legs are carried hanging down. In winter this species readily joins up with flocks of other birds, and is fond of visiting farmsteads for any stray provender. It nests from April to August, and even later, and the neat nest is composed of dry grass, hair, moss, and roots. This is a deep structure, usually placed

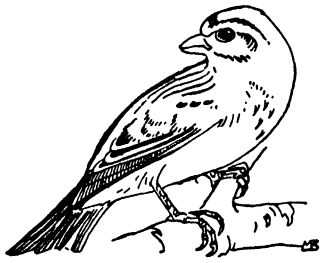


FIG. 59. Yellow Bunting

low down in a bush or hedge, or among tangled herbage on a bank, and sometimes practically on the ground. From three to five eggs are laid, and these are ashy-white, spotted and streaked with scribble markings. The food consists of insects in summer and seeds in winter.

The male Chaffinch (see Fig. 43) in his best spring livery is a really handsome bird; his sprightly disposition makes the most of his fine plumes. This species is active in all its movements, whether on the ground, flying, or hunting for food. The male has a greyish-blue crown and neck, the black wings are prominently banded with white, the back is brown shading to olive, and the bright-coloured breast is rosy-chestnut, fading into lighter colour on the belly. The female is dowdy compared with her mate. The characteristic alarm note is *pink-pink*, and a mournful weeping note is also uttered. The song is rich and loud, and much practising takes place in early spring before the full repertoire is compassed; the perfected notes are high-pitched on a descending scale, ending with a cadenza, and have been likened by my friend, Mrs. S. Vere Hillier, to "a rollicking cadence, ending with a flourish." The Chaffinch is fond of sites not far from human occupation. I have observed several times that it is a very common bird in Scotland, and in some parts quite the most noticeable species. The mossy home is a model of avian architecture, vying with those of the Goldcrest, Goldfinch, and Long-tailed Tit, and one of the most beautiful nests produced by any British bird. It is compact, round, and deep, consisting of feathers, hair, lichens, moss, and wool. Sometimes it is decorated, one I found being adorned with

coloured strips of paper. The four to six ash-grey or blue-grey eggs have a wine-coloured tinge, with spots of dark black and brown. The nesting time is April to June. The food is insects and their larvae in spring and summer, and seeds, including beech-mast, in autumn and winter.

The **Fieldfare** (Fig. 60) is a winter visitor from Scandinavia, and arrives in autumn about the same time as its smaller relative, the Redwing. It is almost our largest British Thrush, and wherever there are hips and haws on the hawthorn and rose bushes, there search may be made for it. A word of warning must here be given; although travelling about in companies during its stay with us, this is a most wary bird, and when danger threatens, it rises ahead of the onlooker on strong wings, and calls loudly *chak-chak-chak*. It is a handsome bird, and although less plump than the Mistle Thrush and less in length, it seems on occasions to rival the other species. It has a slate-grey head and rump, warm brown back, dark brown wings and tail, and a rich brown throat and breast streaked with black. The belly is whitish. When the bird is flying away, the grey rump is a feature worth noting. In addition to being partial to hips and haws, this fine Thrush feeds on insects and worms, and if food is scarce will leave for a more favourable retreat elsewhere. It frequents fields and open country as well as

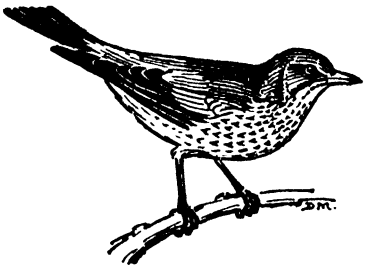


FIG. 60. Fieldfare

hedgerows, and will sometimes consort with others of its tribe.

Thanks to protection, and the decrease in cage-bird marauders, the elegant **Goldfinch** (Fig. 61) has increased perceptibly within the last few years. A friend of mine recently saw a flock numbering at least two hundred in his garden in the centre of a large town. It is a frequenter of large long-established gardens and orchards as well as hedgerows and lanes, and in autumn delights in weedy places where thistles grow. This bright and active bird, dainty in its habits, sprightly in its movements, often betrays its presence by what has been described as "a high tinkling twitter, reminiscent of Japanese wind-bells." I translate it as, *I can do with it!* It also has a very pleasant song, which might be mistaken for that of a Canary. The chief features of interest in its attire are the scarlet head and throat, white cheeks, fore-neck, and under parts, and the flash of gold on the wings. It has a sharp beak well designed for dislodging thistle and other seeds. Evergreen, fruit, and other trees are the normal nesting sites: the nest, although shallower than that of the Chaffinch, is composed of similar materials. The four or five eggs are bluish-white, sometimes spotted, and at others streaked with dark brown and purplish. The young are called Grey Pates.



FIG. 61. Goldfinch

The **Greenfinch** (Fig. 62) is a hedgerow-loving bird, and the male in his dark green, yellow-and-ash-grey dress is quite a handsome fellow. The female's

colour is duller. This is one of the few birds that sings when flying, but its song is only a querulous utterance; a characteristic note reminds one of a bough creaking in the wind, or a gate that wants oiling. This restless species hates being watched. It feeds on insects and weed-seeds, and has a powerful bill. The nest is usually built in a bush or shrub, and is composed of feathers, grass, hair, moss, and twigs. It is a large structure, and sometimes is very untidy. The four to six eggs vary very much in size and markings, and often puzzle the young ornithologist. They are bluish-white, with spots and streaks of purple and other shades.

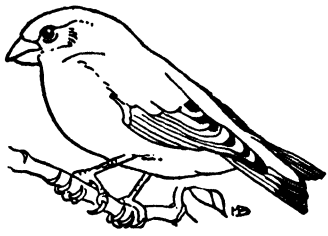


FIG. 62. Greenfinch

Where tall hedges are still allowed to remain, and it is sparsely populated and open country, the **Magpie** (Fig. 63) is to be found. Its velvet-black and white attire, long tail, and fluttering flight are characteristics worth noting; the chattering notes of *kek-kek-kek* as it takes to flight draw attention to its presence. When tamed, the Magpie can be taught to speak, but like other birds it has the annoying habit of refusing to be coaxed to do so before strangers. The nest is built either in a tree or tall hedge, and is a massive abode like a Squirrel's drey, made of clay, dry grass, mud, roots, and sticks. It is of dome shape, with an entrance hole at the side. The five to eight yellowish eggs are freckled all over with ash and olive-brown. The diet is varied, as it consists of birds, fruit, insects, mice, moles, rats, snails, and worms.

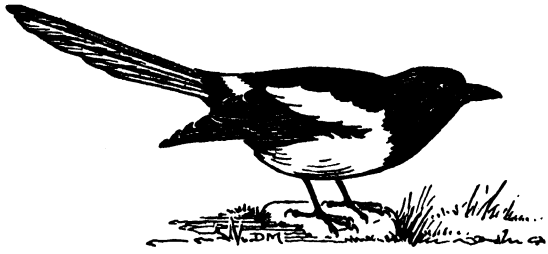


FIG. 63. Magpie

If there are tall trees along the lane, and in spite of its disappearance from many favourite haunts, the Tree Pipit (Fig. 64) may be found. This lark-like bird perches in trees, but builds its nest on the ground. The plumage is brown on the upper parts, with darker centres to each feather. It is buff colour below, spotted and streaked with dark brown. The tail feathers are white. The hind claw is very short and curved. This bird is fond of a particular tree along a hedgerow where there is a plentiful supply of herbage. Its song-flight is a fascinating display; the bird rises from the outer branch of a tall tree, and soars several feet before commencing to plane down in a slanting direction, often returning to the same point it started from. The song is both musical and powerful, and ends with a sweet *rallentando*. The bird is a summer migrant, and arrives in mid-April. The shallow nest, placed on the ground, is built of grass, moss, and roots, with or without a hair lining. The four to six eggs vary in colour and mark-



FIG. 64. Tree Pipit

ing, the ground colour being yellowish to rich chocolate, blotched, clouded, and streaked with darker tints. The food consists of insects and seeds of weeds.

The **Redbreast** is almost sure to pay its respects to the observer in a hedgerow or lane; and if he rests by the wayside for a picnic meal, a Robin is bound to appear. The nest is, as a rule, well hidden in a grassy bank, but it is as well to examine any old tin can or other receptacle that has been thrown away, as this bird has the habit of building its home in such objects; even an old shoe has been known to be employed for the purpose. Grass, hair, moss, and wool are used, and the five or six eggs are white, marked with light brown. The nesting period is from February to July, and the young, until after the first autumn moult, are brown and speckled. The rich plaintive song and *tik-tik-tik* notes, as well as a monotonous weeping note, are well known. When being fed, the young make a hissing sound reminding one that another cargo of food is being delivered. This is one of our most useful birds, feeding on insects, spiders, and worms, and, of course, scraps.

In autumn, when so many of our summer visitors bid us adieu, their places are taken by others from the north which spend the winter in our more temperate climate. Among these the smallest member of the British Thrushes, the **Redwing** (Fig. 65), is sure to arrest attention. It haunts fields and hedgerows like its larger cousin, the Fieldfare, and may be distinguished from the Song Thrush by its smaller size, a conspicuous flush of reddish-chestnut on the flanks and under the wings,

and a light yellowish stripe over the eye. It has a handsome spotted breast. It is a much shyer and more restless species than our familiar Thrush, and cries *quip-quip* when alarmed. The song is not heard in this country except perhaps in spring, just before the bird's departure for its summer home in Scandinavia ; it is said to resemble a poor imitation of that of the Song Thrush. Although coming to us from a northern land, the Redwing is one of the first birds to succumb from hard weather, though there may still be a plentiful supply of berries. Yet we are told that birds do not die from cold as much as from hunger !



FIG. 65. Redwing

Like the Magpie, the **Red-backed Shrike**, or **Butcher Bird** (Fig. 66), as it is also called, delights in a country lane where there are tall hedgerows, and as these are being cut down and its retreats invaded, so this summer visitor is decreasing. It is known as the Butcher Bird because of its habit of impaling its victims, such as small birds, frogs, large insects, lizards, mice, and shrews, on thorn bushes to form a sort of larder. I have, too, seen it catching grasshoppers. It is a silent bird, possessed of immense patience, and perches for hours in a favourite place with little movement. The male is a striking-looking bird with grey on the head and rump, and a chestnut back. The black tail has white margins, the ear-coverts are black, and the under parts pinkish-buff. The female lacks the black-and-grey, is reddish-brown on the upper parts, and has light buff with

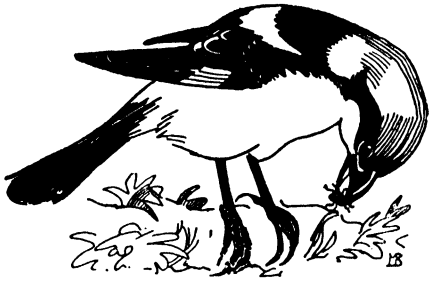


FIG. 66. Red-backed Shrike

grey markings below. The hooked beak is a prominent feature. The large nest is placed out of reach in a thick bush, and is made of dry grass, moss, and roots, lined with down and wool. The four to six eggs are yellowish-white, one variety having ash-grey, and the other light-brown markings at the larger end. The call is given as *chak-chak*, and *chur-chur-chak*.

As a general favourite the Song Thrush (Fig. 67) holds an honoured position as a songster among all lovers of wild birds, and vies with the Blackbird, Nightingale, and Skylark for pride of place. Its amazing variety of notes—rich, loud, and clear—are well known, and its optimism in singing from the topmost branch of a leafless tree, long before the Swallow dares to come or the Cuckoo calls, is a sure sign that the Thrush at least presages the spring. The brown plumage of the back is succeeded by buffish-white below, with dark-brown spots on the

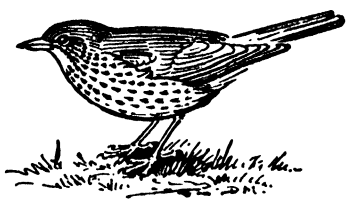


FIG. 67. Song Thrush

breast. The sexes are alike, but the female is smaller than her mate. The nest is built of dry grass, moss, and twigs, plastered inside with mud and rotten wood which, when dry, hardens like cement, and is well calculated to protect the young from the keen winds of early spring. When nesting, the Thrush is much more timorous than the Blackbird, and sits far less close. The four or five light-blue eggs are spotted with black or dark brown, but the number of spots varies, and almost unmarked varieties are produced. This is one of our most useful birds, the food consisting of insects and their larvae, slugs, snails, and worms. It also takes berries and soft fruits.

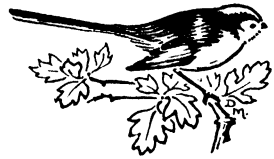


FIG. 68. Long-tailed Tit

A blackthorn or furze bush is a favourite site for the wonderful nest of the **Long-tailed Tit** (Fig. 68); when, as often happens, it is exposed in a leafless bush in early spring, this nest is so plainly seen that it becomes the easy prey of marauding boys. A globular home, with a small hole just below the arched roof, it is composed of lichen, moss, spiders' webs, and wool, ingeniously felted into a compact mass, and lined with a profusion of feathers. The six to twelve or more small white eggs have a few light-red spots. The black-and-white plumage is relieved by a tinge of rose-red, but the chief distinguishing feature is the long tail. The bird travels about in family parties, uttering a querulous subdued note, and is a feathered acrobat as it searches vigorously for insects along a hedgerow. It has many local and old-fashioned names such as Bottle Tit, Oven Builder, and Poke

Pudding. It is entirely beneficial, feeding exclusively on insects.

The last two birds to be dealt with in the haunts under review are the **Greater** and **Lesser Whitethroats** (Figs. 69 and 70). Both are summer migrants, arriving on our shores about mid-April. The Greater is commoner than his smaller and shyer relative, but the Lesser species may be overlooked unless one knows its high-pitched, bell-like notes. The Greater Whitethroat has an ash-grey head, the feathers of which are raised as the male bird utters

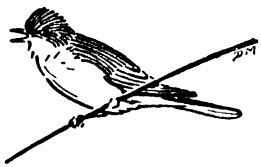


FIG. 69.
Greater Whitethroat

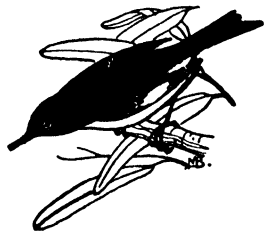


FIG. 70.
Lesser Whitethroat

its scratchy, impetuous song, its white throat swelling perceptibly as it does so. The rest of the plumage is reddish-brown and dusky, with white under parts slightly tinged with rose. It is a plump, well-groomed bird, with long legs and lustrous eyes. It has the habit of singing as it dances over a bush, or hedge, and thrusts itself upon one's attention. It also utters a harsh alarm note. The frail nest is usually placed low down in a bush, or even in stinging nettles (hence the name Nettle Creeper), and is composed of fine grass, with a hair lining. The five or six greenish-yellow eggs are marked with ash colour. The brooding bird slips off her nest very quietly, but sits tight until danger threatens.

The food consists of insects, berries, and soft fruits.

The Lesser Whitethroat, as the forepart of its name implies, is of smaller stature than its kinsman, and has a greyer attire. It has lighter underparts, and the ear-coverts are darker. The plumage is greyer than in the greater species. This bird haunts copses and woods as well as hedgerows, and is a remarkable feathered scout. Its song is at first low-pitched and then loud, and although the bird may be well within ear-shot, it can rarely be seen because of its secretive habits. It builds a deep nest of fine dry grass, hair, and roots—not, as a rule, placed as low down in bush or hedge as that of the Greater Whitethroat. The four to six nearly white eggs are pointed, and are marked with ash and light brown. The food is the same as for the other species.



Chapter XII

BIRD-WATCHING BY THE SEA

CHOUGH – CORMORANT – BLACK- AND RED-THROATED DIVERS – ROCK DOVE – EIDER DUCK – GOLDEN-EYE DUCK – SCAUP DUCK – SCOTER-DUCK – DUNLIN – GANNET – BRENT, GREY LAG, AND PINK-FOOTED GEESE – BEAN GOOSE – BAR-TAILED GODWIT – GUILLEMOT – BLACK-HEADED GULL – COMMON GULL – GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL – HERRING GULL – KITTIWAKE GULL – LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL – KNOT – RED-BREASTED MERGANSER – OYSTER CATCHER – FULMAR PETREL – STORMY PETREL – GREY AND RED-NECKED PHALAROPES – ROCK PIPIT – GREY PLOVER – RINGED PLOVER – PUFFIN – RAZORBILL – REDSHANK – SANDERLING – SHAG – MANX SHEARWATER – SHELD-DUCK – ARCTIC, COMMON, AND SANDWICH TERNS–TURNSTONE–WHIMBREL.

Bird-watching by the sea adds great interest and enjoyment to a holiday, and if by chance the **Chough** (Fig. 71) is observed one has made acquaintance with the rarest member of the Crow tribe in Britain. It may at once be known by its purple-black plumage, red legs, and long curved bill. It haunts sea-cliffs, and a few places inland. It hops, runs, and walks, and rarely perches in trees, but performs aerial movements of much interest. When not nesting, this bird associates in little companies, and has various calls and cries, especially a very loud *chee-aw*, and sometimes *chuff*. The nest is built of roots and sticks, with a lining of grass, hair, wool, and

other materials, and is placed in the crevice of a cave or cliff. The three to six eggs are yellowish-white, spotted with brown and grey. The food mostly consists of insects and worms.

Sea cliffs and the seashore, as well as large sheets of fresh water, are the haunts of the **Cormorant** (Fig. 72), which is a large black-and-very-dark-brown bird with a green and purple gloss. The chin is white, and in spring there is also a white patch on the thigh ; the head feathers form a crest.

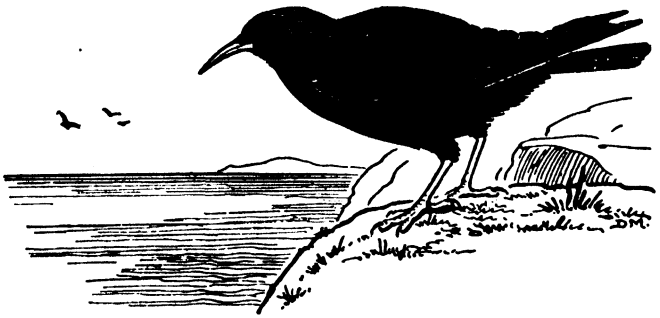


FIG. 71. Chough

This is a strong, powerful species, possessed of great muscular strength and endurance as it dives under water to pursue its finny prey. It will sit on a rock out of the water for hours at a stretch resting until the tide turns, and will doze and preen its feathers to pass the time away. It becomes tame and confiding, and one I made friends with in the Isle of Skye allowed me to caress it, although I had just before almost stepped on an Eider Duck in hiding among the boulders of a sea loch, which set up enough din to frighten all feathered creatures within sound of its whirring flight. The Cormorant

nests in colonies on ledges of cliffs, and when inland, in tall bushes or trees, the materials used being dry grass, seaweed, and sticks. The four to six eggs are chalky-white, and if the shell is scraped the undercoat is bluish-green. The note is a harsh scream, and the call is *kree*, *kraw*, or *krell*. It is a powerful bird on the wing, and often flies just over the surface of the water. In some parts of the world, such as San Lorenzo in Peru, Cormorants are so numerous as to be counted by hundreds of thousands. This species make a mound nest, and the whole sloping cliff is covered with these mounds, which are used again in the succeeding mating season. An entire side of the island acquires a deposit of guano (the birds' excreta) nearly eighteen inches deep during the two-year periods, after which it is collected. The guano is gathered by the Peruvian Government and distributed as a fertilizer. Cormorants are among the best known of the guano birds of South America.

