

THE RED-WINGED STARLING, OR RED-SHOULDERED MARSH BLACKBIRD.

+AGELAIUS PHŒNICEUS, *Linn.*

PLATE CCXVI.—MALE, FEMALE, AND YOUNG MALE.

If the name of *Starling* has been given to this well-known species, with the view of assimilating it to the European bird of that name, it can only have been on account of the numbers of individuals that associate together, for in every other respect it is as distinct from the true Starlings as a Common Crow. But without speaking particularly of generic or specific affinities, I shall here content myself with giving you, kind reader, an account of the habits of this bird.

The Marsh Blackbird is so well known as being a bird of the most nefarious propensities, that in the United States one can hardly mention its name, without hearing such an account of its pilferings as might induce the young student of nature to conceive that it had been created for the purpose of annoying the farmer. That it destroys an astonishing quantity of corn, rice, and other kinds of grain, cannot be denied; but that before it commences its ravages, it has proved highly serviceable to the crops, is equally certain.

As soon as spring makes its appearance, almost all the Redwings leave the Southern States, in small detached and straggling flocks, the males leading the way in full song, as if to invite the females to follow. Prodigious numbers make their appearance in the Eastern Districts, as winter recedes, and are often seen while piles of drifted snow still remain along the roads, under shelter of the fences. They frequently alight on trees of moderate size, spread their tail, swell out their plumage, and utter their clear and not unmusical notes, particularly in the early morning, before their departure from the neighbourhood of the places in which they have roosted; for their migrations, you must know, are performed entirely during the day.

Their food at this season is almost exclusively composed of grubs, worms, caterpillars, and different sorts of coleopterous insects, which they procure by searching with great industry, in the meadows, the orchards, or the newly ploughed fields, walking with a graceful step, but much quicker than either of their relatives, the Purple Grackle or the Boat-tail of the Southern States. The millions of insects which the Redwings destroy at this early season, are, in my opinion, a full equivalent for the corn which they eat at another period;

and for this reason, the farmers do not molest them in spring, when they resort to the fields in immense numbers. They then follow the ploughman, in company with the Crow Blackbird, and as if aware of the benefit which they are conferring, do not seem to regard him with apprehension.

The females being all arrived, the pairing season at once commences. Several males are seen flying in pursuit of one, until, becoming fatigued, she alights, receives the addresses of her suitors, and soon makes a choice that establishes her the consort of one of them. The "happy couple" immediately retire from the view of the crowds around them, and seek along the margins of some sequestered pond or damp meadow, for a place in which to form their nest. An alder bush or a thick tuft of rank weeds answer equally well, and in such places a quantity of coarse dried weeds is deposited by them, to form the exterior of the fabric which is to receive the eggs. The nest is lined with fine grasses, and, in some instances, with horse-hair. The eggs are from four to six in number, of a regular oval form, light blue, sparsely spotted with dusky.

Now is the time, good-natured reader, to see and admire the courage and fidelity of the male, whilst assiduously watching over his beloved mate. He dives headlong towards every intruder that approaches his nest, vociferating his fears and maledictions with great vehemence, passing at times within a few yards of the person who has disturbed his peace, or alighting on a twig close to his nest, and uttering a plaintive note, which might well prevent any other than a mischievous person from interfering with the hopes and happiness of the mated Redwings.

The eggs are hatched, and the first brood has taken flight. The young soon after associate with thousands of other striplings, and shift for themselves, whilst the parent birds raise a second family. The first brood comes abroad about the beginning of June, the second in the beginning of August. At this latter period, the corn in the Middle Districts has already acquired considerable consistence, and the congregated Redwings fall upon the fields in such astonishing numbers as to seem capable of completely veiling them under the shade of their wings. The husbandman, anxious to preserve as much of his corn as he can, for his own use or for market, pursues every possible method of annoyance or destruction. But his ingenuity is almost exerted in vain. The Redwings heed not his efforts further than to remove, after each report of his gun, from one portion of the field to another. All the *scarecrows* that he may choose to place about his grounds are merely regarded by the birds as so many *observatories*, on which they occasionally alight.

The corn becoming too hard for their bills, they now leave the fields, and resort to the meadows and the margins of streams thickly overgrown with



Red-winged Starling
 1. Male Adult. 2. Young Male. 3. Female
Red Maple

the *wild oat* and other grasses, upon the seeds of which they feed with great avidity during the autumnal and winter months. They then associate partially with Reed-birds, Grakles, and Cow-pen Buntings, and are seen to move from the Eastern to the Southern Districts, in such immense and thick flocks as almost to cloud the air.

The havoc made amongst them is scarcely credible. I have heard that upwards of fifty have been killed at a shot, and am the more inclined to believe such accounts as I have myself shot hundreds in the course of an afternoon, killing from ten to fifteen at every discharge. Whilst travelling in different parts of the Southern States, during the latter part of autumn, I have often seen the fences, trees and fields so strewn with these birds, as to make me believe their number fully equal to that of the falling leaves of the trees in the places traversed by me.

