



SYRRHAPTES PARADOXUS.

*J. Gould & H.C. Richter, del. et lith.*

*Walter, Imp.*



# SYRRHAPTES PARADOXUS.

## Pallas's Sandgrouse.

- Tetrao paradoxus*, Pall. Itin., tom. ii. p. 712, tab. F.—Id. Zool. Rosso.-Asiat., tom. ii. p. 74.—Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 755.
- *paradoxus*, Lath. Ind. Orn., tom. ii. p. 643.—Bonnat. Tab. Ency. Méth. Orn., part i. p. 205, pl. 93. fig. 1.
- Syrrhaptes paradoxus*, Ill. Prod. Syst. Mamm. et Av., p. 243.—Temm. Man. d'Orn., 2nd edit. tom. i. p. xciv.—Gray, Gen. of Birds, vol. iii. p. 519, pl. cxxxiv.—Bonap. Compt. Rend. de l'Acad. des Sci. tom. xlii. séance du 12 mai 1856.—Moore, Ibis, 1860, p. 105.—Newton, Proc. of Zool. Soc. 1861, p. 203.—Id. Ibis, 1864, p. 185.—Swinh. in Ibis, 1861, p. 341.—Gould, Birds of Great Britain, vol. iv. pl.
- *Pallasii*, Temm. Hist. Nat. des Pig. et Gall., tom. iii. pp. 282-716.
- Heterochites Tataricus*, Vieill. deux. édit. du Nouv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat., tom. xiv. p. 453.
- Syrrhaptes heteroclitæ*, Vieill. Gal. des Ois., tom. ii. p. 64, pl. 222.
- Heteroclitæ Grouse*, Lath. Gen. Syn., vol. iv. p. 753.—Id. Gen. Hist. vol. viii. p. 261.

This singular bird forms so important a feature in the avifauna of Asia that a figure of it must necessarily be included in a work on the birds of that region; I regret, however, to say that I can give no information respecting it beyond what has recently appeared. Mr. Swinhoe, in China, and Herr Radde, in Dauria, have added largely to our knowledge of its range, habits, and economy; and Messrs. Newton and Moore, in the 'Ibis,' and myself, in the 'Birds of Great Britain,' have each had our say with regard to the numbers which a few years ago visited Eastern Europe, Germany, Holland, and the British Islands.

The *Syrrhaptes paradoxus* is a species the individuals of which are unusually numerous; for it is generally seen in flocks of thousands in all the great Tartar Steppes, from Northern China to the Altai. In these elevated regions it takes the place of the numerous species of *Pterocles*, known by the trivial name of Sandgrouse, which are found in Afghanistan, Scinde, the peninsula of India, Persia, Spain, and Africa.

The following account of this singular species is compiled from the communications to the 'Ibis,' which the irruption of a number of examples into this country, and other parts of Europe above mentioned, have called forth from the pens of Mr. T. J. Moore, of the Derby Museum, Liverpool, and A. Newton, Esq.

"The *Syrrhaptes paradoxus* was first made known by Pallas (to whose notice it was brought by Nicolas Rytzschoff) as a dweller on the Kirghish steppes, which may be taken as extending eastward from the northern half of the Caspian Sea to the regions around Lake Balkach.

"Dr. Edward Eversmann tells us that the *Syrrhaptes* is found on the lofty steppes of the Southern Altai Mountains, on the upper course of the Tschuja, in the neighbourhood of the Chinese outposts. The Mongols there call it *Nukturu*; the Dwojedanzees, *Altin*; the Kirghiz Tartars on the Aral Sea, *Buldruk*; and the Russians, *Sadscha*.

"Gustav Radde, a traveller who has had great opportunities of observing the habits of *Syrrhaptes paradoxus* towards the more eastern limits of its breeding-range, passed the spring of 1856 in the basin of the Tarai-nor, a lake situated in Dauria, about 50° N. and 116° E. from Greenwich. He remarks particularly, in his 'Berichte über Reisen in Sïden von Ost-Sibirien,' on the favourable character of the district for the resort of migratory birds, among which *Syrrhaptes* is one of the earliest to appear, arriving paired, but keeping in flocks, on the 22nd of March. Three days afterwards, while the winter's snow was yet lying on the hillocks of the high steppes, these birds were living in small societies but always paired, on the adjacent salt-plains, from which they resorted early in the morning to the fresh-water springs of the Tarei to drink; there they remained until about nine o'clock in the day, when they repaired to the white salt-pans, among which are some slight elevations covered with grass. On these they scraped shallow pits and sat therein, passing the rest of the day in quiet, some sleeping, others walking about and plucking the young shoots of the *Salicorniæ*, unless disturbed by a Falcon, when they instantly took wing and, after several ringing flights, made off, alarming as they went their nearest comrades, who followed their example, until the air was filled with countless small flocks. Just as quickly as their quiet was disturbed was it again restored. They began to descend, at first timidly, and then settled down on the elevations, keeping so still that, owing to the colour of their plumage, they could hardly be seen. The nest is composed of the down of grasses, placed among sand and stones under a bush. The eggs are four in number, of a reddish-white colour, spotted with brown. The female quits her nest only at the last extremity. On the 12th of May the first young were hatched, and by the 27th a second brood of eggs was laid.