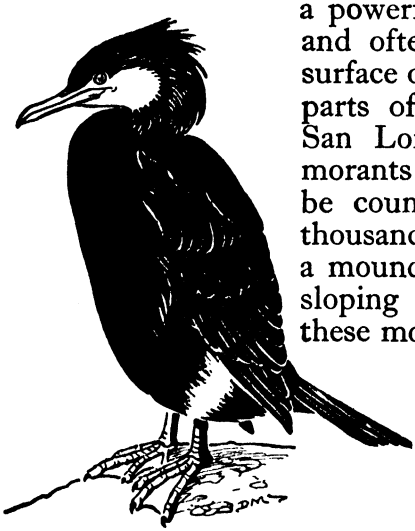


FIG. 72. Cormorant

Both the **Black-** and **Red-throated Divers** (Figs. 73 and 74) are rare birds, and both breed in northern Scotland. When nesting operations are over, and in spring, autumn, and winter, both species occur round our coast. As the names indicate, one has

a black throat and the other a red throat; the latter, however, is only present in summer, the winter dress being brownish-grey, with white on the throat and under parts. The difference between the two kinds is most striking. Both are expert divers, and their food chiefly consists of fish. The nests are placed on small islands, that of the Black-throat being composed of water plants, with a grass lining. The Red-throat makes little or no attempt to build a home. The former's two eggs are very dark brown, with blotches or spots of deeper brown and black; the latter has a somewhat smaller egg of dark brownish-olive with a green tinge and spots of dark umber-brown. The Red-throated Diver is the smaller bird.

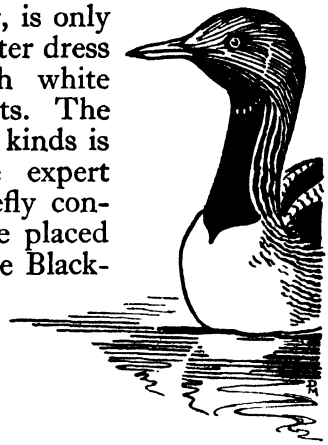


FIG. 73. Black-throated Diver

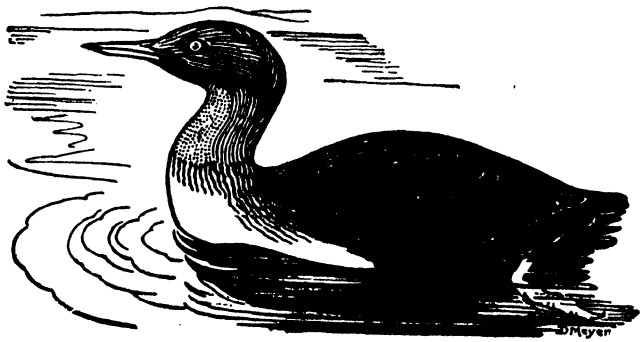


FIG. 74. Red-throated Diver

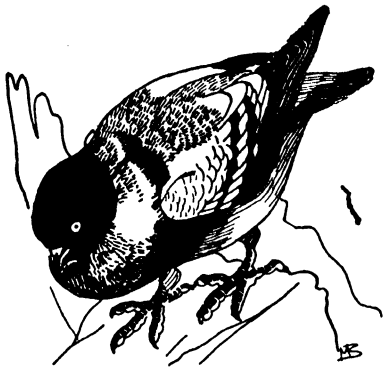


FIG. 75. Rock Dove

Where there are sea cliffs one is likely to find the **Rock Dove** (Fig. 75), which reminds one of a Homing Pigeon. It has grey plumage, with a prominent white rump, and dark bars on the wings. On the neck is a green and purple sheen. The bill is black, and the feet red. This is a local species, not nearly as well distributed as others of its race. Ledges of rocks, or crevices in a cliff, are the sites chosen for the nest, and this is made of dry bents, grass, seaweed, and a few twigs. There are two white eggs. The note reminds one of the Ring Dove with a *roo* among the *coos*. The food is beech-mast, grain, leaves, seeds, and snails.

Our largest British nesting Duck is the



FIG. 76. Eider Duck

Eider Duck (Fig. 76), and it is resident on the Scottish and north-eastern English coasts. Elsewhere it is a winter visitor. The drake is a handsome bird in his black-and-creamy-white dress, and the head and bill are shaped like a wedge. The duck is brown and mottled. This species is almost always found near the sea. The nesting period is May and June, and the large nest is placed in crevices of rocks, or among herbage on the ground. Dry grass and seaweed are used, with a profuse lining of grey



FIG. 77. Golden-eye Duck

down plucked from the bird's own breast. The five to seven pale-green and oval-shaped eggs have a smooth surface. This is mostly a silent bird, but a grating note and a *coo* are uttered. Crustaceans and shell-fish constitute the food. The stuffing used for eiderdown quilts consists of the down which this bird plucks from her body ; the eggs of some Ducks can only be identified by the kind of down with which the nests are lined.

The **Golden-eye Duck** (Fig. 77) is called in Norfolk by the name of Rattle-wings from the noise it makes in flight, but the more popular name

of Golden-eye has been given because the drake has a conspicuous round white patch near the eye. The drake's plumage is black and white with a green tinge, but the duck is browner. They are fresh- and sea-water dwellers, but do not nest in Britain. The species is a frequent winter visitor, and also a passage migrant. It rarely comes to land; the water is its favourite abode, and it is an expert diver. Crustaceans, aquatic insects, and molluscs make up the bill of fare, and no less than one hundred and fifty water beetles have been found in the stomach of one bird.



FIG. 78. Scaup Duck

The **Scaup Duck** (Fig. 78) is mainly a winter visitor to our shores, a few of the species breeding in the north of Scotland. It is a marine bird and a fine diver. The drake has a black head, neck, and breast, with green and purple reflections, and a grey back. The duck is brown, whitish underneath, and has a white forehead. It normally associates in small parties, and feeds on crustaceans, molluscs, and worms. It has a grating alarm cry. The eight to eleven greenish eggs are produced in June, and the nest is usually placed near water.

Another bird which only breeds in the far north is the **Scoter Duck** (Fig. 79). This species is chiefly entitled to inclusion as a winter visitor. The drake is black with an orange patch on its bill, the duck

brown, with paler cheeks. The black and yellow bill, with a knob at the base, is a useful mark of identity. Occasionally inland waters are frequented as well as the sea. The nest is hidden among herbage on the ground, grass with a lining of sooty-coloured down being used. The five to ten buffish-white eggs are laid in late May or early June. Crustaceans and shellfish are eaten. The grating call note is interspersed with a more pleasing conversation during courtship. The Scoter has pointed tail feathers, and when swimming holds its tail aloft; the bird can be picked out by this mannerism if it is in company with other Diving Ducks.



FIG. 79. Scoter Duck

The **Dunlin** has already been dealt with in Chapter VIII., but must not be overlooked as a bird which haunts the seashore in winter.

We now come to that magnificent sea bird, the **Gannet** or **Solan Goose** (Fig. 80). Seen close at hand, this great bird is much larger than one would expect, although when flying its wing-span measures nearly six feet. It is an almost all-white bird, except for dark tips to the wings, with a black patch on the throat and near the eye. The massive grey bill is put to full use for spearing fish; to secure these the Gannet soars high over the sea, and then, with a superb headlong dive, plunges into the water at

breakneck speed. There is a splash, and if successful, the bird presently emerges with a fish in its safe keeping. There are only a few breeding stations of this ocean-loving bird, but where it does nest a great many pairs share the same rocky fortress. The Bass Rock is one of these places, and no less than ten thousand pairs are said to breed there. When the one chick has been hatched from a white, chalky egg, and reared, the land is forsaken, and

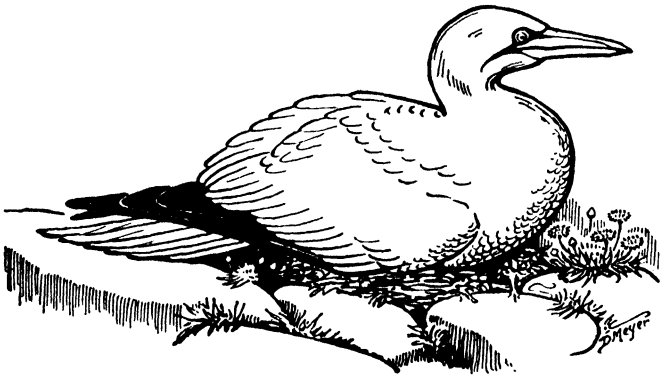
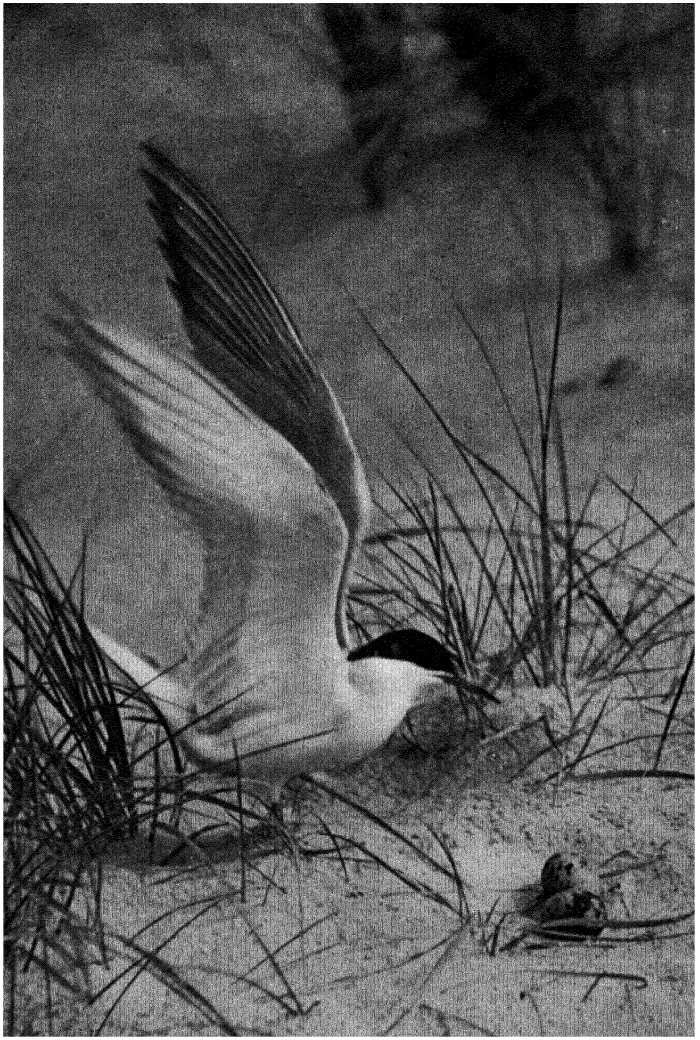


FIG. 80. Gannet

the Gannet becomes an ocean wanderer again. The short, harsh cry is *carra-carra-carra.* The fish secured consist, among others, of herrings, mackerel, pilchards, and sprats. It seems that this bird is infested with parasites, as my old friend, the late Arthur H. Patterson, relates that one of his most unpleasant experiences was when he carried home a Gannet which had come ashore at Yarmouth with a broken wing. He says that, when carrying this specimen, he became covered from head to foot with legions of the most clinging, irritating parasites



[*Photograph : Eric J. Hosking,*

Common Tern alighting at nest

he ever came in close contact with; their travels over his person were a positive torture, and he could not help feeling some pity for their original victim.

In winter especially our coasts are visited by large numbers of various species of Geese, and among these feathered invaders there should be mentioned the **Brent**, **Grey-lag**, and **Pink-footed Geese** (Figs. 81, 82, and 83). The Brent and Pink-footed are winter visitors only, the Grey-lag nests on marshes, moors, and swamps in the north, and at a few places on the coast. The Brent is quite different from its two relatives, as it has a black,



FIG. 81. Brent Goose

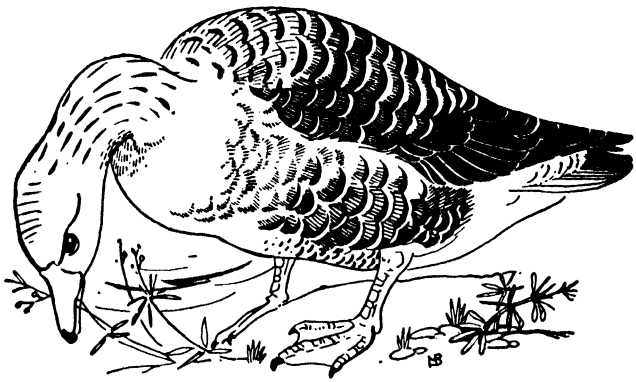


FIG. 82. Grey-lag Goose

grey, and white plumage, and is the smallest of the three. The Grey-lag is greyish-brown, with white beneath the tail and on its tip and on the rump. The bill and legs are flesh-colour. The bulky nest is placed on the ground, and is made of heather, leaves, moss, and sticks, with a covering of down. The four to six creamy-white eggs are laid in April. The note resembles that of the Domestic Goose.

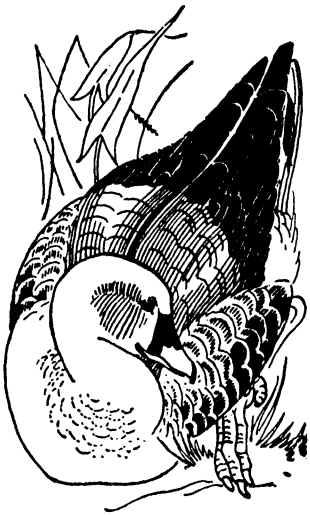


FIG. 83. Pink-footed Goose

In a favourable season great numbers of Pink-footed Geese visit our shores, especially the east coast, where, in company with the late Frank Southgate, the well-known bird artist, I have seen as many as three thousand of these great birds on the wing at one time. At daybreak the flocks leave the high shore to feed inland, and towards evening they return to rest within sound of the ever-murmuring waves. They fly in wedge-shape formation, phalanx after phalanx, "honking" as they proceed; this noise sounds like a feeble motor horn. As the birds settle near the shore they take up a position which reminds one of a battalion of soldiers on parade, but they are very wary, and can only be approached by careful strategy. It is a weird experience to be on a wind-swept shore towards sundown watching these manœuvres in birdland, and almost the last I

heard of Frank Southgate, just before he made the great sacrifice for his country in the war of 1914–18, was a telegram which read : " Come at once to see the greatest invasion of Pink-feet ever known." The telegraph girl at a local post office queried the name of the invaders I was invited to see, but an ornithological explanation soon put matters right! The Pink-foot's plumage is brown on the head and neck, grey-brown on the back and breast, and white beneath the tail. It resembles another winter visitor, the **Bean Goose**, in general coloration, but may be known by the middle portion of the bill being pink, and the legs and feet flesh-colour.

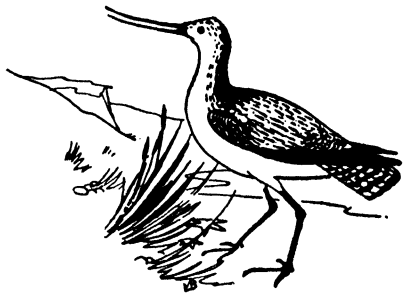


FIG. 84. Bar-tailed Godwit

Another wading bird now calls for notice in the person of the **Bar-tailed Godwit** (Fig. 84), a tall, dignified fowl, standing on long legs, and having a long upturned bill and short tail. The difference between the summer and winter plumage of this species is remarkable—in winter mostly light brown and grey, in summer chestnut-red and mottled-brown, with a white tail barred with brown. It also has a brown speckled head. It is a bird of passage with us, and great numbers pass along the east coast in spring and autumn. It has a subdued, though rather harsh note, and the food consists of crustaceans, sandhoppers, sandworms, and shellfish.

Among our feathered population which breed in

colonies, the **Guillemot** (Fig. 85) is one of the most noteworthy. On various islands and rocky parts of our coast great numbers congregate to lay their one large, pear-shape egg, which, being thus fashioned, can revolve on its own axis when the wind blows. Even an empty shell of this bird, when spun round on a flat object, revolves like a top, and does not roll off as a rounder one would do. The colour and marking of the egg vary a good deal. It may be bluish or greenish, white or yellowish in ground colour, with splashes of black and dark and light brown. It has a look of the Penguin, with a dark brown head, neck, and back, and a white breast. In winter the cheeks and throat are white. The legs are placed far back on the body. Except when breeding, or driven to land by severe weather, the Guillemot is a tenant of the ocean. No nest is built, and the one egg is laid in May. How each pair of birds identify their own egg when such large numbers are placed together is a mystery that has never been solved. The note is best described as a grunt. The bird subsists on a diet of fish, which it pursues under water, propelling its body along by using its wings as paddles.



FIG. 85. Guillemot

The rarer **Black Guillemot** is distinguished from the foregoing by its smaller size and brownish-black

plumage, with a very large patch of white on the wing. This is the summer attire; in winter it is mostly white, with bars of black on the head and other upper parts, and the tail and wings blackish, except for the white patch on the latter. It nests in the north and north-west, the *two* eggs being laid in a crevice of a cliff or rock. These are pale cream, or greenish-white, with brown and grey blotches. In addition to a grunt, the Black Guillemot utters a mournful cry and whistle.

This brings us to the Gulls, and the species deserving mention are the **Black-headed, Common, Great Black-backed, Herring, Kittiwake,** and **Lesser Black-backed** (Figs. 86, 87, 88, 89, and 90). I have already warned the reader as to the difficulty of identifying Gulls in immature plumage; their difficulty must again be emphasized here, as it is only possible to give details of the adult dress, with notes as to the difference, if any, between summer and winter. The so-called **Black-headed Gull** is misnamed; its grey mantle and black wing-tips are relieved in summer by a head and throat *dark brown*, not black. It has a deep red bill and legs, and is our smallest species of Gull, haunting the coast and inland waters, and nesting in colonies. The two to four eggs are deposited in a nest of dead grass, sedge, and sticks, and as a rule a marsh or island is chosen. The eggs vary a great deal and may be bluish-green, brownish, or buff, blotched with dark brown. The bird has a buoyant flight, floating or gliding rather than flying through the air. It is fond of sprats, but will also take waste fish and various surface matter, and performs good work in fishing-ports and harbours by clearing away

garbage. Insects and their larvae and worms are sought for inland.

The **Common Gull** (Fig. 86) is also a misnomer, as the preceding species is its successful rival in numbers. This present species is about the same size as the Black-headed Gull, but the bill is greenish-yellow, and the legs greyish, or yellowish-green. It has soft grey-and-white plumage, with white on the wing-tips. This is not such an inland bird as its relative, and keeps more to the coast. The nest is made of grass, seaweed, and other materials, and is larger than that of the species last under review. The two or three eggs are laid in May, and are variable, being light blue, brown, green, or straw-colour, blotched and spotted with ash and dark brown, or they may be unmarked. It feeds on carrion, crustaceans, insects, sandworms, shellfish, worms, and scraps. The note is a clamorous *yak* and a laughter-like *luka-luka-luka*, as well as *kyah*, and *kree*.

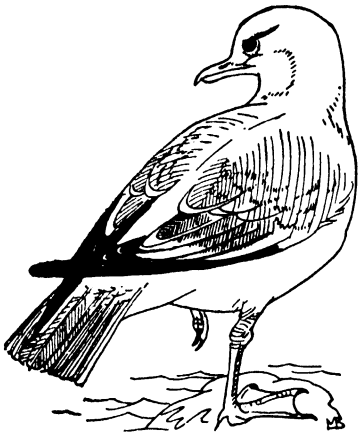


FIG. 86. Common Gull

The **Great Black-backed Gull** (Fig. 87) is a robber and pirate, as our artist has correctly shown in her drawing. It is a strong and powerful flier, and harries other birds for their eggs and young, which it plunders without mercy. It also takes fish and dead animal matter floating in the sea. It is

our largest British Gull, and has an almost black mantle, the rest of the plumage being white, except the black wing-tips, which have white markings. The yellow bill has a red spot on the lower mandible, and the legs are pale flesh-pink. It is more of a sea lover than other Gulls, but will quarter moors to take toll of the eggs and young of Grouse. A

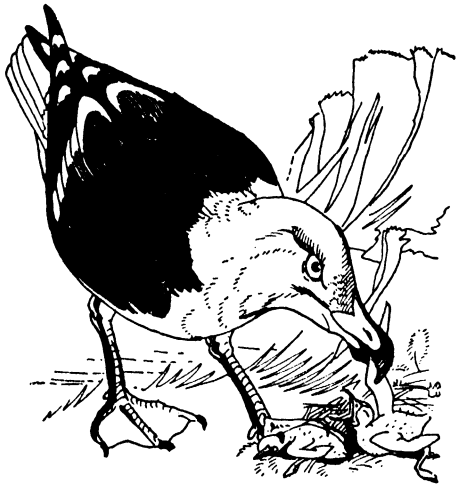


FIG. 87. Great Black-backed Gull

cliff ledge or rocky isle is chosen as a nesting site, and the structure consists of grass, seaweed, and other plants, with perhaps a lining of feathers and wool. The two or three dark olive or olive-buff eggs are marked with darker blotches.