Towards evening they alight in the marshes by millions, in compact bodies, settle on the reeds and rushes close above the water, and remain during the night, unless disturbed by the gunners. When this happens, they rise all of a sudden, and perform various evolutions in the air, now gliding low over the rushes, and again wheeling high above them, preserving silence for awhile, but finally diving suddenly to the spot formerly chosen, and commencing a general chuckling noise, after which they remain quiet during the rest of the night.

Different species of Hawks derive their principal sustenance from them at this season. The Pigeon Hawk is an adept in picking the fattest from their crowded flocks; and while they are in the Southern States, where millions of them spend the winter, the Hen-harriers are seen continually hovering over them, and picking up the stragglers.

The Marsh Blackbird is easily kept in confinement, and sings there with as much vigour as when at full liberty. It is kept in good order with rice, wheat, or any other small grain. Attempts have been made to induce these birds to breed in confinement, but in as far as I have been able to ascertain, have failed. As an article of food, they are little better than the Starling of Europe, or the Crow Blackbird of the United States, although many are eaten and thought good by the country people, who make pot-pies of them.

The dispersion of this bird over the whole of the United States, the Fur Countries beyond the limits of the inhabitation of the human species, the great western plains, the Rocky Mountains, and even the shores of the Columbia river, where it was procured by Mr. TOWNSEND, forms a remarkable part of its history. Our surprise becomes greatly increased by the knowledge of its breeding in great numbers in every part of this vast extent. I found the Islands about Galveston Bay most plentifully supplied with it, as well as the grassy margins of the pools and bayous of the mainland, where

it was seen breeding, sometimes within a few yards of houses. The same occurred on the Florida Keys. The only part of the country visited by me in which I found it wanting is Labrador, although it is known to breed in some portions of the interior of Newfoundland. In many instances I found it nestling in the Floridas on Mangroves and low bushes, in the vicinity of the nests of Cormorants and our smaller Herons, and even sometimes in the midst of them.

In speaking of this species, Dr. RICHARDSON mentions a circumstance relative to its habits of which I was not aware. "On its first arrival (the beginning of May) it feeds on grubs; but as soon as the grain sown in the vicinity of the trading posts begins to germinate, it associates itself with Saffron-headed Maize-birds and Boat-tails (Common Crow Blackbird), and is occupied the whole day in tearing up and devouring the sprouting plants, returning to the work of devastation as often as driven away." He states that it does not pass the 57th parallel.

The attachment of this bird to the locality which it has selected for breeding, is illustrated by the following note of my friend Dr. THOMAS M. BREWER of Boston. "A pair of these birds constructed a nest in a small clump of bushes near a brook in Roxbury, and deposited four eggs, which were taken away. They then built a nest within a foot of the first, in which the same number of eggs was laid, and in like manner abstracted. Undeterred by this want of success, they again constructed a nest in the same clump, and this time without molestation. This fact is perhaps trivial in itself, but the same can hardly be told of any other species." The eggs measure in length seven-eighths and three-fourths, and in breadth five and a half eighths.

At Galveston I observed flocks of female Red-winged Starlings congregated, and to all appearance migrating. This shews that migration in birds is far from being regular, but is dependent on many accidental circumstances, such as difference of temperature at certain seasons when they are supposed usually to move, or storms, or want of proper food.

Dr. BACHMAN writes thus to me:—"You speak of the Red-winged Starlings as nearly all proceeding to the coast to breed. They breed very abundantly in all the low marshy grounds of Carolina, and in all the intermediate places to the Northern States. The young birds in autumn that I have procured from the young guinea-corn and rice-fields were fat, and in taste fully equal to the Robin. I am not aware, that you have mentioned that, when a year old, though not full-plumaged, they breed like those that are older. Indeed, nearly all our birds breed when a year old, however imperfect their plumage; I cannot recollect any species that does not."

I have represented a male and a female in the adult state, and a male in the first spring, and have placed them on the branch of a *water maple*, these birds being fond of alighting on trees of that kind, in early spring, to pick

up the insects that frequent the blossoms. This tree is found dispersed throughout the United States, and grows, as its name indicates, in the immediate vicinity of water. Its wood is soft, and is hardly used for any other purpose than that of being converted into common domestic utensils.

RED-WINGED STARLING, *Sturnus prædatorius*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. iv. p. 30.

ICTERUS PHENICEUS, Bonap. Syn., p. 52.

AGELAIUS PHENICEUS, *Red-winged Maize-bird*, Swains. and Rich. F. Bor. Amer., vol. ii. p. 280.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD, *Icterus phæniceus*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 169.