"About the second week in June, according to our reckoning, Herr Radde made an excursion to the island of the Tarei, passing over a high steppe, in the course of which he met with numerous bands of *Syrrhaptes*, and two great flocks, each consisting of at least a thousand birds; but they were so shy that neither on



horseback nor by stalking could he approach them. After being many times disturbed they betook themselves, flying with no small noise, to the bank of the Tarei and eastwards over the high steppe, alighting on two places where herds of cattle had been folded in the winter, and consequently covered with a thick layer of dung, trodden so hard that no vegetation appeared through it. Here they settled closely; and as night came on he left them, making sure of finding them the next day; but in the morning they had vanished, and throughout the summer he did not meet with a single example in that district. The herdsmen assured him they would return; but it was not until October and in another locality, near Abagaitui, that he again saw them. They were then flying in skeins, like Plovers, high and rapidly towards the north. The Cossacks who accompany the caravans to Peking across the Gobi told him that *Syrrhaptes* also inhabits those plains in great numbers, and serves them for game on their march. From the above passages it will be seen that the bird is subject to sudden movements on a very large scale, and of a kind which, at first sight, appear almost capricious."

"During winter," says Mr. Swinhoe, "flocks of hundreds constantly pass over the plains between Peking and Tientsin with a very swift flight, not unlike that of the Golden Plover. The market at Tientsin is literally glutted with them, and you may purchase them for a mere nothing. The natives call them 'Sha-chee,' or Sand-fowl, and told me they were mostly caught in clap-nets. After a fall of snow their capture is greatest; where the net is laid, the ground is cleared and strewed with small green beans. This clear patch is almost sure to catch the eyes of the passing flocks, when they descend and crowd into the snare. It only remains for the fowler, hidden at a distance, to jerk the strings, and in his haul he not unfrequently takes the whole flock. Numbers, however, are shot with matchlocks. When on the ground they are rather shy and difficult of approach; but on the wing they will sometimes dart within a few yards of you. The only note I have heard them utter is a rather melodious chuckle. The natives say that during summer they are numerous on the vast plains of Tartary beyond the Great Wall, and that they breed there in the sand."

The male has the face buff, deepening on the lower part of the throat into a large gorget of light chestnut-red; on each side of the neck a mark of the same tint; head, ear-coverts, sides of the neck, breast, and abdomen blue grey, passing into greyish buff on the flanks, a few of the feathers on each side of the breast edged at the extremity with black, forming a band which nearly meets in the centre; beyond the grey a broad band of black crosses the abdomen in front of the legs, posterior to which the abdomen, the vent and under tail-coverts, the legs, and feet are creamy-white; all the upper surface sandy-red crossed by numerous crescentic bands of black, anterior to each of which is a wash of grey; wing-coverts grey, stained on the edges with reddish buff; tips of the first row of the greater coverts bright chestnut-red, the second row black; centre of the primaries and secondaries black, the inner webs bordered with greyish stone-colour, and the outer webs bordered with grey next the shaft and outwardly with buff; tail similarly marked to the upper surface, the outer feathers tipped with white; the filamentous extremity of the outer primary on each side and those of the two central tail-feathers black; bill olive-green becoming darker towards the tip of the upper mandible; irides dark brown; naked skin round the eye olive-grey; toe-nails greenish black.

The above description is taken from a specimen killed in the Altai: I mention this because the bird seems to be subject to some slight variation in colour.

The female has the cheeks and chin light buff becoming gradually deeper on the lower part of the throat, where it is bounded by a narrow crescentic line of black; feathers of the head sandy-red, each with a dark-brown centre; the colouring of the upper surface is similar to that of the male, with this exception, that the dark bands assume the form of arrow-heads; the breast is dull greyish stone-colour, numerous spotted on the sides with black; the wing-coverts have each a spot of black near the tip; in other respects the colouring is similar to that of the male, but less vivid.

The Plate represents the two sexes, of the natural size.



Gould, John. 1867. "Pallas's Sandgrouse, *Syrrhaptes paradoxus* [Pl. 60]." *The Birds of Asia* 6(XIX), -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323478>.

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