The **Herring Gull** (Fig. 88) not only feeds on herring and other fish, and proclaims the advent of a shoal to fishermen on shore, but is also a robber like its last-named relative. It is a pretty bird in its soft

grey-and-white dress, with black-and-white wing-tips. The bill is yellow, with a red spot on the lower mandible, and the legs are flesh-pink. The flight is graceful as well as powerful. The bird haunts mudflats, large rivers, saltings, and sea cliffs, and builds on rock ledges and grassy cliff sides. The nest is a tangle of grass and seaweed, and the

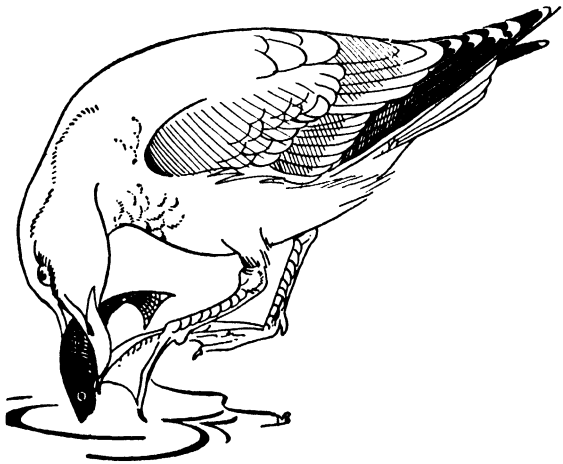


FIG. 88. Herring Gull

three eggs are brown, green, or yellow, with blotches of ash-grey and dark brown. The note is a croak, as well as *pee-wheel*, and the usual Gull cries.

Perhaps the **Kittiwake Gull** (Fig. 89) is the favourite among bird-lovers ; the soft grey-and-white plumage, almost black legs, greenish-yellow bill, and black wing-tips, make it fairly recognizable. This Gull haunts rocky cliffs, mostly on the north and west coasts, and breeds on precipitous ledges. Marine plants, with a lining of grass, are used, and several

pairs nest close together. The three stone-coloured or olive eggs are blotched and spotted with ash-grey and shades of brown, and these are produced in May and June. It is a good diver and swimmer, and feeds on crustaceans as well as fish. The three notes resemble the bird's name, or *ah-get-away, ah-get-away.*



FIG. 89. Kittiwake Gull

The **Lesser Black-backed Gull** (Fig. 90) is about the size of the Herring Gull, but may be known by the very dark mantle and yellow legs. It has small feet, is found inland as well as on the coast, and likes fresh-water islands. The large nest is composed of grass, leaves, and seaweed, and may be found on a grassy cliff or island, or in a marsh. The two or three buff, greenish, or olive eggs are spotted with brown. Small fish and other marine creatures go to make up the menu, as well as carrion, insects, sea-birds, eggs, and worms. The calls resemble those of the Herring Gull, being laughter-like and weird.



FIG. 90. Lesser Black-backed Gull

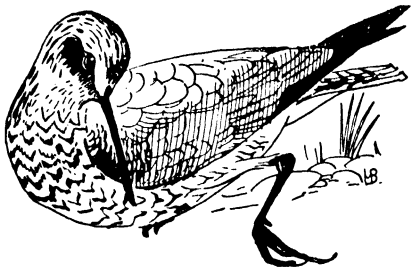


FIG. 91. Knot

The **Knot** (Fig. 91) is a wading bird and a winter visitor; in some years it comes to us in very large numbers, and wanders inland. In summer it is chestnut and dark brown, in winter light grey above and white below, with streaks on the breast and flanks. It haunts mudflats and sandy shores, and feeds on crustaceans, sandworms, and shellfish. The cry is *knot* or *knut*. This is a social species, large numbers keeping together with their heads all facing the same way. It runs with short, quick steps, and is for ever on the move. It breeds in the northernmost parts of the Arctic Circle.

The drake of the **Red-breasted Merganser** (Fig. 92) is a very dignified bird in its glossy-green-black



FIG. 92. Red-breasted Merganser

head and back, white under parts, spotted chestnut breast, and grey flanks, with a conspicuous crest or tuft on the head. There is a patch of white with black bars on the shoulder, and a streak of white on the wing. The duck is smaller than the drake, and has a grey back and brown head. The upper mandible has a hooked tip, and both upper and lower ones are serrated, or saw-like. This species nests in Ireland and Scotland, but elsewhere is a winter visitor. It visits inland waters as well as the sea, and breeds from late May to early July. The nest is made of grass, leaves, and twigs, lined with grey down, and is secreted under a rock, or among grass or scrub. The six to twelve eggs are glossy olive-grey. It swims under water in pursuit of fish, but does not disdain crustaceans and shellfish. It has a grating note resembling *karr-karr*, and also coos. It is a wary bird, and soon dives out of sight when disturbed.

One day on a favourite stretch of pebbly shore I had an exciting race with a young **Oyster Catcher**, of which species an adult is shown in Fig. 93. With its long stilt-like legs, small body, and high forehead, this precocious fledgling was an easy winner in the race, for it ran much more easily than I could on the pebbles, and when it took cover under a wave-washed boulder, it was lost to view. The adult is a handsome bird with black-and-white attire, long orange bill, and flesh-coloured legs and feet; it is one of the chief sentinels of the estuaries, mudflats, and seashore, uttering, on alarm, a shrill, musical whistle, rapid and clamorous. As soon as the bird sights danger it takes to flight, skimming just above the water, crying as it goes. Although it feeds on

shellfish, it is a mistake to call it Oyster Catcher, as the favourite bivalve associated with the Colchester Oyster Feast is never taken. Crustaceans, small fish, and sandworms are also eaten. Hardly any nest is made, the three or four eggs being deposited among shingle or rocks. Occasionally it is placed in grass, and one nest I found was surrounded by the pink heads and grassy leaves of Thrift. The yellowish eggs are blotched with ash and dark brown. It is an active, engaging bird, more common in the north

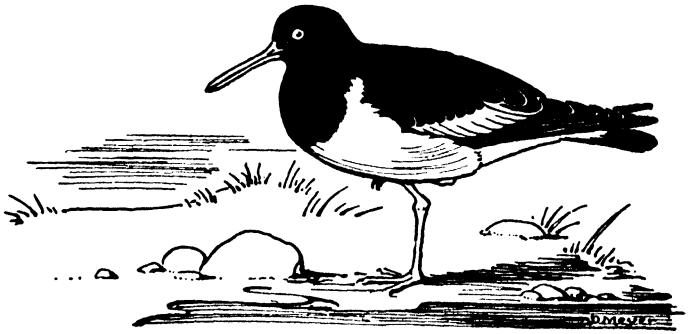


FIG. 93. Oyster Catcher

than south, but in winter may be looked for in districts from which it is absent in summer.

Among those birds that have increased their range within recent years, the **Fulmar Petrel** (Fig. 94) deserves special mention, in spite of the fact that it is regarded as an oceanic bird, and delights to dwell on isolated islands far out at sea. It is of Gull-like form, and has a grey mantle and tail, with white on the other parts. Its increase of territory is remarkable when it is remembered that until 1878 its only known breeding-place in Britain was on the lone

island of St. Kilda. Its skill upon the wing is such that the sustained manœuvres of some of our Gulls are easily surpassed. Its steady flight has been compared to that of an aeroplane, and it sails, glides, and soars without effort in a strong gale. Coward says that where the Atlantic rollers are dashing on the shore " it swoops into the trough, sweeps up the crest, swings over at right angles, the tip of one wing just clearing the wave." That brilliant bird-observer, my friend Richard Perry, records that the Fulmar is paired up as early as Christmas Day, and

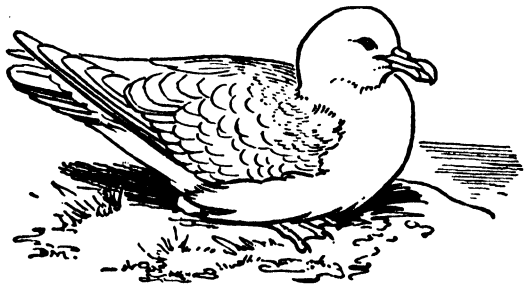


FIG. 94. Fulmar Petrel

that before taking up its quarters at a new breeding-station, temporary dwelling-places are selected which lead eventually to the establishment of a fresh colony. The young, too, Perry says, have the desire to return to their birthplace, and thus there is set up another nesting territory. Courtship, says the same naturalist, commences long before the breeding season is due ; he has watched Fulmars already paired up and courting vigorously early in the New Year, taking up thus early nesting sites where they will not be sitting until months later. Perry's remarkable first-hand observations have disproved a

great deal of what has been written about this remarkable bird, and those who wish to pursue the matter further should read his book, *At the Turn of the Tide*. The one chalky-white and rough egg has a strong odour, and is placed on a rocky ledge or a hole in the turf. The food consists of blubber, cuttles, fish, oily offal, and refuse, and the young are fed by the parent on regurgitated oil. Both young and old birds have a plentiful supply of oil inside their bodies, and when an intruder ventures too close they do not hesitate to squirt it out. This is a silent species, and the only record I have refers to a low crooning, and an oft-repeated sharp note.



FIG. 95. Stormy Petrel

The **Stormy Petrel** (Fig. 95) is a very much smaller species, and is often referred to as Mother Carey's Chicken. It is dark-brownish, with a white band at the base of the tail conspicuous in flight, and has long legs. Although it has wide wings it is not much larger than a Swift; in spite of being the smallest web-footed bird, it is an ocean-lover, and only comes to land to breed, or when driven ashore by very rough weather. It nests on islands off the north and west coasts, the one white egg having faint rufous markings at the larger end. This is placed in the crevice of a rock, under a stone, or in a hole in the turf. In flight the bird follows the waves and treads water as it proceeds. It feeds on crustaceans, small fish, offal, oil, and shellfish. At its nesting site it is said to eat sorrel. Its call is *kekerek-ee*, and it

also has a churring note at the nest, and a plaintive *weet*. Leach's, or the Fork-tailed Petrel, may be distinguished from the foregoing by its larger size and forked tail.

Two small wading birds next claim attention, one of which is only an autumn visitor—the **Grey Phalarope** (Fig. 96), and the other, the **Red-necked Phalarope**, nests sparingly in western Ireland and Scotland, and is also seen as a migrant on the coast when summer's lease has run out. These cheerful little birds, no larger than a Thrush, have a narrow edge of webbing round the toes, which distinguishes them from the Sandpipers. The Grey is a very trustful bird, and permits, sometimes to its detriment, a close approach. It appears in Britain in its winter plumage of soft grey and white; the summer dress in its breeding quarters in the far north is dark brown above, with bright chestnut-red below, and a white cheek. The Grey has a thin and tapering black bill, the Red-necked has a broad, flat, yellow bill tipped with black. The name of Phalarope is given because of the webbed feet, *phalara* (Greek) meaning fringed, and *pous*, a foot. The female of the Red-necked kind is adorned more gaudily than her mate—a reversal of the usual conditions in the bird world—and she is larger. The summer plumage is dark grey, with orange-chestnut on the sides of the neck and head, and white below. In winter there is grey

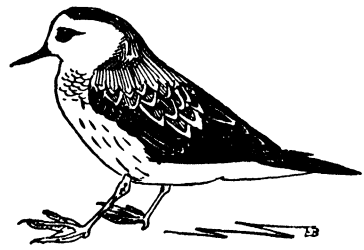


FIG. 96. Grey Phalarope

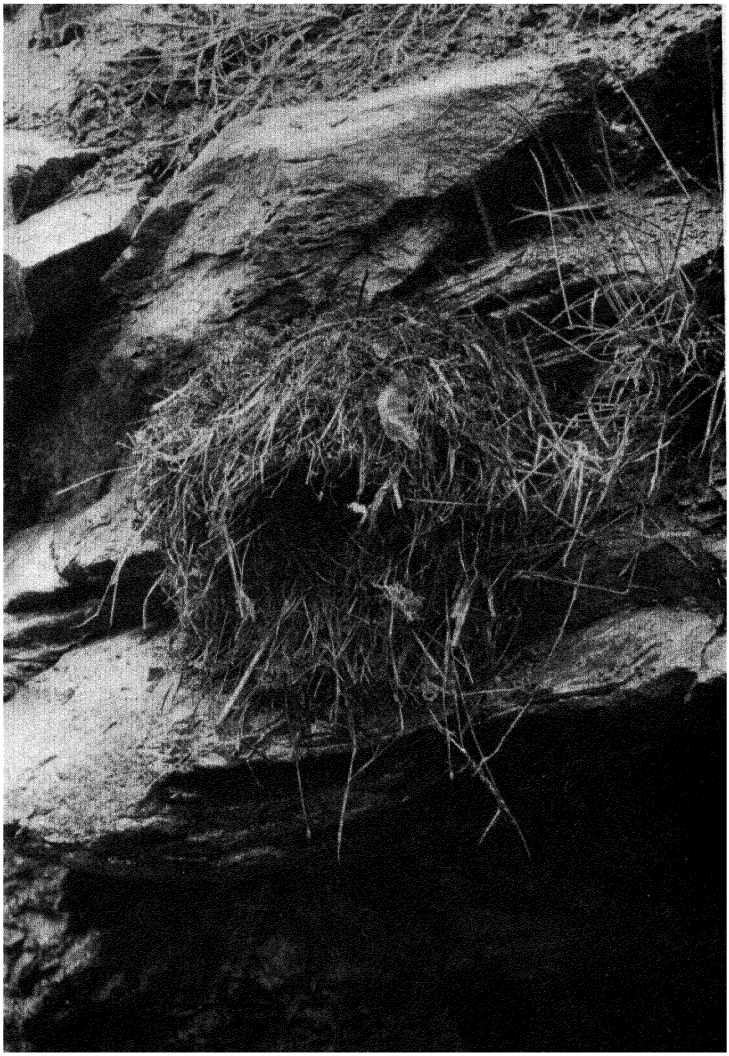
above, with streaks of buff, brown on the head, and white under parts. The grass nest is placed in a tuft in a swamp, and the four eggs are pale buff, or olive, heavily blotched, speckled, and spotted with various shades of dark brown and a few spots of light grey. The food consists of insects, worms, and other creatures. These birds are rapid fliers, splendid divers and swimmers, and move rapidly on land. They utter a shrill note of *weet* at breeding time, and a call-note of *tirr* as well as *quet* or *quit*,



FIG. 97. Rock Pipit

and *chirra-chirra-chirra* and *kyow* in summer. As the birds rise they cry *ket-ket-ket*.

When walking along the rocky shore the bird-watcher may hear above the sound of the breakers a tinkling song which is a pleasant variation from some of the screams and raucous cries of the sea birds. The bird responsible for this diversion is the **Rock Pipit** (Fig. 97), a well-groomed, dainty-looking bird which delights to dwell near the sea. It is larger than its cousin, the Meadow Pipit, has greyer plumage, and lacks white in the tail. The hind claw is very much curved. When it takes to wing the Rock Pipit utters a loud *peep-peep*, and as it rises in the air to perform its song flight, the notes



Nest of Dipper



FIG. 98. Grey Plover

increase in volume; it circles slowly round, and then commences to plane down, singing more shrilly as it proceeds towards the ground. It is not a rapturous song, but the haunt in which it is heard appeals to those whose ears are receptive to bird music. The nest is made of grass, moss, and seaweed, with, as a rule, a horsehair lining, and is placed under a stone or in a crevice or hole. The four or five greenish eggs are heavily speckled with grey or greyish-brown. This species nests in May and June. Its food in summer is crustaceans, marine insects, and worms, and seeds in winter.

As a rule the **Grey Plover** (Fig. 98) is a bird of passage in spring and autumn, but it may also be seen in winter. Its summer dress reminds one of the Golden Plover, the difference being on the hood and mantle, which are mottled with grey and silver instead of black and gold. The under parts are black. The rump and tail are whiter than in the other species, and the tail has black and white bars. In winter the plumage is light grey-brown with spots and streaks, and the under parts are mostly white. The Grey Plover utters a high-pitched note, and when a company of them call to one another the effect is very delightful.

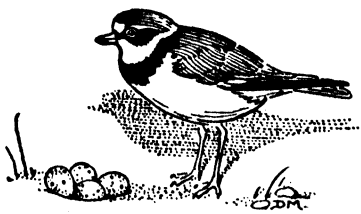


FIG. 99. Ringed Plover

I am a great admirer of the **Ringed Plover** (Fig. 99) a dapper little wading bird adorned by soft greyish-brown on the upper

parts and white beneath. There is a broad black ring on the chest, a black gorget on the breast, and a white feather boa is worn round the neck. This latter, and the rest of the plumage, make the bird so inconspicuous when seen sitting on its eggs among pebbles or sand that it is only by careful scrutiny it can be picked out. It is at all times an active, engaging bird, and very fast upon the wing. It is a social species, and mixes freely with other waders. Not only does this Plover haunt estuaries, mudflats, saltings, and the shore, but it frequents inland waters, and also nests on the dry barren wastes of Breckland in Norfolk. If any attempt is made to build a home, the nest will merely consist of a few pebbles, pieces of shell, or a depression among grass. I have seen a few well-built nests, but they are exceptions. The four very pointed cream-coloured eggs are spotted and streaked with black, and when placed among shingle are very difficult to locate. The note is a musical *too-lee, too-lee*, but a harsh *trr* and *penny-yet* are also uttered. This industrious wader searches untiringly for food such as crustaceans, insects, sandhoppers, sand-worms, and shellfish, and when thus engaged, indeed at all times, is one of the most delightful of our resident birds to watch.

To any reader impressed with the romance of bird life, and their courtship habits in particular, I recommend an intensive study of that curious parrot-like dweller on coast and island, the Puffin (Fig. 100), of whose amazing exploits at mating time Richard Perry has presented such a fascinating story. This bird is more or less a dwarf, thick-set, in black-and-white attire, with white cheeks, but the amazing

part of its anatomy is its grotesque bill of greyish-blue, red, and yellow. Its interest is increased in the breeding-season, when, as one may say, a false nose, or sheath, is grown over the permanent bill. Provided with this nuptial adornment, and possessed of courtship habits such as actual kissing, this Sea Parrot, as the fishermen call it, provides those interested in such matters with an object of special study. The orange or scarlet legs and feet are set far back on the body, and as the bird waddles about near the coast in numbers which may rise to thousands, the whole company is worth watching and their manœuvres recorded. Perry has devoted much time to observation of these sea-dwellers, as well as Guillemots, Kittiwakes, and Razorbills, and it is largely due to his unique experiences that latter-day attention has been drawn. The haunts are rocky sea-cliffs and islands, and the one white egg is placed at the end of a burrow or hole in the turf, or in a cleft or cranny. Colonies crowd together on a turf-covered cliff or island, and as a rule, no attempt is made to build a nest. For diet small fish are captured, in pursuit of which the bird dives and then swims under water with its wings. The deep notes resemble *a-r-r* to *o-r-r*, or *orr-a-orr*.

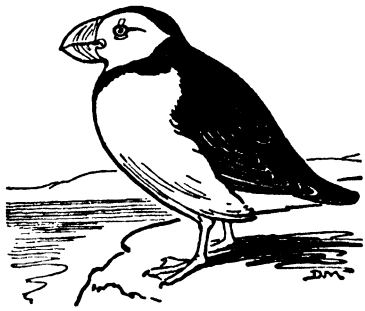


FIG. 100. Puffin

In similar haunts one may observe the **Razorbill** (Fig. 101), which is the nearest living relative of the



FIG. 101. Razorbill

now extinct Great Auk. This is a much larger bird than the Puffin, adorned in blackish-green on the upper parts, with a dark-brown throat and snow-white below. A feature of interest is the massive axe-like beak, which has a white crescent-shaped mark across the deepest part. The one whitish egg is laid in a crevice or hole on rocky sea-cliffs, and is blotched with dark reddish-brown. It is not as large nor as pear-shaped as that of the Guillemot. The call-note is a croak, and the alarm-note a grunt. Small fish constitute the food.