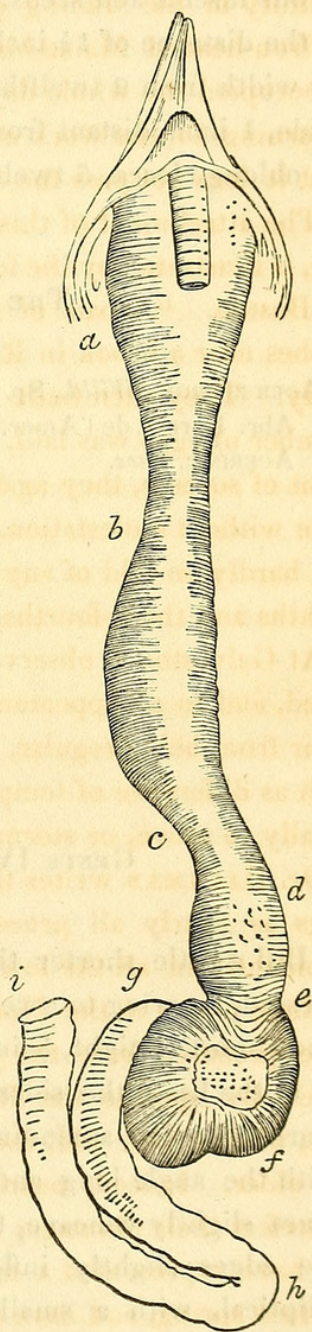
RED-WINGED STARLING OR MARSH BLACKBIRD, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. i. p. 348; vol. v. p. 487.

Tail considerably rounded. Male with the plumage glossy black, the smaller wing-coverts scarlet, their first or posterior row buff-coloured, at the tip whitish. Female much smaller, with the upper parts dark brown, the feathers edged with light brown; some of the smaller wing-coverts tinged with red; wings and tail blackish-brown, the feathers margined with brownish-red, the first row of small coverts and secondary coverts narrowly tipped with whitish; a yellowish-brown band over the eye; lower parts longitudinally streaked with dusky and whitish, the fore neck strongly tinged with dull carmine. Young similar to the female, but without red on the small wing-coverts or throat, the latter part with the sides of the head being pale yellowish-brown.

Male, 9, 14. Female, $7\frac{1}{2}$.

Breeds from Texas throughout the United States, and northward to the Saskatchewan. Vast numbers spend the winter in the Southern and Western States.

In a male preserved in spirits, the palate ascends rapidly, and is in the middle concave, with two very prominent papillate ridges, which, in meeting, form a large soft prominence, anteriorly of which the roof of the mouth is nearly flat, with a median and two lateral ridges. The posterior aperture of the nares is oblongo-linear,



with its margins papillate. The lower mandible is deeply concave. The tongue is 9 twelfths long, higher than broad, sagittate and papillate at the base, grooved above, tapering to a horny flattened, slightly emarginate tip. The œsophagus, *a b c d e*, is $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches long, forming a sac, *b c*, the width of which at the commencement is $7\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths, soon after $4\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths, toward the lower part of the neck $5\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths, but on entering the thorax contracting to $3\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths; the proventriculus, *d e*, $4\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths in width. The stomach, *e f g*, is broadly elliptical, 9 twelfths long, $7\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths wide, its lateral muscles well developed; the epithelium thin, but dense, and of a reddish-brown colour. The contents of the stomach are remains of coleopterous insects and seeds. The duodenum, *g h i*, curves in the usual manner at the distance of $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches; the entire length of the intestine is 10 inches, its width from 2 twelfths to $1\frac{1}{2}$ twelfths; the cœca 2 twelfths long, $\frac{1}{2}$ twelfth wide, 1 inch distant from the extremity; the rectum gradually dilates into an oblong cloaca, 5 twelfths in width.

THE RED MAPLE OR SWAMP MAPLE.

ACER RUBRUM, *Willd.*, Sp. Pl., vol. iv. p. 984. *Pursh*, Flor. Amer., vol. i. p. 266. *Mich.* Abr. Forest. de l'Amer. Sept., vol. ii. p. 210, pl. 14.—OCTANDRIA MONOGYNIA, *Linn.*—ACERINÆ, *Juss.*

GENUS IV.—ICTERUS, *Briss.* HANG-NEST.

Bill a little shorter than the head, conical, very slightly decurved, compressed, tapering to a very attenuated point; upper mandible with the dorsal line almost straight, being very slightly convex, the ridge indistinct, narrowed at the base; the sides convex, the edges overlapping, the tip extremely sharp; gap-line ascending at the base, afterwards direct; lower mandible with the angle long and of moderate width, the dorsal line and that of the crura slightly concave, the sides erect at the base, convex towards the end, the edges slightly inflected, the tip extremely slender. Nostrils basal, elliptical, with a small operculum. Head ovate, of moderate size; neck



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Audubon, John James. 1842. "The Red-Winged Starling, or Red-Shouldered Marsh Blackbird, *Agelaius phoeniceus*, Linn. [Pl. 216]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 4, 31–36.

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