GENUS I.—DOLICHONYX, *Swains.* RICE-BIRD.

Bill rather short, very stout, moderately compressed, conical; upper mandible with the dorsal line straight, a little convex at the base, and very slightly deflected at the end, its ridge rather broad, indistinct, sides rounded, edges direct, overlapping, tip rather acute; lower mandible with the angle of moderate length, very broad, dorsal outline ascending, slightly convex at the base, sides erect and convex, tip acute; gap-line ascending for a fourth of its length, then direct. Nostrils small, elliptical, operculate. Plumage blended, but firm, with little gloss. Wings rather long, pointed, the first quill longest. Tail of moderate length, the feathers narrow and acuminate. Toes large; claws very long, little arched, slender, tapering to a fine point.

 THE RICE-BIRD.—BOB-O-LINK.

+ DOLICHONYX ORYZIVORA, *Linn.*

PLATE CCXI.—MALE AND FEMALE.

Very few of these birds pass through Louisiana in spring, and still fewer, on their return, in autumn; for which reason I am inclined to think that they do not spend the winter months so much in the southern parts of America as in some of the West India Islands. Indeed, I am the more inclined to believe this to be the case, as they seldom penetrate far into the interior, during their stay with us, but prefer the districts bordering upon the Atlantic, through which they pass and repass in incredible numbers.

In Louisiana, small detached flocks of males or of females appear about the middle of March and beginning of April, alighting in the meadows and grain-fields, where they pick up the grubs and insects found about the roots of the blades. I have heard it asserted, though I cannot give it as a fact,

Wandering Rice-bird

1 Male 2 Female

Red Maple. Acer Rubrum.

that the appearance of the Rice-bird in spring forebodes a bad harvest. The idea probably originates from the circumstance that these birds do not pass through Louisiana regularly every year, there being sometimes three or four springs in succession in which they are not observed.

The plumage of many of the males at this early season still resembles that of the females, but it changes in the course of their stay, which is seldom more than a fortnight. I have ascertained this fact by dissecting many at this period, when, notwithstanding the dull colour of their plumage, I found the sexual organs greatly developed, which is not the case in autumn, even in the old males. I had another clew to the discovery of this fact. No sooner did a flock of females make its appearance, than these dull-looking gentlemen immediately paid them such particular attention, and sang so vehemently, that the fact of their being of a different sex became undeniable.

Here they pass under the name of *Meadow-birds*. In Pennsylvania they are called *Reed-birds*, in Carolina *Rice Buntings*, and in the State of New York *Boblinks*. The latter appellation is given to them as far eastward as they are known to proceed for the purpose of breeding.

During their sojourn in Louisiana, in spring, their song, which is extremely interesting, and emitted with a volubility bordering on the burlesque, is heard from a whole party at the same time; when, as each individual is, of course, possessed of the same musical powers as his neighbours, it becomes amusing to listen to thirty or forty of them beginning one after another, as if ordered to follow in quick succession, after the first notes are given by a leader, and producing such a medley as it is impossible to describe, although it is extremely pleasant to hear it. While you are listening, the whole flock simultaneously ceases, which appears equally extraordinary. This curious exhibition takes place every time that the flock has alighted on a tree, after feeding for awhile on the ground, and is renewed at intervals during the day.

There is a very remarkable fact in the history of this species, which is, that while moving eastward, during their migration, in spring, they fly mostly at night; whereas in autumn, when they are returning southward, their flight is diurnal. —This, kind reader, is another puzzle to me.

About the middle of May, the Boblinks reach the State of New York, their stay in the intermediate States being of short duration at that season, although sufficient to enable them to cause great injury to the corn fields in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, where it is said, although I can scarcely give credit to the assertion, that they cut the blade near the root. This is perhaps laid to their charge for the purpose of aggravating the real injury which they afterwards inflict on the farmers, by feeding on the grain when in a milky and tender state. However, they reach the States of New

York and Connecticut, and extend their journey to the easternmost of our districts, proceeding also to the borders of Lake Champlain, Lake Ontario, and the St. Lawrence.

By this time they have become so plentiful, and have so dispersed all over the country, that it is impossible to see a meadow or a field of corn which does not contain several pairs of them. The beauty, or, perhaps more properly, the variety of their plumage, as well as of their song, attracts the attention of the bird-catchers. Great numbers are captured and exposed for sale in the markets, particularly in those of the city of New York. They are caught in trap-cages, and feed and sing almost immediately after. Many are carried to Europe, where the shipper is often disappointed in his profits, as by the time they reach there, the birds have changed their colours and seem all females.

Whilst the love-season lasts, the males are more sprightly than ever. Their song is mostly performed in the air, while they are rising and falling in successive jerks, which are as amusing as the jingling of their vocal essays. The variety of their colours is at this juncture very remarkable. It is equally so, when, on rising from among the grass and flying away from the observer, they display the pure black and white of their wings and body.

The nest of the Rice Bunting is placed on the ground, without much apparent care as to choice of situation, but always amongst the grass, or in a field of wheat or barley. It is composed of coarse dried grasses and leaves externally, and is lined with finer meadow grass. It appears large for the size of the bird. The female lays from four to six eggs, of a white colour, strongly tinged with dull blue, and irregularly spotted with blackish. They raise only one brood in a season.

No sooner have the young left the nest, than they and their parents associate with other families, so that by the end of July large flocks begin to appear. They seem to come from every portion of the Eastern States, and already resort to the borders of the rivers and estuaries to roost. Their songs have ceased, the males have lost their gay livery, and have assumed the yellow hue of the females and young, although the latter are more firm in their tints than the old males, and the whole begin to return southward, slowly and with a single *clink*, sufficient however to give intimation of their passage, as they fly high in long files during the whole day.