We have already discovered the **Redshank** in its nesting haunts in Chapter VIII., and need only add that it may also be found haunting estuaries, mud-flats, and the seashore. It fraternizes with other waders, and often acts as a sentinel, warning the whole company to take to wing when danger threatens. The white patch on the rump should be looked for when this bird rises and flies away.

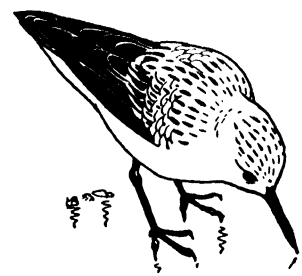


FIG. 102. Sanderling

The **Sanderling** (Fig. 102) is a bird of passage in spring and autumn. Some

individuals also spend the summer and winter with us, but do not breed. This dainty wader, of social disposition, often associates with other birds which tenant the shore. It is a very active species, and when hunting for marine creatures its movements are so quick that one has to be constantly on the alert to follow them. In summer the upper parts of the plumage are black and rufous, turning in autumn to brownish-grey with white beneath. The bird is not unlike a larger edition of the Little Stint. Its note is a musical twitter, and when, as often happens, several of these birds take to flight together, the united chorus strikes pleasantly upon the ear. The food consists of sandhoppers, sandworms, seaweed, and shellfish. It nests in the highest Arctic regions.

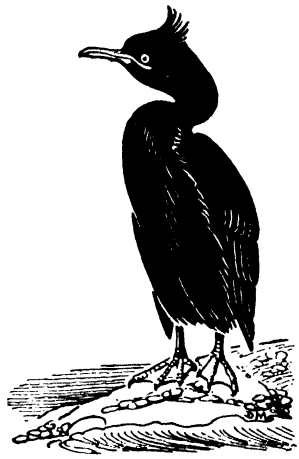


FIG. 103. Shag

Although the **Shag** (Fig. 103) is a rock-loving bird, it is sometimes met with far inland when driven there by adverse weather at sea. One I secured was found calmly parading in a Hertfordshire roadway, and not knowing what to do with it, a friend placed it in a large tank containing fifty goldfish. There it was left for the night, but the next morning it was dead and all the fish had disappeared. The Shag, after its long journey, was evidently very hungry, and a post-mortem proved that it had died from overfeeding. This species is

glossy-green with a crest in summer, but in winter dark- and light-brown. It has a long bill and short legs set far back on the body, and is much smaller than its cousin, the Cormorant; if its tail-feathers are counted, they will be found to number twelve instead of fourteen as in the larger bird. The Shag never seems to tire of its close proximity to and noise of the sea, delighting in wild rocky cliffs and islands, and placing its nest of seaweed and other materials on a cliff or ledge. The three to five eggs are chalky-white, but soon become soiled. The bird utters



FIG. 104. Manx Shearwater

a harsh guttural croak, but is for the most part silent. It dives to a great depth, and swims after fish with much adroitness and speed. It also has a fast and regular flight.

Curiously enough, I have also a record of a specimen of the **Manx Shearwater** (Fig. 104) found inland in the month of July far away from its island dwelling-place. This instance is really more remarkable than that of the Shag, as the Shearwater, although possessed of wonderful homing instincts, rarely wanders far away from its established haunts on or close to the sea. It may be seen on various parts of our coast in summer and autumn, but breeds chiefly on islands of the west country. The plumage

is black above and snow-white below. The long blackish bill has a down-curved tip, and the legs and feet are yellowish-green. The name Shearwater has been given because of the bird's habit of gliding or skimming close to the surface of the waves and following their curves. It nests in colonies, the one white egg being laid in May or June in holes in the turf or among rocks. A little grass is all that is used. Its call is likened to *kitty-coo-roo*. Largely nocturnal in habits, these birds keep to their burrows by day, and swarm on the sea to feed at nightfall; it is a weird experience to spend the hours of darkness in the midst of a colony, and to watch their phantom forms when nearly all other creatures are fast asleep. Great numbers of these birds make various islands and parts of our coast their summer home.

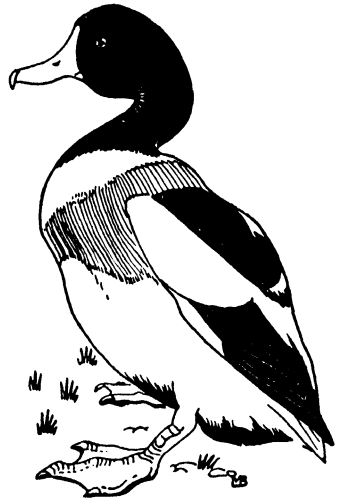


FIG. 105. Sheld-duck

The **Sheld-duck** (Fig. 105) haunts mudflats, saltings, sand-dunes, and the seashore, and is the largest and one of the most handsome of our British Ducks. The duck and drake resemble one another, but the former is smaller and not so gaudy as her partner, and lacks a knob on the base of the bill. The head and forepart of the neck is white, and this is succeeded by a broad band of chestnut which

extends over the shoulders. The wings are black, chestnut, and white, and the bill, legs, and feet flesh-coloured. The nest may be some distance from the sea in a rabbit's burrow, or in a hole made by the owners. Dry grass, moss, and sedge are used, with a lining of light-grey down. In this snug abode the six to twelve or more creamy-white eggs are laid during May. The drake utters a low whistle, but the duck gives vent to a loud *kor-kor*, and quacking notes are also emitted. Food is secured by dabbling in shallow water, for this is not a diving duck, and the menu consists of corn, crustaceans, sandhoppers, and worms, seaweed, seeds shellfish, and snails. One of the prettiest sights to witness is a family of ducklings of this species making their way to the sea accompanied by their anxious parents.

It is difficult to know the favourite birds of other observers, but few can fail to be charmed with the appearance and graceful movements of the **Terns**, which visit our shores in summer. Of these mention must be made of three species, the **Arctic, Common,** and **Sandwich Terns** (Figs. 106, 107, and 108). Whereas a few of these Sea Swallows, as they are also called, may be seen fishing offshore, plunging headlong into the water after their daily bread, the great majority have well established "terneries" in various parts of Britain, where they nest in very considerable numbers. The breeding haunts of the **Arctic Tern** (Fig. 106) are most numerous in Ireland and Scotland. The two or three eggs vary from buff to olive in ground colour, blotched with blackish-brown and grey. The eggs are placed among pebbles, sand, or shingle, and little, if any,

nest is attempted. This species has a black crown and nape, pearl-grey mantle, lighter under parts, and white rump and tail. The bill and legs are red.

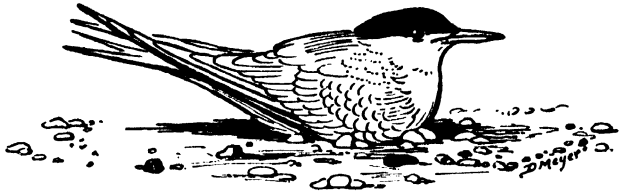


FIG. 106. Arctic Tern

The call is *kik*, or a long-drawn-out *krr-ee*, and a sharp *krrick*.

The Common Tern (Fig. 107) is whiter and less grey than the preceding, and the red bill has a black tip. As with the others, the tail is deeply forked. Its haunts are coasts, inland lakes, and tidal rivers. Sometimes a poor nest is made, at others none at

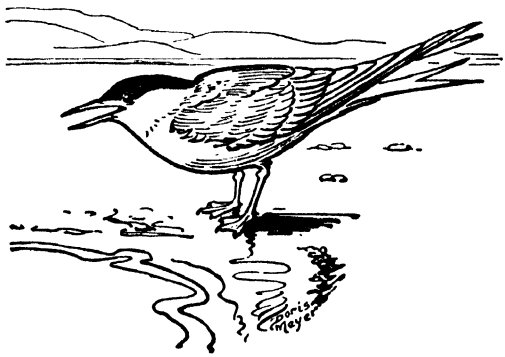


FIG. 107. Common Tern

all. The two or three eggs vary in ground colour, as with the last-named species, and are blotched with dark brown. Small fish constitute the food,

and it is recorded that insects are also eaten. The note is a sharp *kik* or *kirri*. The flight is slow and skimming, with occasional hoverings, and the clean-cut wings are a feature worth noting in these fairy-like birds.

The **Sandwich Tern** (Fig. 108) is much larger than either of the other two named, and may thus be known, and also by its black bill with a yellow tip, and black legs and feet. The tail is unusually deep in the fork. The breast has a tinge of rose colour. The first specimen was found at Sandwich, one of the old Cinque

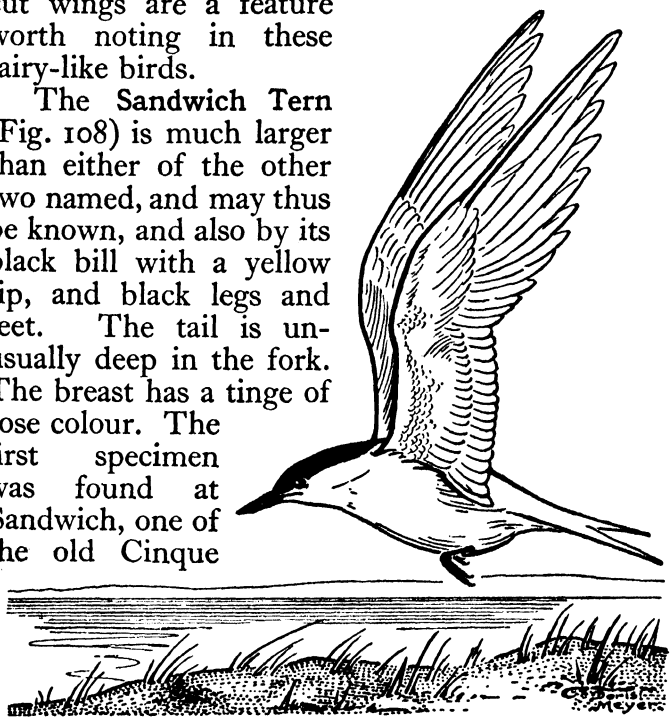


FIG. 108. Sandwich Tern

Ports in Kent. The nest is merely a scoop in the sand, and the two to four eggs are buff or white, blotched with ash and dark brown. The note is a grating *kirkitt*, or *tre-wit*.

The Lesser and Roseate Terns are also British breeding-birds, but are the rarest of the five nesting

species, and the Black Tern is a spring and autumn migrant which once nested, but now no longer nests in the marshlands of the eastern counties.

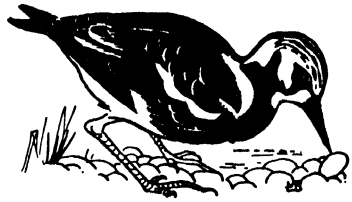


FIG. 109. Turnstone

The observer keen on watching seashore birds is likely to come across the **Turnstone** (Fig. 109) at any time of the year, but it does not nest with us, being mostly a winter visitor. The plumage is brown on the upper parts and white below. The breast is black, and there are curious black and white bars on the face and neck. The legs are orange-yellow. On shore this is a lively little wader, and has acquired its name from its habit of turning over shells, stones, and other objects in search of small sea creatures. As it flies it utters a shrill but very pleasant *keet*. The breeding territory is near the sea in Arctic regions.

The last bird in our present haunts may be described as a smaller edition of the Curlew. This is the **Whimbrel** (Fig. 110). It is brown and grey, mottled and streaked all over, with dark-brown bars on the tail, and two deep-brown stripes over the crown. It only nests in the far north of our islands, and is seen elsewhere as a bird of passage. As

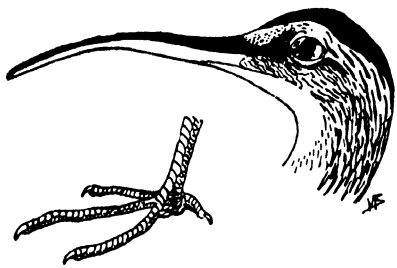


FIG. 110. Whimbrel

such, it may be looked for on rocky or sandy coasts and mudflats. It has a low, quick flight, but when migrating ascends much higher, like other birds which traverse great distances. The nest is merely a hollow in the ground lined with a sprinkling of grass, heather, and moss, and is found on moors. The three or four olive-yellow eggs are blotched with brown, especially towards the larger end. The note is a whistling *titterel* uttered seven times, and from this it receives the names of Titterel and Seven Whistler. With its long beak this bird picks up various kinds of sea creatures, such as crustaceans, small fish, sandworms, and shellfish, but when dwelling inland, berries, insects, snails, and worms are its main dietary.



Chapter XIII

BIRD-WATCHING BY INLAND WATERS

REED BUNTING – COOT – SPOTTED CRAKE – DIPPER – PINTAIL DUCK – TUFTED DUCK – WILD DUCK – GADWALL – GARGANEY – GREAT CRESTED GREBE – LITTLE GREBE – MARSH AND MONTAGU'S HARRIERS – HERON – KINGFISHER – SAND MARTIN – MOORHEN – SHORT-EARED OWL – POCHARD – WATER RAIL – COMMON SANDPIPER – SHOVELLER – JACK SNIPE – MUTE SWAN – TEAL – BEARDED TIT – MARSH TIT – GREY WAGTAIL – PIED WAGTAIL – YELLOW WAGTAIL – GRASSHOPPER WARBLER – MARSH WARBLER – REED WARBLER – SEDGE WARBLER – WIDGEON.

THE waterside provides the bird-watcher with a selection of both large and small birds, and among the latter the **Reed Bunting** (Fig. 111) is frequently to be observed. This bird not only delights in a damp place, where bushes or reeds abound, but also calls attention to itself by uttering a scratchy and persistent chatter. The male may be known by its brownish back, light breast, black head and throat, and white collar. The female lacks the black markings, but has reddish-white under parts, with dusky spots, and a light line over the eye. The bird has a dipping flight, and when it alights it flutters its wings and spreads its tail. The deep nest is made of dry grass, leaves, moss, and seeds, with a lining of reed flowers and horsehair. It is usually



FIG. 111. Reed Bunting

placed low down among rank undergrowth, but I once found a colony of many nests which were several feet from the ground, among osiers. The three to six eggs are ashy-grey, with almost black markings. The food consists of insects and seeds.

Out of the water the **Coot** (Fig. 112) is a large, ungainly black bird; in its more usual element it swims with ease and vigour. It has lobed feet, and resorts to the shore much less than its cousin, the Moorhen. The white patch on the forehead is a sure means of distinguishing the Coot. It favours a sheet of water fringed with reeds and rushes, and there hides its large cradle of reeds, rushes, and sedges. The six to twelve eggs are stone-colour speckled with black. This bird is a strong flier, and when rising from the water skims along and eventually alights with a splash. The sexes are alike, but the young are furry-black water-babies

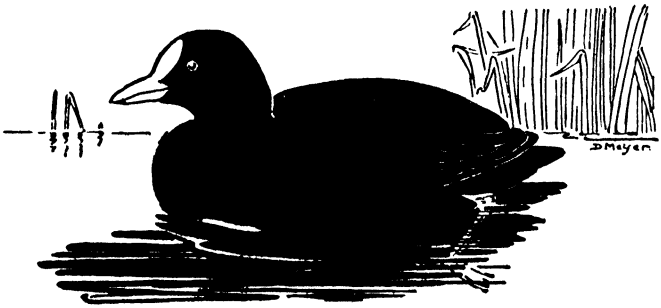


FIG. 112. Coot

with red heads. The note is written down as *kew*, frequently repeated. The diet is made up of grain, aquatic plants, shellfish, worms, and other ingredients. Such a large plump bird requires a great amount of food, and is said to be always either feeding or fighting. I have heard a Norfolk saying as follows: "There've been a body of Cutes on Breydon since the Broads ha' friz."

The **Spotted Crake** (Fig. 113) is a comparatively rare bird which haunts swamps, and having shy habits is rarely seen. It moves its head jerkily like the Moorhen, and on land carries the body in a horizontal position similar to the Corncrake's, with head held well forward. It has reddish-brown plumage on the upper parts, with black and white streaks, and paler beneath. The sides of the head and breast are greyish, closely spotted with white. The yellow bill has a red base, and the legs are pale green. The bird nests in May and June, and the homestead is built of water plants and placed among aquatic herbage. The eight to ten olive-buff eggs are spotted with dark red-brown. The food consists of insects, molluscs, seeds, and worms. Some of its notes are whistle-like, resembling *whuit-whuit*; it also has what is known as "a loud ticking or throbbing cry."

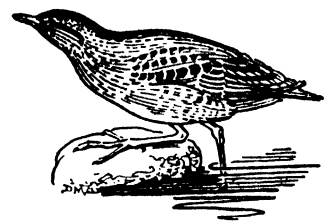


FIG. 113. Spotted Crake

Where there is a clear stream on the moors and among the mountains—for preference, one that is fast-flowing—there, amidst the solitude of the hills, one may be entertained by the lively antics of the

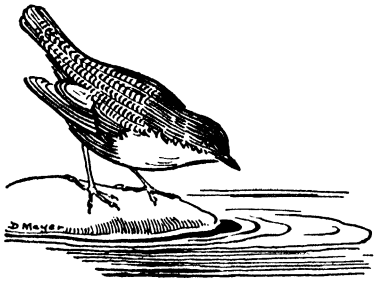


FIG. 114. Dipper

Dipper (Fig. 114), or heartened by its pleasant little song as the long-legged bird dips and curtseys on a boulder in mid-stream. It calls *sip-sip*, and the song is a trill which can be heard above the music of the tumbling beck. The Water Ouzel, as it is also called, is constantly on the move, and may at once be known by its dark-brown attire, enlivened by a pure white throat and breast. The belly is chestnut shading to black. I have found the domed nest actually *under* a waterfall, the water just missing the damp abode during its onward rush. The hole is towards the base of the nest, and in this snug abode, made of dry grass, leaves, and moss, five white, pointed eggs are laid. Under an old bridge is a likely place to search for it. The Dipper is rather a puzzle, as it is a song-bird that dives and

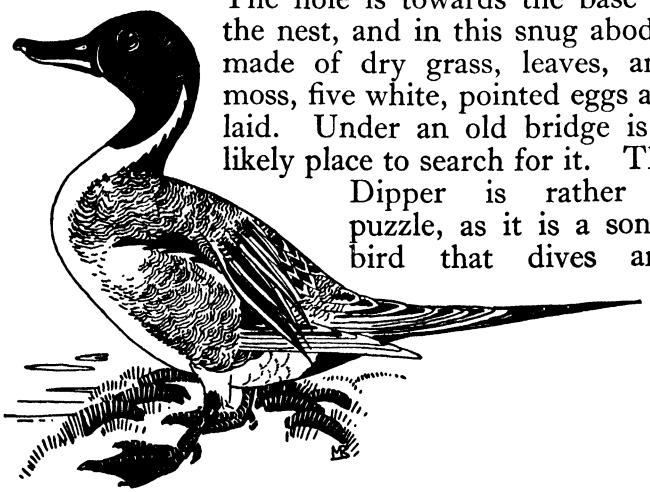


FIG. 115. Pintail Duck

swims, and a water bird that sings! It flies, when alarmed, just above the surface, and will without hesitation dive into the clear water and search for food on the bed of the stream, using its wings to propel itself along. It seeks the fry of fishes, aquatic insects and their larvae, and water snails. Hudson well describes this happy-go-lucky and jocund bird as "a big black Wren with a silvery-white bib."

The **Pintail Duck** (Fig. 115) is a spring and winter visitor, but a few remain to nest in the far north. This species haunts the sea as well as fresh water near the coast. The drake is greyish, with white beneath, and the dark-brown head and neck are relieved by a white stripe. The long and pointed tail accounts for the popular name. In summer, as with other Ducks, an "eclipse" dress is worn, and this is dusky-brown. The duck is brownish and mottled, with lighter under parts, and her tail is less long. The note is a loud *quaark*. The nest is built on the ground among herbage, and is lined with dark-brown down, having faint white tips. The seven to ten eggs are greenish-yellow. The food consists of crustaceans, grain, sea-grass, shellfish, and water-weeds.



FIG. 116. Tufted Duck

One of our best diving ducks and a strong bird on the wing is the **Tufted Duck** (Fig. 116); on some waters it is the most familiar species. In winter it is very numerous on the coast. The drake has

black-and-white plumage, and whilst both sexes possess a crest, that of the former is more conspicuous. The duck is dark brown. It nests in May and June, and the aquatic plants with which it is made are lined with greyish-black down. It is placed on the ground near water, and is well hidden. The eight to ten greenish-buff eggs are often stained. The call is *kr-kr-kurra*. Fish, insects, shellfish, and weeds make up the food.

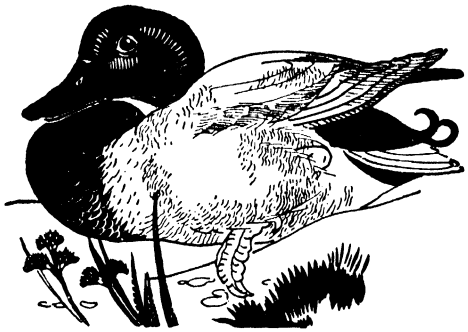


FIG. 117. Wild Duck

Lakes, ponds, and streams, as well as mudflats and saltings near the sea, are the haunts of the **Wild Duck**, or **Mallard** (Fig. 117), and it is one of our commonest species. The drake—previous to his change into a much plainer garb in summer, when he goes into hiding—is a handsome bird, and brief details must be given. He has a green head with a white ring round the neck. The chestnut-brown breast is succeeded below by greyish, deckled with light brown. There is a violet patch on the wing, edged with white. The bird has a dark rump, and the upper tail-coverts are curled. The duck is

greyish-brown all over, but the violet and white patch on the wing is much more prominent. It is an early nester, and eggs are often produced in March. The nest is composed of aquatic plants and grass, lined with down, and the ten to twelve pale-green eggs are covered over when the Duck leaves them. The varied diet is composed of berries, frogs, grain, insects, shellfish, slugs, snails, and worms.

The **Gadwall** (Fig. 118) is our rarest fresh-water Duck, but nests sparingly in suitable localities. It is also a winter visitor. It is a strong flier and a capital diver. It is smaller than the Wild Duck and not nearly as handsome, being brown, with a prominent white bar on the wing. The note is a shrill *quack*. The nest is placed on the ground, perhaps under the shelter of a bush, and is made of dry grass, leaves, and rushes, lined with down. There are eight or more greenish eggs. Fry and spawn of fish, water insects, plants, and seeds are eaten.

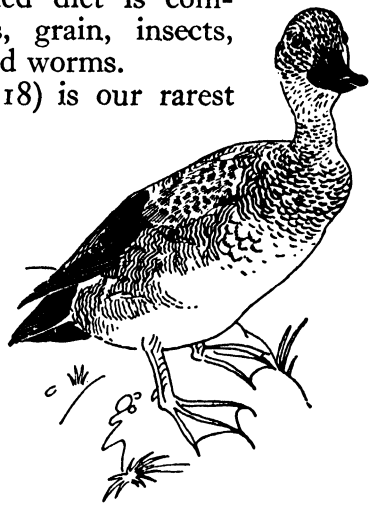


FIG. 118. Gadwall

The **Garganey** (Fig. 119) is a summer visitor, and is a small species like the Teal. The drake is an attractive bird, having a brown head and neck, with a red-brown breast and a conspicuous white stripe from above the eye to the back of the neck. The under parts and flanks are pale grey and white.

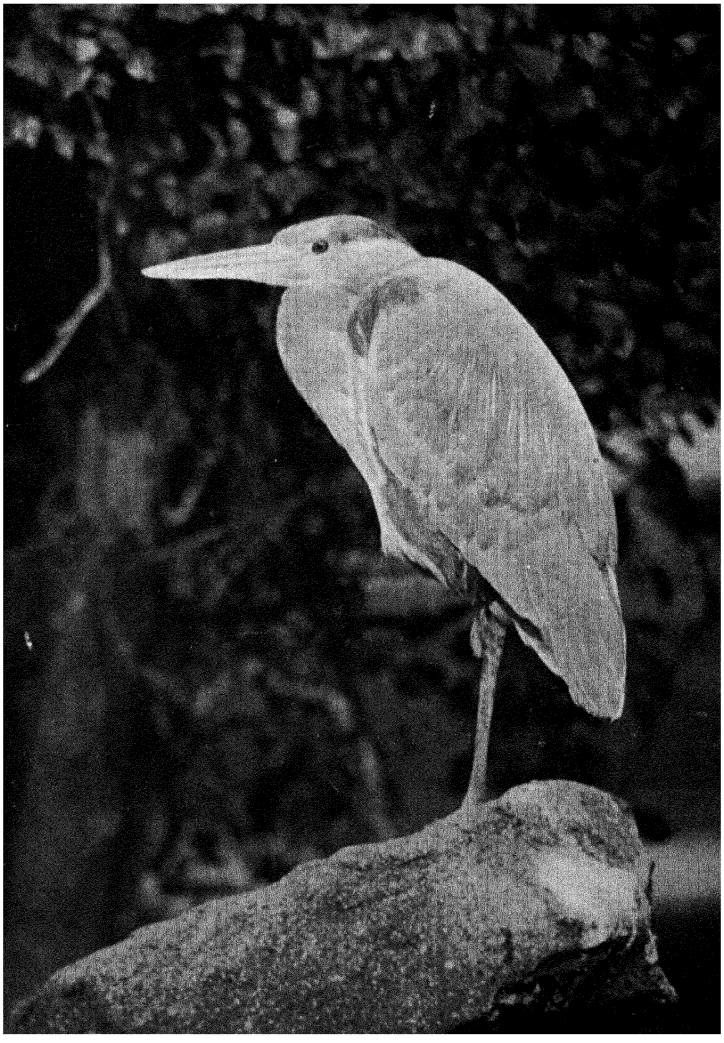
The black-and-brown back has a blue gloss. The duck is brown. This bird rides high in the water, flies high with outstretched neck when it rises, and very swiftly. It utters a double quacking cry on the wing, and the call being likened to *crik*, has resulted in the local name of Cricket Teal. The nesting period is April and May, and the home is constructed of aquatic plants with a down lining, having long white tips, and is well hidden among



FIG. 119. Garganey

herbage. There are ten to twelve buff or creamy-white eggs. It is Teal-like in habits, and the food is the usual diet of these water birds.

Thanks to protection in many localities, the **Great Crested Grebe** (Fig. 120) is increasing; such a graceful and striking-looking bird well deserves encouragement. In its best spring livery of dark brown and chestnut crown, crest, and ruff, white cheeks, dark-brown upper parts, and silky-white under parts, and long neck, the male is sure to attract notice. It is also a model parent and most attentive to its young. In winter it is much plainer in its attire.



[*Photograph: Eric J. Hoskyng.*

Heron resting after a meal of fish

It haunts broads, lakes, and meres, and places its nest among aquatic vegetation. Dead and decaying water plants are used, and the nest often floats in the water. The three or four whitish eggs soon become stained, and when leaving the nest, these are covered over. Food is obtained under water, as this bird is a fine diver; the diet consists of fish, frogs, insects, shellfish, and tadpoles. It utters various harsh notes at nesting time, but is mostly silent.



FIG. 120. Great Crested Grebe

I have many times played hide-and-seek with companies of the **Little Grebe** or **Dabchick** (Fig. 121), and on one occasion I counted no less than three hundred of these dapper little water-sprites diving under the surface of the lake where I fished in my unregenerate days. One moment the water would be alive with their active forms, and then, presto! before one could realize it, all had disappeared, poking up their tiny sharp-pointed beaks ever and



FIG. 121. Little Grebe

anon to take in a fresh supply of air. In summer the plumage is dark-coloured, with chestnut cheeks and throat and brown flanks. In winter it is lighter all over. Possessed of great muscular power and enviable activity, the Dabchick is constantly on the move in the water, but unless hard weather drives it away from its chosen haunts, it rarely changes its quarters. The nest floats in the water, and is often saturated, and even submerged. This flat cradle is placed among reeds and sedges, and the eggs are covered when the parent leaves her treasures. These number from four to six, and at first white, soon become discoloured. It is an engaging sight to see the young clamber on to the parent's back when they leave the nest, and they seem to enjoy such a pick-a-back. The voice is usually a shrill cry, but a quiet call-note is also uttered. The food resembles that given for its larger and much-less-common relative last described.



FIG. 122.
Marsh Harrier

Two rare birds, unlikely to be seen except by good fortune, claim mention, and these are the **Marsh** and **Montagu's Harriers** (Figs. 122 and 123). The third species, the **Hen Harrier**, resorts to moorlands and similar haunts. All three are almost extinct as British breeding birds, so that only brief descriptions are necessary. The male Marsh Harrier is brownish above and whitish below, with the head and throat buff, the wings brown and grey, and the tail ashy-grey. The female is larger than the male, and is brown below and on the tail, but the plumage

varies. The Harriers quarter the ground in search of birds, frogs, insects, mice, moles, and voles—hence their name—and the Hen Harrier may be known by the whitish rump displayed in flight. The Marsh is a tall, thin, and upstanding bird, with strong yellow legs and talons. The note of the female has been likened to *pitz-pitz*, that of the male being *koi* or *kai*. The large nest is made of reeds, sedge, and

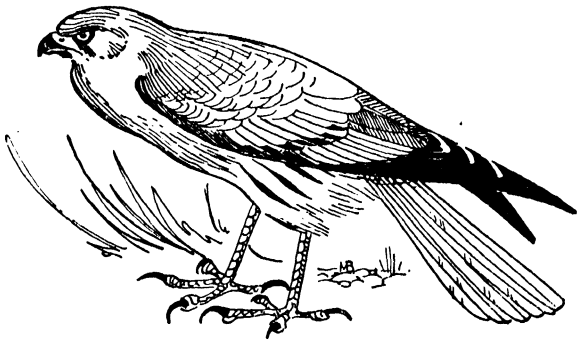


FIG. 123. Montagu's Harrier

sticks, and the three to six round and rough eggs are bluish-green or whitish. Montagu's Harrier is greyish above and whitish below, with bars of brown and white on the tail-feathers. There is a narrow central streak of chestnut on the breast. The female is brown above and on the tail, with buff and grey bars and light tips. This species is a graceful flier, and sails in widening circles. It also hovers like a Kestrel, yet it keeps to ground more than its relatives. The voice is a feeble and tremulous chatter. The four or five eggs resemble those of the Marsh Harrier. The Hen Harrier is greyish above, whitish below; the greyish head is streaked

with brown, the wings brown and whitish, and the throat grey. The female is brown above, with white streaks on the nape, and the ruff is very distinct.

The long-billed and long-legged **Heron** (Fig. 124) may often be seen standing immovable as a sentry by a watercourse in a marshy field; it also haunts estuaries and mud-flats. It is one of our largest British birds, and is dressed in dark and light grey with lighter under parts. White plumes adorn the lower



FIG. 124. Heron

part of the neck, and the male has plumes which form a crown. The strong bayonet-like bill admirably fulfils its purpose of transfixing fish, frogs, and voles. Insects and snails are also consumed. Like most fishermen the Heron is very patient, and will stand in a crouched position for a long time before it suddenly becomes active, wades into the water, and beats the surface with its strong wings

to drive the fish into the shallows. It is a powerful bird in the air, albeit its flight is laboured. When flying, the head and neck are drawn back, and the long legs are held in a horizontal position at the rear. In Broadland, Norfolk, this is one of the chief birds to be observed, and forms an integral part of the landscape. As a rule, several nests are built in trees close together, and form a heronry, but solitary nests are sometimes found. This large structure is composed of sticks and twigs, and contains three or four dull, greenish-blue eggs. The note is a deep croak.

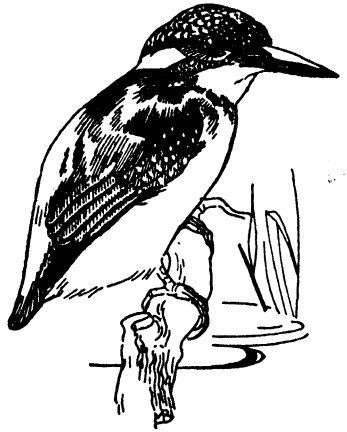


FIG. 125. Kingfisher

Those who have never seen a living **Kingfisher** (Fig. 125) have yet to observe the most beautiful bird in Britain. The preserved specimen in a museum always excites interest and wonder, but is not comparable with the living feathered jewel as it flashes downstream on unerring wings, uttering a high-pitched note which may be imitated by blowing into the hole of a key. The sexes are equally beautiful, with bright blue and unmatched green plumage on the head and wings, chestnut-red on the under parts and ear coverts, and a white patch on the chin and each side of the neck. The Kingfisher is a plump bird, with a short tail, a long, dagger-like bill, and short red legs and feet. As an expert fisher

this gem of the feathered race holds a high place. It has its favourite watching point, such as an overhanging branch of a tree, and there it watches for its finny prey. Suddenly the immobile form comes to life and activity, there is a superb headlong plunge and splash, and the bird emerges from the water with a silvery fish dangling from its bill. The nest is found at the end of a hole in a river bank, and simply consists of fish bones, a by no means tidy or pleasant abode, containing six to eight glossy white round eggs. Besides fish, water insects, shellfish, and tadpoles are also taken.

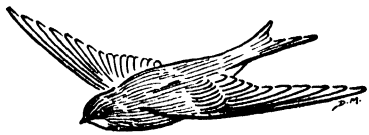


FIG. 126. Sand Martin

Although the Sand Martin (Fig. 126) often nests in sand-pits away from the waterside, it is also found tenanting sandy cliffs and river banks, and hawks for insect food—in company with House Martins, Swallows, and Swifts—over lakes, ponds, and rivers. It may be distinguished from these by its smaller size and mouse-coloured plumage above, and a band of dark brown across the white breast. It utters a cheery twitter as it hunts after its prey. It is at all times a social species, and nests in colonies, each pair of birds burrowing a tunnel in the face of the sand or river bank; at the extremity of the burrow, the nest of dry grass and feathers is placed out of arm's reach. Behind King's College on the River Cam at Cambridge, and near the famous Bridge of Sighs, there is a brick wall which holds up the high grassy bank, and in some of the small holes left in the wall for drainage Sand Martins have their nests, within a

foot or so of the level of the water. The thought occurred to me recently when I was on the Cam and passed the busy Martins popping in and out of their curious nesting sites, that flood-time (as in 1879) must be perilous for these particular birds, as their nests would undoubtedly be destroyed. The four or five small, pointed, white eggs are produced from May to July. It is an early migrant, often arriving in March from its winter quarters in Africa and India.

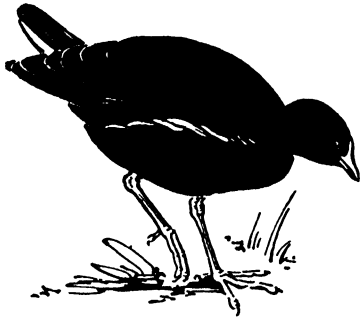


FIG. 127. Moorhen

The Moorhen (Fig. 127) has in recent years taken more and more to a ground life, and even builds its nest in bushes and low trees and searches for food on land. In spite of this fact, and although having no lobes or webs on the toes, it is a first-class swimmer. Any wayside pond, as well as other waters, is likely to contain a pair or more of these familiar birds, and its *crook* note betrays its presence. It is dark-coloured, with a white line on the flanks and a prominent white patch under the short tail. The bill is yellow at the tip, and scarlet at the base; the legs are green, with long sprawling toes. On land the Waterhen, as it is often called, has a sedate gait, and flirts its tail; whilst in the water it jerks its head as it swims. The flat cradle of reeds and rushes, with a grass or sedge lining, is placed among surrounding vegetation, or elsewhere, as already mentioned. The six to twelve buffish-red eggs are

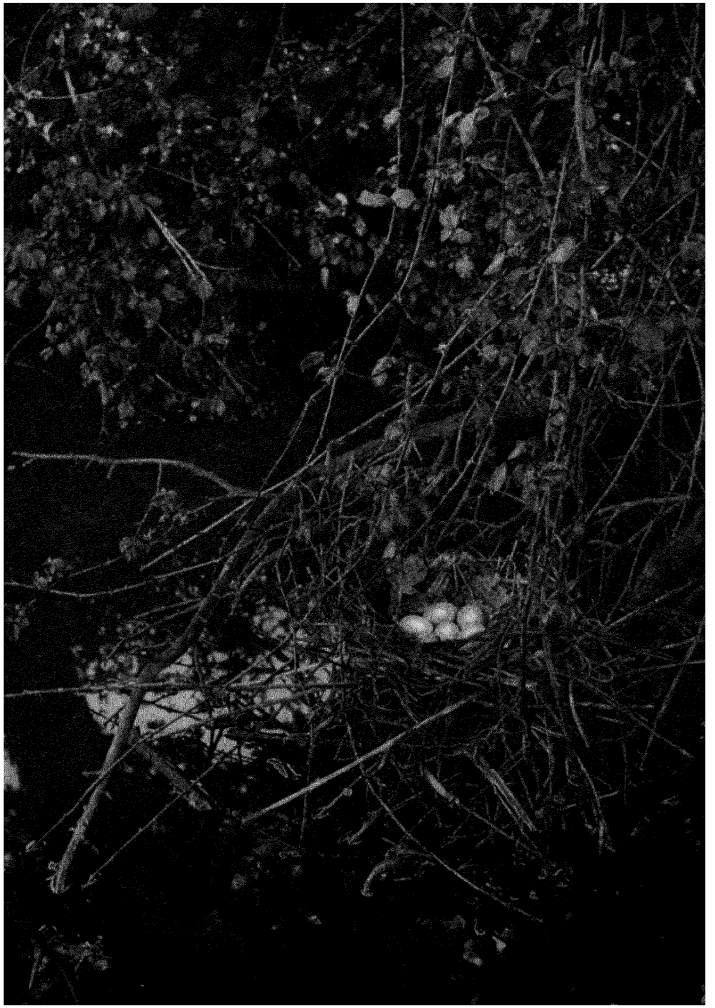
marked with red-brown, and the young take to the water the moment they are hatched. As expert water-babies they have few equals. The food consists, among other things, of aquatic plants, berries, insects, slugs, snails, and worms.

The **Short-eared Owl** (Fig. 128) is entitled to a place in the haunt under consideration, as it frequents fens, heaths, and moors. It nests in the north, and is only a winter visitor to the south. It arrives about the same time as the Woodcock, and is sometimes called the Woodcock Pilot in consequence. Compared with the Long-eared Owl, this species has much shorter "ears," and it is a day and not a night flier. The buff plumage is barred and striated with dark brown, but the breast and lower parts are almost unmarked. It is larger than any of the other British Owls, but not so stocky as the Tawny Owl. The Short-eared Owl lays four to seven white oval eggs on the ground among heather, reeds, or sedge. The prey captured includes beetles, birds, mice, and voles. The notes are a sharp scream and a harsh cry; and the bird is also said to bark.



FIG. 128. Short-eared Owl

The **Pochard** (Fig. 129) is another Duck which dives for its daily "bread," and its menu consists of shellfish, water insects, and water weeds. It frequents broads and lakes as well as the sea. The



Nest and eggs of Moorhen

drake may be known by its chestnut head, dark throat and upper part of breast, grey back, and black tail-coverts. The duck has a dull-brown head and neck and a white chin. There is a grey bar on the wing in both sexes. The Pochard has a quick, low flight, and makes quite a noise when on the wing. The note is a hoarse croak, and the call a subdued whistle. The dry-grass-and-sedge nest is lined with brownish-grey down, and the six to twelve eggs are greenish or whitish-buff.