Now begin their devastations. They plunder every field, but are shot in immense numbers. As they pass along the sea shores, and follow the muddy edges of the rivers, covered at that season with full grown reeds, whose tops are bent down with the weight of the ripe seeds, they alight amongst them in countless multitudes, and afford abundant practice to every gunner.

It is particularly towards sunset, and when the weather is fine, that the

sport of shooting *Reed-birds* is most profitable. They have then fully satiated their appetite, and have collected closely for the purpose of roosting. At the discharge of a gun, a flock sufficient to cover several acres rises *en masse*, and performing various evolutions, densely packed, and resembling a sultry cloud, passes over and near the sportsman, when he lets fly, and finds occupation for some time in picking up the dozens which he has brought down at a single shot. One would think that every gun in the country has been put in requisition. Millions of these birds are destroyed, and yet millions remain, for after all the havoc that has been made among them in the Middle Districts, they follow the coast, and reach the rice plantations of the Carolinas in such astonishing numbers, that no one could conceive their flocks to have been already thinned. Their flesh is extremely tender and juicy. The markets are amply supplied, and the epicures have a glorious time of it.

By the end of October, few are found remaining in the States of New York and Pennsylvania; and by the first of December they have left the United States.

The food of these birds varies according to the seasons, and consists of grubs, caterpillars, insects of various kinds, such as beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, and ground-spiders, and the seeds of wild oats, wheat, barley, rice, and other grasses. They cling or climb along the stalks of rank weeds, reeds, and corn, with great activity and ease, and when at roost place themselves as near the ground as possible.

According to Dr. RICHARDSON, this species does not proceed northward beyond the 54th parallel, where it arrives in the beginning of June. Among the Creek Indians it bears the name of "Skunk-bird," from the similarity of its plumage to the colouring of the Skunk, *Mephitis Americana*. It has been observed on the Rocky Mountains by Mr. TOWNSEND. I found it entering the United States from beyond the Texas, on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, early in April, when most of the males were in full plumage, and I have no doubt that before they reach the Carolinas this state of plumage is perfected.

My friend Dr. BREWER describes their mode of nestling in Massachusetts as follows:—"This species breeds here abundantly, although, from the careful manner in which the nest is concealed, it is very seldom met with. The Rice-bird arrives in New England about the middle of May, and commences its nest usually about the first of June. It is placed on the ground, and here for the most part in meadows, and with so much pains at concealment, that it is to be found only by accident. Ingenious stratagems are also used to decoy the passer-by from its vicinity: for instance, a pretended anxiety about parts of a field in which they have not the slightest interest; so that persons

unaware of this are often induced to search spots many rods distant from the object of their pursuit. The nest is very simple, usually consisting of a few pieces of hay and straw, so loosely arranged as hardly to admit of removal without falling to pieces. The eggs, five in number, measure fifteen-sixteenths of an inch in length, and eleven-sixteenths in breadth. About the 8th of August, they assemble in large flocks, and take their departure for the south."

In a male preserved in spirits, the palate is ascending, with two lateral ridges, which on meeting anteriorly form a soft prominence; on the upper mandible beneath are three ridges, of which the lateral are larger; the lower mandible is deeply concave; the width of the mouth $4\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths. The tongue is 5 twelfths long, sagittate and papillate at the base, narrow, deep, pointed, and with a median groove on its upper surface. It thus approaches in form to that of the Finches and Buntings. The œsophagus is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, its greatest width $4\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths, contracting to 2 twelfths as it enters the thorax; the proventriculus 3 twelfths broad, its glands forming a belt 4 twelfths in breadth. The stomach is rather small, roundish, much compressed, 6 twelfths in length, and of the same breadth; its lateral muscles thick, the tendons large; the epithelium thin, tough, reddish-brown, with longitudinal rugæ. The intestine is 7 inches 9 twelfths long; its average width $1\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths; the cœca $\frac{1}{2}$ twelfth long, $\frac{1}{4}$ twelfth broad, 9 twelfths from the extremity.

The trachea is $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, 1 twelfth broad at the upper part, considerably compressed; the rings 55, with 2 dimidiate; the muscles as in the last species; bronchi of about 12 half rings.

RICE-BUNTING, *Emberiza oryzivora*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. ii. p. 48.

ICTERUS AGRIENNIS, Bonap. Syn., p. 53.

DOLICHONYX ORYZIVORUS, *Sharp-tailed Rice-bird*, Swains. and Rich. F. Bor. Amer., vol. ii. p. 278.

RICE-BIRD, or BOB-O-LINK, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 185.

RICE-BIRD, *Icterus agriennis*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. i. p. 283; vol. v. p. 486.

Male with the head, cheeks, lower parts, wings, and tail, black; a band of brownish-yellow across the hind neck; the back anteriorly black, the feathers with yellowish edges, posteriorly light grey, passing into white, of which colour are the scapulars. Female with the upper parts light yellowish-brown, longitudinally streaked with blackish-brown; the lower parts light greyish-yellow, the sides streaked with dusky. In autumn, the males assume the plumage of the female.

Male, 7, 11.

Passes from Texas eastward and northward. Breeds from the Middle Districts northward. Extremely abundant. Migratory.

Audubon, John James. 1842. "The Rice-Bird.--Bob-O-Link, *Dolichonyx oryzivora*, Linn. [Pl. 211]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 4, 10–14. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319324>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/125069>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319324>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/319324>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries

Sponsored by

Biodiversity Heritage Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: NOT_IN_COPYRIGHT

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.