FIG. 129. Pochard

The **Water Rail** (Fig. 130) is a first cousin of the Spotted Crake, and resembles that species in its recluse habits. It hides as soon as disturbed in aquatic herbage, or will take to the water and swim out of danger beneath the surface. Nevertheless, it is an inquisitive bird, and like the stoat, will come from its hiding-place if only patience is exercised. The fact is that very often bird-watching may be much more successful by remaining in well-chosen concealment than by wandering about from place to place. Close-up views may be had by

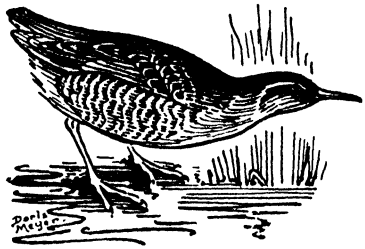


FIG. 130. Water Rail

remaining still, and one gets more intimate knowledge of wild creatures and their personalities than when they are seen afar off, or hastily flying away. The Water Rail is chestnut-brown above with black spots and streaks, but the face, throat, and under parts are greyish to buff. There are black and white bars on the flanks, and the long bill is red. It has a short upturned stump of a tail, and the size over all is about the same as the Corncrake's. Its haunts are marshes, reed-beds, and rivers, and the nest is made of reeds, sedges, and other water plants. The six to twelve eggs are pale brown, or buffish-white, with spots of yellowish colour and grey. Spawn and fry of fish, frogs and tadpoles, insects, molluscs, and worms form the chief food, but berries and seeds are also eaten. The call-note is a shrill *crrrick*, and a clear *whit* and scream. One observer says it utters a wheezy grunt, a loud groan, a squeal, and the noise a hedgehog makes when grubbing in the dusk.

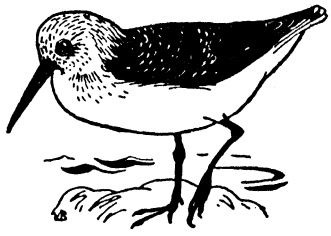


FIG. 131. Common Sandpiper

The **Common Sandpiper** (Fig. 131) is a summer migrant, arriving from Africa during April or earlier. A lover of lonely watercourses, it often turns up when least expected; being a wading bird, it haunts brooks, lakes, marshes, streams, and the seashore, and mostly nests in the north. Active, engaging, and constantly on the move, when standing it nods its head and jerks its tail. The upper parts and breast are olive-brown, the under parts white; the white tail becomes prominent during flight. The

nest is made of grass, moss, or sedge, and placed on the ground among bushes or herbage. The four pear-shaped eggs are buff with brown spots, and may be looked for in May. On the wing the note is a plaintive *weet-weet*, and the call may be likened to *a-chuck-chuck-chuck*. The food includes crustaceans, small fry, insects, and worms.

The Shoveller (Fig. 132), if so named because of its spade-like and recurved bill, is well christened; by means of this useful "tool" it is well able to



FIG. 132. Shoveller

procure frogs, insects, shellfish, and water weeds. It is mostly a bird of passage with us, but some examples are resident and nest sparingly in Ireland and Scotland. The drake has a green head, black and brown back with a blue gloss, white breast, and bright chestnut under parts. The duck is mottled brown. The haunts are lakes, marshes, and ponds, and the nest is concealed among herbage, and is lined with blackish down. It has from eight to twelve greenish-white eggs. The call is *took-took*, but the duck quacks. In flight it utters a *puck-puck*.

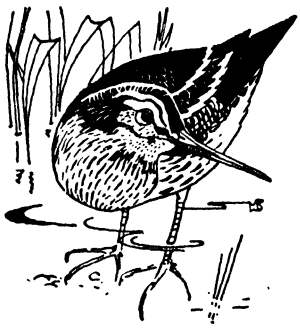


FIG. 133. Jack Snipe

Water insects and weeds are the chief items of food, but small fish, frogs, and shell-fish are also eaten.

The **Jack Snipe** (Fig. 133) is a winter visitor, and is hardly as large as a Starling. It has mottled and streaked brown and grey plumage, with a bill which looks out of all proportion for such a small bird. It does not fly in such a zigzag manner as the Common Snipe (see Chapter VIII.), and is more fond of taking cover when disturbed. Marshy places are its habitat, and it may often be found in the same spot each year. It breeds in the Arctic regions.

The **Mute Swan** (Fig. 134) is so well known that a brief description will suffice. Its pure white plumage is only relieved by the black marking at the base of the deep orange bill, and the black legs and feet. The male is called a Cob and the female a Pen. The young are known as Cygnets. They are grey, with bluish bills and legs. The graceful attitude of the adult as it proudly rides in the water, the stately manner in which it holds its head and neck, and its whole aristocratic bearing, are features of interest. So many of these birds



FIG. 134. Mute Swan

are domesticated that it is difficult to dissociate them from the wild ones, but there are at least two places far apart where I have seen large numbers of undoubted wild birds, one being a small loch in Perthshire, and the other on a small river in Hertfordshire, where the birds have taken up their haunt quite of their own accord. The last time I counted these Hertfordshire Swans there were nearly a hundred swimming about, or standing on the lush green meadow-bank looking in the distance strangely foreign, and reminding one of so many Pelicans. The secret of this swannery seems to be the abundant food supply from a mill-race, and the fact that the birds are not interfered with. The male Swan is not a good-tempered fellow, especially when his consort is sitting in her large nest containing five to twelve greenish-white eggs—the largest eggs produced by any British bird. As its name indicates, it is mostly a silent species, but it does utter a trumpet-like note and hisses like a Goose. It is also said to possess a low song in the breeding-season, but I must confess I have never yet heard it.

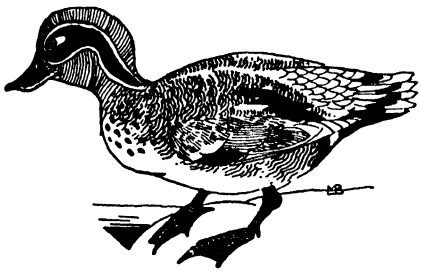


FIG. 135. Teal

The Teal (Fig. 135) is our smallest British Duck, and although it nests near lakes and pools, its numbers are greatly increased on the coast in winter. The drake has a chestnut and bright-green head, the rest of the attire being greyish with a profusion

of brown mottling. There is a prominent purple and bright-green patch on the wing-bar, and a long white streak. The duck is mottled buff and brown. The reed and rush nest is lined with dark-brown down and feathers, and contains eight to twelve buffish, or greenish, eggs. It feeds on crustaceans, grain, insects, and water plants. The note is a croak and sharp whistle, and the duck quacks.



FIG. 136. Bearded Tit

If two pennies are chinked rapidly together one can imitate the sharp note of that rare bird the **Bearded Tit** (Fig. 136), which still nests sparingly in Devon and Norfolk's Broadland. It haunts reed-beds, and only careful watching will disclose its whereabouts. It is an attractive-looking bird, and can briefly be described as having a blue-grey crown, a long black moustache, orange-tawny back, and a long fawn-coloured and wedge-shaped tail. It has a dipping flight, and every now and again pauses and glides. The nest is made of dry grass, reeds, or sedge, with a lining of reed flowers. The four to seven whitish eggs are lined and speckled with brown. The diet mostly consists of insects and small shellfish.

The **Marsh Tit** (Fig. 137) may be known from the Coal Tit by having an all-black head and nape, and the white wing-bars are absent. Like its congeners, this is a cheery little bird of local distribution, and is not nearly as familiar as the Coal Tit. As well

as swampy places, this species haunts damp coppices and woods, and sometimes visits gardens. The nest is placed in a hole—a rotten willow by a streamside is a favourite abode—and the materials used are fur, hair, moss, willow down, and wool matted together. The five to eight white eggs are speckled with light red. It has a fluttering flight, haunts tall trees, and cries in a persistent voice *would-ye-would-ye*, and other notes which sometimes are so deceptive as to mislead the listener. Insects and small seeds are eaten.



FIG. 137. Marsh Tit

The still rarer **Willow Tit** may be distinguished from the foregoing by having a sooty-brown head instead of black, and has warmer under parts. I can claim early acquaintance with this species as, in company with the late distinguished ornithologist, Dr. Ernst Hartert, I was among the first to secure a specimen of this bird in this country, about thirty-five years ago in a wood in Bedfordshire.

A male **Grey Wagtail** (Fig. 138) in its best nuptial dress might be mistaken for its near relative, the Yellow Wagtail, but may be distinguished by the former having a longer tail, with a grey head, narrow white eye-stripe, black patch on the throat, and green

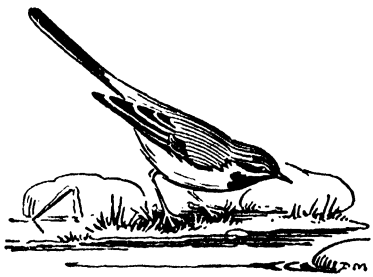


FIG. 138. Grey Wagtail

rump. In winter the black throat-patch is white. The under parts are bright greenish-yellow. The female is paler grey, and lacks the black throat. It delights in lonely watercourses, and in Scotland I have many times met with it by a burn in the heart of the hills. Its habits are similar to others of its race, but this species is more fond of perching in trees. It is one of our less common resident birds, and because of this is always worth watching. The nest is built in a rock or wall, or a hole in a river bank, and is composed of grass, hair, and rootlets. Under an old bridge is a favourite place. The four to six eggs are pale grey, clouded with light creamy-brown. Insects alone compose the food. The shrill call-note is *tiz-it, tiz-it*, but in spring and autumn it is as well to listen for a pleasant little song.

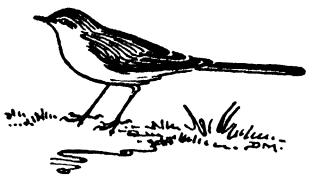


FIG. 139. Yellow Wagtail

We have already made acquaintance with the **Pied Wagtail** in Chapter X., and except to remark that it constructs a nest of dry grass, hair, roots, and wool containing four to six whitish eggs speckled all over with grey, we can pass on to one of the most lovely British birds, the **Yellow Wagtail** (Fig. 139). This species, being a migrant, is only with us in the summer. It has been aptly called a fairy-like bird, for not only is its olive and bright-yellow dress attractive, but its active manners and dainty ways make an appeal to the most indifferent observer. It has blackish wings and tail, with the outer tail-feathers white. It is very local in distribution, tenanting damp pastures, fields, and marshes. I

have seen this delightful bird many times in company with Wheatears in Suffolk. Their being such active and handsome birds has meant happy hours spent in their joint company. The female Yellow Wagtail is more soberly clad than her gay-clad mate, being browner above and paler below. This bird has a sharp alarm-note and a cheery little song. The nest is placed on a bank among a tussock of grass, or at the base of a wall. I have found it in a corn-field. Dry grass, moss, and rootlets are used, with a lining of feathers, hair, and wool. The four to six eggs are smaller than those of the Pied Wagtail, and are yellowish, clouded with brown or grey. It is entirely insectivorous in its diet.



FIG. 140. Grasshopper Warbler

Another summer migrant which has of recent years become increasingly scarce is the **Grasshopper Warbler** (Fig. 140), which although in my experience prefers a damp situation not far from water, is also found elsewhere. It is one of our shyest Warblers, and has a remarkable knack of pouring out its stridulating song when hidden in a thick bush or tangled herbage and yet remaining unseen. As the bird sings the whole air seems electrified, and its notes strike upon the ear as now near, now far away, as the hidden singer turns its head rapidly from side to side. It is more often heard at early morning, or just before dusk, and many are the games of hide-and-seek I have played in my effort to get a sight of this secretive species. When it is observed, it drops to cover,

but will soon recommence its whirring song. It has olive-brown plumage above, and lighter under parts, with darker striations and mottlings. The very deep nest is composed of dry grass, and is usually on or close to the ground, and the four to six white eggs are closely speckled with light red. It nests from May to July and feeds exclusively on insects.



FIG. 141.
Marsh Warbler

The **Marsh Warbler** (Fig. 141) is another summer visitor, and is mostly confined to the west of England. It is, like the Reed Warbler, of shy disposition, and soon hides when disturbed. It is a tenant of osier beds and reedy places, also the margins of lakes and rivers. It is olive-brown above and buff beneath, shading to nearly white. The legs are flesh-coloured, those of the Reed Warbler being slaty. The nest is built low down among herbage, usually close to, but never over, the water. Grass, leaves, and moss are used, felted with cobwebs and down, with a horsehair lining. The five to seven almost white eggs are blotched with purplish-brown. This bird sings at night, as well as by day, and in its song one can detect the notes of other birds. It feeds on insects.

The **Reed Warbler** (Fig. 142) is a longer and slimmer bird than the Sedge Warbler, next to be described, but resembles it and the Marsh Warbler in being with us only in summer. It loves reedy places, as its name implies, and has the habit of

sidling up reed stems and singing in full view from the top, one leg higher on the stem than the other. It is mostly brown above and lighter below, but it has a less noticeable eye stripe than the Sedge Warbler, and lack of streaks on the head and dark spots on the back. The female is paler. The very deep and compact nest is suspended among reed stems, and as the reed grows so the nest gets higher. It is composed of feathers, grass, moss, and wool, and is almost always over the water. The four or five greenish-white eggs are blotched with olive. This species of Warbler utters a scolding note, and although its chattering song reminds one of that of the following, it has neither the power nor the energy of that bird. It feeds on insects.

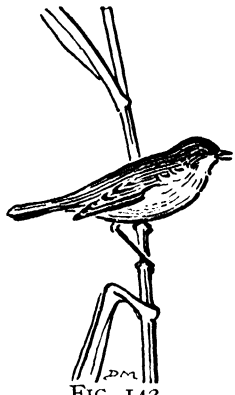


FIG. 142.
Reed Warbler



FIG. 143.
Sedge Warbler

The **Sedge Warbler** (Fig. 143) is a more familiar species than any of the last three under review, and may be heard or seen where there is a reedy ditch, marsh, wayside pond, or river. It is more distinctive-looking than the others, being greyish-brown above, with a broad yellow-white stripe over the eye, under parts pale buff, and a white throat. It keeps well to cover in the same way as the three other species, and rarely flies into the open. It betrays its presence by the

persistent utterance of a medley of chirpy and scratchy notes, in which it sometimes introduces those of other birds. It scolds with a *churr* and an abrupt *tek-tek*. The nest is placed in a low bush, or among herbage, close to the ground, and in its construction grass, hair, moss, and stalks are used. The five or six greenish-yellow eggs are entirely mottled with brown. The food consists of aquatic insects and their larvae.



FIG. 144. Widgeon

The last bird to include in this haunt is the **Widgeon** (Fig. 144), which is chiefly a winter visitor, its only nesting haunts being in Scotland. Next to the Golden-eye, Sheld-duck, and Wild Duck, the Widgeon is one of our larger species, and in some winters it visits estuaries, shores, and inland waters in considerable numbers. The drake has a conspicuous buff forehead, chestnut head and neck fading into rufous and grey, grey back prettily deckled with small transverse brown bars, and there is a prominent white patch, succeeded by a smaller one of metallic green and black, on the flanks. The wings and tail are dark brown. In July the drake assumes the plumage of the duck, and this is greyish-brown above, whitish on the shoulders, greyish-green on the secondaries, and buffish-white mottling on the under parts. The nest consists of herbage lined with sooty down, and is well concealed near water.

The five to ten eggs are creamy-white. The drake utters a pleasant whistle, but the duck is content with a purring and a quack. The food sought after is grain, water insects, sea grass, sand worms, and shellfish.



Chapter XIV

BIRD-WATCHING IN THE WOODS

BLACKCAP – BRAMBLING – CHIFFCHAFF – TREE CREEPER – CROSSBILL – CARRION CROW – CUCKOO – RING DOVE – STOCK DOVE – HOBBY FALCON – PIED FLYCATCHER – GOLDCREST – SPARROW HAWK – JAY – KESTREL – NIGHTJAR – NIGHTINGALE – NUTHATCH – BARN OWL – LITTLE OWL – LONG-EARED OWL – TAWNY OWL – PHEASANT – LESSER REDPOLL – REDSTART – SISKIN – TREE SPARROW – COAL TIT – GARDEN WARBLER – WILLOW WARBLER – WOOD WARBLER – WOODCOCK – GREAT SPOTTED, GREEN, AND LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKERS – BROWN WREN – WRYNECK.

If asked to select my own favourite among haunts for birds, I should choose either an old green lane in the heart of the country or a secluded wood. True, some woods are strangely void of bird life—perhaps because of a lack of essential food supply or of nesting sites—but a good wooded fastness should yield most of the species we are now to become acquainted with.

Appropriately enough, the **Blackcap** (Fig. 145) occupies pride of place, for this summer visitor and melodious warbler is a general favourite. Dressed in sober grey uniform, with a black cap or crown (the female's is brown), this notable songster is more often heard than seen, and is one of the few migrants that carries its song-period into July, when it is

almost the only minstrel of the woods. The song is wonderfully musical, sweet, and deep-throated, but there is a Robin-like sadness of utterance which, when the bird is the only singer in sultry July, becomes more manifest. Yet some individual birds have a repertoire of imitations which baffle the listener. Thus, only this summer, I heard a Hertfordshire Blackcap imitate to perfection some of the notes of the Nightingale; only when the bird returned to its more usual song was its identity established. The Blackcap loves wooded places and large gardens; its frail nest of dry grass, hair, and rootlets is usually placed in a bramble, wild rose, or other tangled bush. The four or five yellowish-white eggs are mottled with reddish-brown. The food is mostly insectivorous, but when the bird arrives in spring from overseas it finds the black berries of the ivy much to its liking.



FIG. 145. Blackcap

The **Brambling** (Fig. 146) is a winter visitor only, and should be sought for where there is a plentiful supply of beech nuts, though it also feeds on insects. The male, even in winter, is of striking appearance, having a glossy-black head, and bars of chestnut and white on the brown wings. There is also chestnut on the shoulders and breast. The lower back and under parts are white. The female is browner. The note is given as a prolonged *wee*



FIG. 146. Brambling



FIG. 147. Chiff-Chaff

or *tak*. A subdued song is also uttered, but it is not often heard in this country. The flight is rapid and dipping. The nest is interesting, as it almost invariably has birch-bark in its composition.

One of the earliest heralds of spring is the **Chiff-Chaff** (Fig. 147), which comes to us from the shores of the Mediterranean, where it spends the winter. This slim and very small bird, olive and buff-white, may be confused with the Willow Warbler. It has black legs. The simple song of *chip-chop*, *chip-chop*, and a shrill *chadic-chadic* at once distinguishes it from its cousin with the sweet piccolo refrain. The Chiff-Chaff haunts the topmost branches of tall trees, where it searches for insect food, but places its oval nest on the ground, usually well hidden among herbage. Grasses, leaves, and moss are used, with a lining of feathers. The five to seven white eggs have brown spots.

An unobtrusive little woodland bird with a long curved beak and sharp-pointed tail-feathers may be disturbed as it searches busily for insects in the rough bark of a tree. This is the **Tree Creeper** (Fig. 148), which has brown plumage on the upper parts, with striated markings, and white below. Mouse-like in habits, it is often difficult to follow in its jerky and whirligig movements up and around a tree trunk. Listening intently one



FIG. 148. Tree Creeper

may hear a faint note like *treep*, but there is also a subdued song which may be rendered thus: *tee-tee-tee-sissi-tee*. Gardens and parks where there are large trees are frequented, as well as woods and coppices; a crevice or hole in a tree, or behind loose bark, are favourite sites for the nest. This is composed of bark, feathers, grass, hair, moss, and twigs, and contains from five to nine white eggs with red and brown spots at the larger end. The flight is nearly always downwards to the base of the tree; in its search for food the Creeper works upwards, and thus carries out its investigations very thoroughly.

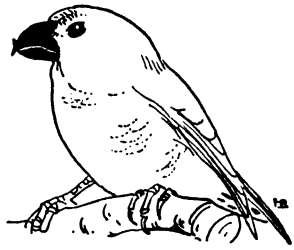


FIG. 149. Crossbill

The Crossbill (Fig. 149) is a comparatively rare bird, which, however, nests sparingly in certain areas where one would least expect to find it; for I have even found it on the outskirts of a large town. Its chief breeding stronghold is in the north. It is characterized by its crossed bill, and this it uses to extract seeds from fir cones and other plants. It is very fond of apple pips. The male is a handsome bird in his red uniform and brown wings and tail. The female is olive-green and yellow, with brown mottling and striations. The young are shaded with yellow and orange. The nest is built early—often in February—and is well constructed of grass, lichens, moss, and wool, usually placed high up in a fir or pine tree. The four or five almost white eggs have spots of red-brown. The bird's note is a short *tit*, and it also utters a low querulous song.

In the south the Crossbill is mostly a winter visitor, and it is in the fir and pine woods of Scotland that it makes its home.

It seems agreed that the **Carrion Crow** (Fig. 150) is not so common as has been supposed; but it is a solitary species, and may be overlooked. Like the Raven, it is an all-black bird; unlike the Rook, it has feathers at the base of the bill. When in flight the wings do not present such a ragged appearance as those of its more familiar relative, and it may be distinguished from the Raven by its smaller size. The large nest is mostly composed of twigs, and is placed in tall trees or on rocky cliffs. It is plastered with mud or cow dung, and lined with hair, leaves, moss, and wool. The four or five greenish eggs are blotched, mottled, and spotted with light brown and greenish-ash. The loud, harsh *caw* (usually repeated not more than three times) is deeper than that of the Rook. The food is most varied, being made up of berries, young birds, carrion, fruit, grain, grubs, and mammals. Like the Rook, it is fond of walnuts.



FIG. 150.
Carrion Crow

Everyone who lives in the country is familiar with the cry of the **Cuckoo** (Fig. 151), and those who look and listen for our bird friends from across the sea anxiously await the coming of this feathered herald of spring. No sooner has this mysterious bird arrived again than it begins to utter its well-known double call, which may be written down as *koo-koo*, often repeated. After the bird has settled down in its old quarters—for it is established that

it returns to the same haunts each year—the male changes his note, being desirous of letting the female Cuckoo know he is in search of a mate. I once counted how many times a male called without stopping to do more than take breath; the total was nearly two hundred. Then the feathered lover listened in vain for a response, and again took up his curious and little-varied ditty. Then he became tremendously excited, and tried another tune, introducing several *kooks* to one *koo*, thus *kook-kook-*



FIG. 151. Cuckoo

kook-kook-kook-koo, and a lilting *kook-a-lar*. This remarkable outburst had the desired effect; I heard in the distance the bubbling note of the female about to respond to the wonderful vocal effort that had enticed her from hiding. The hurried bubbling notes of the female Cuckoo are little known even to country people within earshot of the wandering voice, and every nature lover would do well to listen carefully for the notes so as to be able to appreciate one of the most remarkable contributions to the orchestra of bird music.

The European Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*, from *Cuculus*, a Cuckoo, in classical Latin; *canorus*, melodious, from *cano*, I sing) does not, for some unknown reason, build a nest of her own. The schoolboy who wrote in his essay that "the Cuckoo is a bird what don't lay its own eggs" was not, however, supported by scientific evidence.

This is a parasitic bird; that is, it depends upon the labours of others, depositing its egg in the nest of a small bird among those of the rightful owner. Favourite foster-parents, among others, are the Hedge Accentor, Meadow Pipit, Reed Warbler, and Robin. Perhaps the most curious nest of all in which to find a Cuckoo's egg is that of Jenny Wren, whose cradle, as is well known, is a domed structure with a small entrance hole only large enough for one's finger to enter. It would be impossible for such a large bird as a Cuckoo (which is the size of a Pigeon) to get into a Wren's homestead; in such case the egg must be carried to the nest and deposited within it. The eggs vary in colour, and may be greyish or brownish, with marks and spots of a darker colour. Sometimes the Cuckoo's egg harmonizes with, or resembles, that of the rightful owner, and even blue Cuckoo's eggs have been discovered among the same-coloured eggs of the foster-parents. The egg is small in comparison with the size of the bird, hardly exceeding that of a Sparrow. There is reason for this, as a larger egg would be more liable to be noticed by the little birds under whose care the young Cuckoo is reared. All goes well until the young Cuckoo is born. He is blind, naked, and helpless so far as looking after his own wants are concerned; but he has the habit of throw-

ing out of the nest anything and everything which is there beside him. He feels what is around him by means of strong, muscular wings, which are exceedingly sensitive to touch.

Bear in mind that this blind Hercules, or feathered Philistine, as I have often called him, has not yet seen the light of day. He seems instinctively to know that if his foster-parents are to succeed in attending to his wants, it is necessary that their own eggs, or young, shall be thrown out of the nest, and that he alone must survive. So this young usurper sets to work; and, curiously enough, the owners of the nest do not seem to mind the disappearance of their own eggs and fledgelings. Indeed, it has been recorded that a pair of Meadow Pipits actually assisted a young Cuckoo to throw out of the nest their own eggs. Remaining as sole survivor, a feathered King of the Castle, as it were, the young Cuckoo settles down to receive a constant supply of food in the shape of hairy caterpillars. Upon these he thrives, and soon becomes, as the Scots boy said, "A big little bird!"

In due course his eyes open, and for the first time he sees his surroundings and his home. Thereupon the desire to throw out anything from the nest ceases, for I once placed a baby Sparrow in the nest beside a young Cuckoo, and the latter allowed the little stranger to remain comfortably housed quite close to him. A young Cuckoo eight days old only turned the scale at $1\frac{3}{4}$ ounces. My friend Stanley Crook tells me that the baby's succeeding weights were as follows: nine days old, $1\frac{7}{8}$ ounces; fifteen days old, $2\frac{3}{4}$ ounces; eighteen days old, 3 ounces.

In colour the adult bird is light and dark grey, with white markings on a fan-shaped tail, and light-greyish breast with prominent dark bars. The young one is brownish. The wings are pointed, and the flight reminds one of a Hawk's. As to the date of arrival of this bird, a remarkable series of observations of birds and plants taken at Marsham, Norfolk, have been published extending over a period of no less than one hundred and seventy-eight years. During this long time the average date of appearance of the Cuckoo for all years was the one hundred and fifteenth day, namely, 26th April. The average date of arrival for the thirty-five years, 1751–85, was also the one hundred and fifteenth day, and the average for the thirty-five years, 1891–1925, was the one hundred and thirteenth day. My own records for this bird, covering a period of forty years from 1901–41, show the earliest date of arrival as 22nd March, in 1923, and the latest as 4th May, in 1907, with the mean date 14th April. Thus in Hertfordshire the mean date of arrival is 14th April, compared with 26th April in Norfolk.

The **Ring Dove** is a very common inhabitant of the woodland, and as soon as even one bird flaps from the tree-tops, the noise it makes—so unlike that of the gentle Turtle Dove—is sure to arrest attention. Curiously enough, this species—although, as I have told in Chapter X., it has taken up its residence in London and other large cities—still remains a very timid wild bird in the country. It builds a loose platform of sticks without any attempt at lining, and on this the two pure white eggs are deposited. The young are called Squabs. It is our largest British Pigeon, and when in fine feather is

a really handsome bird, not to be compared with the specimens seen suspended in the poulterers' shops. The general colour is grey, with a reddish flush on the breast; there is a white ring on the neck, and a green and purple sheen. When flying, the large white bar on the wing is very prominent; the tail is almost black. This Dove constantly utters its agreeable notes which have been likened to: *Don't-scold-so-Sukey—don't*, the last "don't" being abruptly ended. The diet consists of acorns, berries, cater-

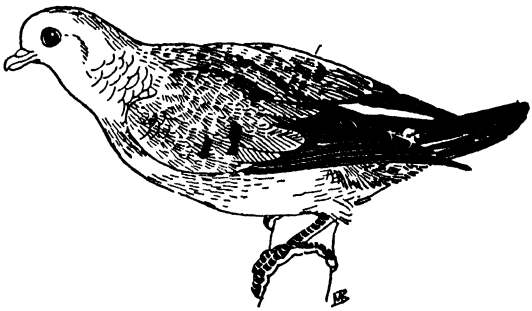


FIG. 152. Stock Dove

pillars, grain, green leaves, nuts, and weed seeds, and at certain times of the year there is no doubt that, when a raid is made on the farmer's crops, much damage is perpetrated. No less than forty acorns have been taken from the crop of one bird!

The **Stock Dove** (Fig. 152) is commonest in the midlands. It has bluish-grey plumage, with a green patch on the neck, and only one bar on the wing, and that is brown and not white. The bill is red at the base and white at the tip; that of the Ring Dove has a yellow tip. The note uttered is of shorter duration than that of the last-named, and the nest

is usually placed in the hole of a tree, in a rabbit burrow, or among creepers on a ruin. There are two creamy-white eggs. It frequents cliffs as well as woods, and its food is very similar to that of the better-known Wood Pigeon.



FIG. 153.
Hobby Falcon

Our first bird of prey in the woods is the **Hobby Falcon** (Fig. 153), which is one of our smaller Falcons, and is a summer visitor from Africa and India. It has a dark greyish-brown back and wings, white on throat and neck sides, and a white breast profusely streaked with dark brown, becoming rufous on the lower parts and on the feathered legs. There is a prominent line of black from the ear-coverts, and a short, sharp beak. It has a gliding and swooping flight, and does not hover to the same extent as the Kestrel. The old nest of another bird is chosen; the three eggs are laid in June, and these are buff or red-brown, with brown mottlings. The prey consists of birds and insects. The Hobby utters a shrill chatter, and a call-note resembling *pree-pree*.

A small dark blue-black and white bird may be seen in some woods darting from a tree-branch after insects. This will be the **Pied Flycatcher** (Fig. 154), an uncommon summer migrant, mostly found in northern England. Its striking plumage is bound

to attract notice, especially the white throat and breast and the large patch of white across the wing. There is also a white patch on the forehead. The female is brown instead of black. It has a butterfly-like flight, and searches for insects that are at rest as well as catching them on the wing. The site of the nest is usually a hole in a decayed tree or wall; bark, hay, and leaves are used, with a lining of feathers and hair. The five eggs are pale greenish-blue. The alarm note is *chuk-chuk*, and a low pleasing song is also uttered.



FIG. 154. Pied Flycatcher

The smallest bird in Europe is the **Goldcrest** (Fig. 155), a mite of activity in feathers. It haunts fir plantations, large gardens with coniferous trees, and woods, and although its quiet needle-like notes can be heard by the intensive bird-listener, the tiny bird itself is rarely seen. It is an active, engaging species, and its olive and lighter plumage is prettily relieved by the bright fiery crest of the male, and the yellow of his mate. The compact nest is a gem of avian architecture, and is deftly suspended on a pliant branch of fir. In its make-up cobwebs, lichen, moss, and wool are used, with a feather lining. It rivals a really good nest of the Chaffinch, but is smaller and not so deep. The seven to ten white eggs are no larger than a pea, and are covered with very small and faint red-brown specks. This is a useful bird; among the insect life it destroys is the detestable



FIG. 155. Goldcrest

greenfly. How such a small bird successfully crosses unknown lands and seas is not the least interesting query connected with it.

The **Sparrow Hawk** (Fig. 156), which pursues its prey with such daring, may at times be seen darting purposefully across a glade or ride in a wood. With the Kestrel, it is our commonest Falcon, and possesses a swift, gliding flight, either hanging in the air in pursuit of prey, or sweeping along close to the ground. In colour it is greyish-blue above, with a white patch on the nape; it is buff below, with many bars of rufous-brown, and the tail has dark- and light-brown bars. The female, as with other birds of prey, is the larger of the two sexes. The large nest is placed in a tree—if the deserted nest of another bird is not selected—or on a cliff, and is composed of sticks, and lined with rootlets or moss. The five whitish eggs are handsomely blotched with red-brown. The prey mostly consists of birds, but frogs, insects, and mice are also eaten. The note is a screaming *mew*.



FIG. 156. Sparrow Hawk

The **Jay** (Fig. 157) is a wary sentinel of the woods, and its harsh alarm notes warn other wild creatures that danger threatens. It is one of our most attractive woodland birds in its fawn attire, having a pretty crest of black, blue, and white, with bright-blue

wing feathers ; a black tail, and a prominent white patch on the rump, are well displayed during flight. On the wing the Jay floats rather than flies, and on the ground hops boldly. At times it leaves its woodland home to visit our gardens in search of vegetable peas, and I have had eight at one time ransacking my rows of these vegetables. The Jay also pilfers the nests of other birds for their eggs and young, and for several weeks in early spring does incalculable damage. Small mammals are also preyed upon, and acorns, beech-mast, earthworms, fruit, insects, and snails are secured. The large nest of sticks, grass, and roots is placed in a tree or tall bush, and the five to seven pale-greenish eggs are closely speckled with light brown.



FIG. 157. Jay

The form of our commonest bird of prey—the **Kestrel** (Fig. 158)—may frequently be seen as it hovers in the air, sometimes motionless, then with quivering wing-beats, as it scans the earth for prey. The tail is fan-spread, and the head is held low. The male's back is chestnut-brown, pitted with black ; the head, rump, and tail are slate-grey, and the under parts are deep buff, spotted and streaked with black. The black end of the tail is tipped with white. The female is rufous-brown, with bars and striations across the tail. The haunts are open as



FIG. 158. Kestrel

well as wooded country and cliffs; for nesting, as a rule the old nest of a Crow or other bird is commandeered. The four or five buff eggs are closely mottled with reddish-brown, and are produced in April and May. The prey consists of birds, frogs, insects, mice, rats, and voles. The screaming call is compared to *keelie-keelie-kee-kee-kee*, and a chatter.

That world-renowned songster, the Nightingale (Fig. 159), is a plain-looking bird, warm brown and grey in colour. Most people seeing it for the first time are impressed by its plainness and small size (it is longer but no bulkier than a Sparrow). It loves the deep recesses of wood or coppice, tangled lane and thicket, and hides its large, deep nest among herbage, or at the base of a bush. All those nests I have seen have had dead oak leaves round the rim. Dead grass



FIG. 159. Nightingale

is the staple material used. The four to six glossy eggs are olive-brown or olive-blue. The food mainly consists of insects, but berries and worms are also sought for.

Generally speaking, the Nightingale is a shy bird, and an adept at keeping to cover, no matter how close the listener may be able to approach. It sings by day as well as night, and if the haunt is known and the bird is within earshot, it can be impelled to start singing by an imitation of its long-drawn-out notes. I have many times challenged a Nightingale, and have so roused its jealousy that the bird has actually flown *at* me and just missed my head! On one occasion I challenged a favourite individual secreted in a briar bush opposite my country study, and so impressed was this particular bird with the fact that a feathered rival was in the vicinity, that it flew after me into the garden, perched on a flower vase on the lawn, poured out a tempestuous flow of unmatched song, and not content with that, entered the open casement door, flew on to the back of a chair, and repeated the performance. Such music has never been heard in my household before or since; that was one of the most memorable events of my fifty years of bird-watching.

Any attempt to describe the rich, full-throated song of this remarkable bird would fail; suffice it to say that the *jug-jug-jug* notes and the long-drawn-out one, as if the bird was taking breath, are characteristic parts of its wonderful repertoire. When the song period finishes in June or early July a strange monotonous weeping note is uttered, difficult to associate with the principal feathered musician of spring and early summer. One further note of

interest. This bird seems to be absent from many districts apparently well suited to it. Lack of its favourite insect food, and dampness of regions in which one might expect to find it (such as Scotland and Wales), may account for this absence.

Just before dusk, when walking along the clearing in a wood, the bird-watcher may espy the dark-brown form of the **Nightjar** (Fig. 160), hunting and catching night-flying insects on the wing. Every now and again this strange tenant of woods and

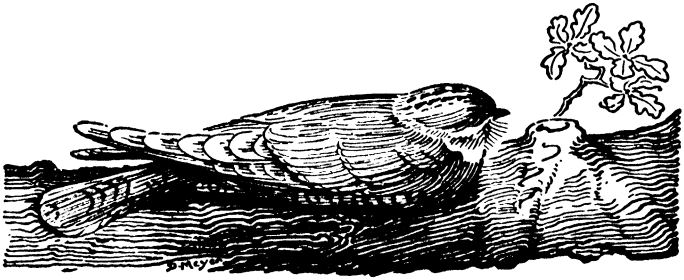


FIG. 160. Nightjar

heathy places raises its long wings to their fullest extent and brings them rapidly together, with a crack like the report of a pistol. The reason for this performance has always puzzled me, and I must content myself with recording it. If the observer is not fortunate enough to see this nocturnal wanderer, its curious vibrating song—if such it can be called—may be heard as the bird sits or rather squats, lengthwise on a branch. It has its favourite haunts, even its favourite tree; a solitary birch tree of my acquaintance in a Scottish glen in Perthshire is selected by one of these birds for its vigil on a warm summer evening. The Nightjar has a flat head,

a large, hairy mouth, and short legs with a curious saw-like middle claw; its dress is best described as brownish-grey, with bars and other markings of black, buff, and chestnut. In the male the tips of the outer tail-feathers are white. The bird squats by day on the ground in a clearing, sleeping and snoozing, and there its two white and grey marbled eggs are deposited, no nest being made. When they lie among bleached stones it is difficult to locate them, and the young squat so close that they may be trodden upon before being seen. They do not leave the "nest" straight away, as so many other ground-nesting birds do, and are helpless for at least a fortnight after hatching. The food consists entirely of insects, especially beetles and moths. The Nightjar is a late summer migrant, and does not arrive until May. It has a soft, gliding flight, and in the gathering gloom its presence in a darkened wood adds an eerie note not soon forgotten.



FIG. 161. Nuthatch

We may well call the Nuthatch (Fig. 161) the gymnast of the woods, for its antics in the tree-tops are unlike those of any other woodland species, with the exception of the Tree Creeper and Woodpecker. This rotund bird, dressed in grey, buff, and chestnut, with a short wedge-shaped tail, strong bill, short legs, and a black streak across the eye, is bound to arrest attention as it clings to the fissured bark searching for insects. It has a dipping flight from

one tree to another, so quick as to be difficult to follow, especially as the grey back so harmonizes with its surroundings that only a practised eye can closely detect the living form. Very often a loud tapping alone discloses the bird's whereabouts, and even when it shouts clearly *twit-whit-whit* it plays hide-and-seek so successfully that I have hunted a whole wood through without a sight of this woodland rover. It also utters a metallic trill. One day I did discover a handsome male hammering away at something on the trunk of an oak tree, and inspection revealed a great many hazel nuts fixed in the crevices of the bark, some whole, others with a neat hole drilled through the centre. This, I found, was the bird's larder, for it had collected the nuts, fixed them in position, and extracted the contents as and when necessary. Berries and seeds, as well as insects and nuts, are eaten. The Nuthatch can travel with ease and safety upside down under a branch; it perches lengthwise, not crosswise as birds generally do, and is said to sleep head downwards like a Bat. The nest, made in the hole of a tree, consists of chips of bark, grass, and dead leaves; the entrance hole is almost wholly plastered up with mud, leaving a small opening just large enough to admit the bird. This habit is maintained even when a nesting box is tenanted, as Lord Lytton has often pointed out to me on his beautiful estate at Knebworth. The five to eight eggs much resemble those of the Great Tit, being white with light-red spots.

At dusk, or sometimes by day, the light-fawn and snow-white form of the **Barn Owl** (Fig. 162) may be seen gliding silently through the trees, or,

if there are young in the nest, they may be heard snoring. In addition to the woods, this species haunts barns, as its name indicates, also farm buildings, ruins, and towers. Its flight is noiseless and ghostly, and its wide wings make it appear much larger than it really is. I once had a race with one of these Owls beside a stream, and the bird was an easy winner! It is often called by country people the Screech Owl, as it hisses, hoots, and screeches as well as snores. Holes of trees, barns, church towers, and ivied ruins are chosen as nesting sites, and little, if any, attempt is made to build a nest; only decayed wood, discarded feathers, and ejected pellets mark the site.



FIG. 162. Barn Owl

The three or four white eggs are pointed, and at times eggs and young are found together; there is an interval in laying period between egg and egg, so that they hatch in a sequence. The prey consists of beetles, small birds, mice, moles, rats, and shrews, and the farmer who is short-sighted enough to destroy this useful benefactor deserves all he gets, or rather, deserves to lose all he loses!

It is surprising how the **Little Owl** (Fig. 163) has spread so quickly all over the country, for this "fierce little foreigner," as it has been aptly called, was only introduced in the mid-nineteenth century. It has a greyish-brown plumage, barred and spotted



FIG. 163. Little Owl

with white. It is possessed of great daring, and will attack animals that much larger birds of prey would hesitate to tackle. Birds, insects, mice, and worms go to make up its diet, and although it is accused—perhaps rightly—of doing much harm to game preserves and poultry, there is another side to the picture, as examination of the pellets cast up by Owls have so often testified. It is a day as well as night flier, and often takes up its perch on telegraph and telephone wires. A hole in a tree is selected to receive the four to six round white eggs in April or May The note is a shrill *tu-whit*, or *ki-wak*, and a mewing *kwee*.

We made acquaintance with the Short-eared Owl in our last Chapter, and have now to consider the claims of the **Long-eared Owl** (Fig. 164). This is a longer and slimmer species than the first named, and haunts parks and woods in general, and is very fond of fir and pine woods. It is orange-buff in colour, barred and streaked with arrow-like markings, and feathered right to the toes like others of its race.



FIG. 164. Long-eared Owl

The female is redder and larger than the male. The long ear-tufts are brownish, and when raised are very prominent. This species is rarely seen by day, preferring to hide until nightfall in the dark recesses of the wood. It has a buoyant yet hesitating flight. The call is a *mew*, but a loud bark is uttered on the wing. An old nest of another species is invariably used; after a few additions have been made, four or five oval white eggs are deposited in



FIG. 165. Tawny Owl

March or April. The food is the normal Owl dietary.

Perhaps the **Brown, Tawny, or Wood Owl** (Fig. 165) is the most familiar, at least by its well-known mellow hoot, than any of its congeners, and it is a great lover of woods. It is dressed in warm brown, with dark and light bars and streaks; the short, stocky legs are so densely feathered to the claws as to remind one of plus-fours! As with other Owls, the female is larger than her mate. If an old nest of another bird is not chosen, a hole in a tree or ruin serves for

the laying of the three or four large, round, white eggs. In addition to the usual Owl diet, rabbits—and, it is said, fish—are also preyed upon. The Brown Owl cries in a shrill burst of delight, *tu-whit-tu-whit*, and *whit-whit*, but its chief disturbance of the peace of night consists of the eerie call: *hoo-oo-hoo-oo-oo*. When very hungry it tells the listener so by crying *ky-eck-yek*.

As a sporting bird the Pheasant (Fig. 166) is highly prized, and it seems agreed that, unless "preserved," it would soon die out in Britain as a wild bird, having been artificially reared for so long a time. The male is a very handsome fellow in his rich golden-red, marked with black and cream, glossy green neck, purple sheen, bright red face without feathers, long tail, and prominent "ear-tufts." The hen is much more soberly dressed, having mottled-brown plumage and a much shorter tail. This handsome game-bird resorts to thickets and woods, but feeds in the fields on such things as acorns, ants' eggs, berries, grain, grubs, mast, seeds, and other morsels. It is a strong flier when once on the wing, gets up with a "whirr," spreads its tail fanwise, and cries loudly *cock-up-cock-up-cock-up*. It keeps to ground as much as possible, and has a sedate walk, one foot in front of the other, as testified by its tracks in the snow. Little attempt is made to build a nest, and the eggs are usually well concealed in a hedge bottom, or amongst dense herbage. They are pale olive, and number ten or



FIG. 166. Pheasant



[*Photograph: Eric J. Hosking.*

Long-eared Owl brooding

twelve. I once knew of a nest which contained over fifty eggs, the produce of three females laying in the same abode. Combats for partners between the males rage fast and furious, and great fights ensue; a strange way indeed to go courting!

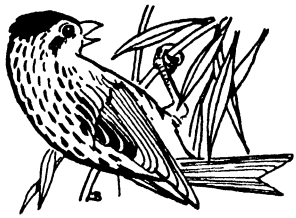


FIG. 167. Lesser Redpoll

Many plantations and woods which seem admirably suited to the requirements of the **Lesser Redpoll** (Fig. 167) are minus this cheery little brown and grey bird with the scarlet crown and rose-pink breast, yet I have known it to nest on several occasions in a rose-bush in a garden in a large town near London. The female lacks the pink on the breast. Fir and pine woods in the north are its more usual retreats, and it is one of the few birds that sings its twittering song when pursuing its fairy antics in the air. In the south it is much more of a winter visitor. The nest is made of grass, moss, twigs, and wool, and is placed in a bush or tree, or in a patch of herbage. The four to six greenish-blue eggs are speckled with brown, and may be sought for in May and June. Insects and small weed seeds constitute the diet.



FIG. 168. Redstart

Haunts known to me since a boy, where I could once rely on seeing the **Redstart** (Fig. 168), know it no more. It loves old gardens, orchards, and dark woods, and is a summer visitor, appearing in late

April. The male is grey above, with bright chestnut-red on the rump and tail; by flirting the tail the bird attracts attention to itself. It has black cheeks and throat and a white forehead. Long legs, Robin-like habits, and a constant animation add to the appeal of this uncommon species. The female is not nearly as gaudily attired as her mate, but with her, too, the flirting of the bright tail is sure to attract attention. Where the limb of a tree has broken off is a favourite resort for the nest, or in the hole of a wall, or among creepers, and it is built of feathers, dry grass, hair, moss, and rootlets. The five or six eggs are pale bluish-green. The bird utters a plaintive *weet* and *wee-tit-tit*, and I have heard it sing a subdued but pleasant little song. It feeds entirely on insects.

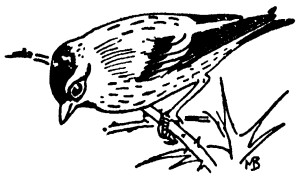


FIG. 169. Siskin

The **Siskin** (Fig. 169) is only a winter visitor to the south, but it is always a welcome sight to see this plump green-and-gold bird, with black on the chin and head, searching for insects and seeds in the pine woods. It nests in lonely pine forests in the north, the home being placed in the fork of a tree. The materials used are dry grass, moss, roots, rabbit flick, twigs, and sometimes feathers. The four or five bluish eggs are spotted with brown and lilac colour. It has a hesitating, dipping flight. Various cries and calls are uttered, such as *keet*, *zit*, and *pee-wee*, and a sweet musical song.

The best way to know the **Tree Sparrow** (Fig. 170) from the much commoner House Sparrow is to

look for the rich chocolate head and double white bar on the wings. The persistent chirp of the common species becomes more like *chow-chow* in the Tree Sparrow, and the eggs are very different. The trouble is that the House Sparrow also nests in trees, although the Tree Sparrow chooses a hole in a tree as well as in a quarry, rock, or old wall. The nesting material, as with the House Sparrow, is an untidy collection of grass, straw, and wool, with a lining of feathers and hair, and among the clutch of four or five dark-brownish eggs I have always found one lighter than the others. The food consists of insects and weed seeds.

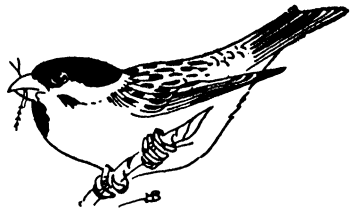


FIG. 170. Tree Sparrow

The **Coal Tit** (Fig. 171) is an active little bird which loves tall trees where, during its search for insects, it draws attention by constantly uttering two notes which sound like *would-ye, would-ye.* It is a very small bird, has an olive-brown back, black head and throat, white cheeks, and two white wing-bars. The white patch on the nape distinguishes it from the Marsh Tit. For a nesting site it chooses a hole in a dead tree stump or wall, and the nest is loosely made of feathers, dry grass, hair, and wool. The six to ten white eggs are spotted with light red. The diet consists of beech-mast, buds, insects, and seeds.



FIG. 171. Coal Tit

In spite of the forepart of its name, the **Garden Warbler** (Fig. 172) usually inhabits woods, copses, and orchards. It is a summer visitor of a retiring nature, more often heard than seen. Yet few of my bird friends seem acquainted with its liquid song; partly, I presume, because it is not high-pitched, and is often drowned in the medley of the woodland choir. To me the fast, bubbling ripple of this fine songster is a sheer delight. When singing, the Garden Warbler is for ever on the move; one of its favourite hunting-grounds is a sycamore tree when the honeyed tassels of bloom attract insects to the feast. One day this summer (1941) I visited the large old-fashioned garden of a friend who had wired in his fine bushes of red currants, on which was a bumper crop of luscious berries. Somehow or other a Garden Warbler had got through the wire netting, and was flying about trying to obtain its freedom. I opened the large wire door of the enclosure, and drove the nervous feathered invader to liberty. I was pleased about this, but an hour later when I passed that way my released captive was searching for a place where it could re-enter the enclosure, and actually succeeded in doing so through a hole caused by the sagging of the wire. It thus became a captive once more. There I left it to enjoy another feast, and to make good its escape as best it could! The Garden Warbler is a plain-looking bird in its brown or olive-



FIG. 172.
Garden Warbler

brown plumage above, and very light buff underneath. There is a pale stripe over the eye, and the legs are blue. The frail nest of dry grass and rootlets is lined with hair, and is often placed in a bramble bush, and the four or five yellowish-white eggs are mottled with greyish- or reddish-brown. The food consists of insects and soft fruits.

Now comes the piccolo soloist in the avian orchestra—the **Willow Warbler** (Fig. 173), which I must confess is one of my own favourites. It must have been a favourite with many others; I have on my list no fewer than twenty-five local and old-fashioned names for this common and familiar summer visitor. Among these may be mentioned Bank Jug, Ground Huck-Muck, Sally Picker, Tom Thumb, and Willie Muftie. This slim Warbler is well named Tom Thumb because of its diminutive size; it has olive-green plumage, a faint greenish eye-stripe, and light-brown legs. It haunts wooded places, and in autumn visits gardens. Its sweet but simple song has been well described as a descending cadence. The call is a plaintive *too-eet.* The domed nest is placed in a hedge bank or tuft of grass, and is made of dead grass, horsehair, leaves, moss, and roots, with a profusion of feathers for a lining. The five to seven white eggs are faintly marked with light brown. Insects alone constitute the food.

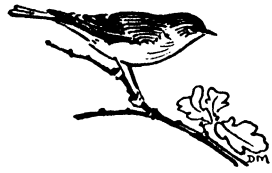


FIG. 173.
Willow Warbler

Search for its cousin, the much rarer **Wood Warbler** (Fig. 174), should be made amidst the shade

of a beech or hornbeam wood. If one is unacquainted with its shivering song, this elfish bird is likely to be missed, being adept at hiding. Its yellowish-green attire very well matches the light and shade of beeches. But if the bird can be watched at close quarters, its manner of singing will be found interesting. It flutters its wings, pirouettes on its long legs, uses its tail as a balance, and with wide-open beak repeats over and over again the simple refrain of *choo-choo-choo-choo-eee.* It is a dainty bird of solitary habits, returns to more or less the same spot every year, and rarely wanders far from it. Its domed nest is placed on the ground, and may be known from those of the Chiff-Chaff and Willow Warbler by the *absence* of feathers. The five or six white eggs are speckled with dark-purplish or brownish-red, and are larger than those of its two common relatives. The bird itself is largest of the three, and is entirely an insect eater.

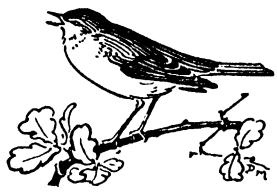


FIG. 174. Wood Warbler

The **Woodcock** (Fig. 175) is a plump, well-groomed bird of sober and yet elegant plumage, with a short tail and large prominent eyes placed near the forehead. An old couplet says :

> " For fools are known by looking wise
> As men find Woodcock by their eyes."

Except on the throat it is barred with dark and light brown and chestnut, the under parts being lighter than elsewhere. The long bill is a feature of interest, and the legs are comparatively short. The haunts

are copses, ditches, marshes, and woods, and in autumn its numbers are much increased by visitants from abroad. In at least two of the Home Counties the Woodcock is now established as a breeding species, and is extending its range. It is mostly nocturnal, secreting itself by day among bracken and other hiding-places. To take to its darting flight it gets up with a whir, and proceeds with

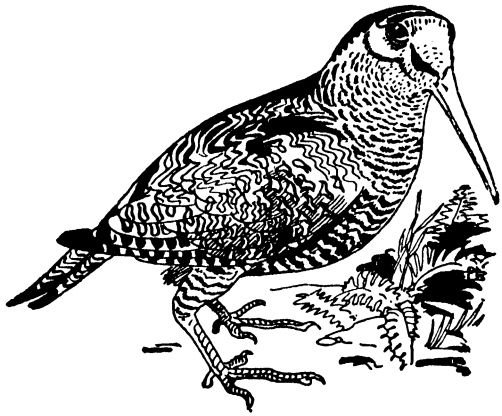


FIG. 175. Woodcock

drooping wings and beak pointing downwards. The four whitish eggs are blotched and spotted with pale brown and purplish-grey, and are to be found as early as March and April. Little, if any, attempt is made to build a nest, the eggs being placed in a depression, with a few dead leaves as a lining. The young are carried away by the parents if danger necessitates this proceeding, and if they are interfered with the adult barks and hisses. The call is a shrill *skyach* and *vessop*, and on the wing *crok-crok-*

weet-crok-crok-weet, the *crok* hoarse and the *weet* sharp. The Woodcock feeds on insects and worms. Each evening this game-bird takes the same line of flight when once it has settled down in a favourite haunt, and a careful watch for its appearance is almost sure to be rewarded.



FIG. 176.
Great Spotted Woodpecker

More years ago than I care to recount, when I was on a ramble with an old naturalist near St. Albans, we were fortunate enough to see all three British Woodpeckers—the Great Spotted, Green, and Lesser Spotted species—and I recollect this devout old man saying to me, his junior, "It will be many a day before you observe all these three species on one ramble again." His words have proved true.

The **Great Spotted Woodpecker** (Fig. 176) is a fine black-and-white bird with a red patch on the neck, creamy-white under parts, and crimson on the abdomen and under-tail coverts. The female lacks the red patch on the neck, but the young have red on the crown. It dwells in orchards, parks, and woods, where its loud tapping on the branch or bole of a tree often disturbs the silence. When ascending a tree it does so in a circular direction, and taps as it proceeds; then, without warning, it flies off to another tree to commence operations in the same way. It

prefers insects, but will not disdain berries and nuts if the former are scarce. The call-note is *chink-chink*, and also a shrill *whit*; another somewhat resembles that of the next species. A hole is drilled in a tree by the bird's bayonet-like beak, and in this four to seven glossy-white eggs are laid in May. This is the least common of our three British species.

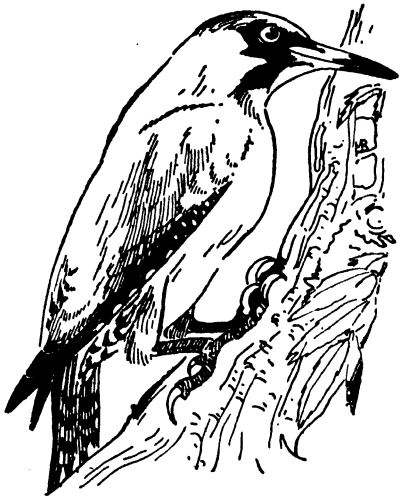


FIG. 177. Green Woodpecker

The striking appearance of the **Green Woodpecker** (Fig. 177) in its green and gold livery, with a scarlet crown and nape, always excites interest among those who rarely see this handsome bird at close quarters. It is the largest of the three British Woodpeckers, and more often seen in the open than the other two, being more fond of searching for food on the ground, and having a special liking for visits to anthills—from which by means of its long barbed tongue it licks out the inhabitants. In its other habits it much resembles its relatives, but in addition to its distinctive plumage, it may be known by its succession of loud laughter-like notes. Country people say these foretell rain, one of the bird's old-fashioned names being Wet-Wet-More-Wet. A dead tree is often



FIG. 178. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

used in which to hew out a nesting-hole, and in this four to seven glossy-white eggs are laid in April or May. Berries, fruit, and nuts are eaten when insect food is not available.

The cheeriest of these three woodland birds is the **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** (Fig. 178), which is a smaller replica of the Great Spotted species, except that the male has a red crown, and the under tail-coverts have no red on them. It is of very restless habits, and although its high-pitched and persistent call of *chee-chee-chee*, as well as the vibrating noise made as it "drums" on a tree, may frequently be heard, patience alone will reward the bird-watcher with a sight of the bird. It rarely flies far away, and is a typical tree-dweller. The five to nine white eggs are deposited in a hole in a tree only just large enough to admit the parent birds. It frequents large gardens, groves, and parks, as well as woods, and in the spring its piercing notes may be mistaken for those of the Wryneck.

Creeping mouse-like along a hedgerow bottom, or flitting butterfly-like in the woods, the small form of the **Brown Wren** (Fig. 179), with its rotund breast and cocked-up tail, may be espied. For such a small bird its trilling song is wonderfully powerful; moreover, it has no restricted song period,



FIG. 179. Brown Wren

being as cheerful and lyrical on Christmas morning as on Midsummer Day. It sings on the wing, is rarely still and has endeared itself to all those who love birds as "Jenny Wren." The call-note is a sharp *tit-tit*. The plumage is brown above, barred with darker brown, and greyish-brown below. The tail is barred with black. The oval nest is composed of feathers, grass, hair, leaves, moss, and wood, and more nests are built than are used for breeding purposes. The extra nests are believed to be used for roosting by "Johnny Wren," and are called cocks' nests. The nest may be found in almost any situation, such as a bank, farm-building, bush, creeper, gatepost, haystack, or wall. The most curious places I know of were in a bundle of thirteen old horseshoes and in a scarecrow! The five to twelve white eggs are faintly speckled with red-brown, and are produced from April to June. It is delightful to watch the pretty young ones emerge from the small entrance to the nest. It is a useful species, feeding on insects and their larvae and spiders. It is a frequent visitor to the garden, and picks up scraps in winter.



FIG. 180.
Wryneck

The last bird of the woods to be described here, and the last in this book, is the **Wryneck** (Fig. 180), or, as it is more familiarly known, the Cuckoo's Mate, because it arrives with us at about the same time as the Cuckoo in April. It has acquired the name of Wryneck from its habit of twisting the neck

round; it hisses when approached. It is greyish-brown and spotted above, the throat is buff, with many narrow blackish bars, the greyish tail is soft and rounded, with rippling dark-brown bars, and there are twelve tail-feathers. It is a long, slim bird, with a narrow head and neck, and when in a tree is most difficult to see. Indeed, it is not only an adept at hiding—a feathered scout—but is becoming increasingly rare. It has a short, rapid flight, and its frequently repeated piercing notes of *pee-pee-pee* betray its presence, although the bird may still remain hidden from view. Holes in trees are sought for as a nesting site, but no nest is made; when a nesting box is commandeered a few materials are used to receive the six to ten pure-white eggs. It feeds on insects and their larvae, and like the Green Woodpecker, is possessed of a long sticky tongue which it uses in the same way to lick up ants from their nest. Hence a local name of Emmet Hunter. It is also said to be fond of elderberries.

POSTSCRIPT

I COMMENCED this Book on Birds by dedicating it to my friend and fellow naturalist, Richard Perry, and I conclude it by quoting from his own fascinating volume, *At the Turn of the Tide*. I do this as a tribute to his intensive powers of observation and masterly command of English prose; in appreciation of the highly important contributions he has made to British Ornithology; and, last, but by no

means least, because I find in his words a satisfying expression of my own thoughts, thus:

"To know the cries of birds and the way of beasts, and to be conversant with the thousand-and-one subtleties with which Nature safeguards the species, is to open up a new world of an unsuspected beauty and tranquillity too rare in the Twentieth Century.

"For to me watching birds means something greater than these things: acquaintance with English country. I live in an age that has forgotten its birthright. Never before have men had so little interest in their own land. We are breeding a nation of urbanites, whose cheap, artificial pleasures are found in towns; to whom the country is virgin land to exploit for money and more monies. No longer does a man plant a wood and watch with pride from year to year how fine it grows for his sons and grandsons; instead, he hacks it down, and builds a row of villas in three months, which is a slum in a generation. I love England. Every wild place I live in deepens that love—deepens, too, immeasurably, my contempt for my fellow-men who are destroying, not only the beauty, but the economic soundness of English country by their insensate greed for money. The curses of future generations, despoiled of their inheritance, will be heavy on them."

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