ERYTHROPUS VESPERTINUS .

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Orange-legged Hobby.

Falco vespertinus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 129.

—— *rufipes*, Beseke, Vög. Kurlands, p. 13, tab. 3, 4.

Cerchneis vespertinus, Boie, Isis, 1828, p. 314.

Erythropus vespertinus, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 76.

Pannychistes rufipes, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 57.

Tinnunculus (Erythropus) rufipes, Kaup, Class. der Säug. und Vög., p. 108.

—— (——) *vespertinus*, Kaup, Mus. Senckenb., 1845, p. 257.

—— *vespertinus*, Gray, Gen. of Birds, vol. i. p. 21, *Tinnunculus*, sp. 13.

THIS remarkably pretty species, whose natural home is in countries far warmer than our own, has been killed in England so many times that no question can arise as to the propriety of assigning it a place among the "Birds of Great Britain." Here, as well as in all the parts of Europe in which it has yet been discovered, it is strictly a migrant, and, moreover, is rendered remarkable by its peculiar habits: in the first place, it is gregarious, many often breeding in company; in the next, it is so fearless of man that, if one or more of a number be killed, the remainder remain apparently regardless of danger; thirdly, it is said to sometimes breed under the roofs of houses, and even to construct its nest in their interiors; and, lastly, it is crepuscular, feeding on insects captured in the twilight, and but seldom on birds; much diversity, moreover, occurs in the colouring of the sexes and immature examples. It is somewhat doubtful whether there be not two or three species of this particular form included under the specific term *vespertinus*, inasmuch as the dark-coloured males from China and South Africa have the under part of the wing white, and not plumbeous as seen in European specimens; but, in their size and markings, nothing is observable which would enable the ornithologist to determine the plurality or unity of these birds in a specific sense.

The first recorded notice of the occurrence of this Falcon in our islands will be found in the fourth volume of Loudon's 'Magazine of Natural History,' where the late Mr. Yarrell states that three individuals (an adult male, a young male, and an adult female) were obtained in May 1830, at Horning, in Norfolk, and that a fourth specimen was shot at Holkham Park. Besides these he mentions, in his 'History of British Birds,' that a fifth example was shot in the same county in 1832, three more in Yorkshire, one in Durham, one near Devonport, and that a female was struck down by a Raven in Littlecote Park, near Hungerford. Since the publication of Mr. Yarrell's work, several other specimens have been procured; thus W. Oxenden Hammond, Esq., of St. Alban's Court, Wingham, Kent, records, in the 'Zoologist' for 1862, the killing of an adult female at Sandling Park, near Hythe, in the early part of the same year, and Mr. Stevenson, of Norwich, in the 'Zoologist' for 1863, that he had recently purchased a young male which had been killed at Somerleyton Station, near Lowestoft, on the 12th of July, 1862. In a letter received from the last-mentioned gentleman, dated June 20, 1868, he informs me that an adult female had been killed on Yarmouth Broad a fortnight before; and, more recently, Mr. H. Smither, of Churt, states that another adult female had been shot near Farnham. The above comprises all the British examples with which I am acquainted; but there may be others which are unknown to me. There is no verified instance of its having been found in Scotland, and but one of its occurrence in Ireland. It is a constant visitant to Silesia, Hungary, Poland, Austria, the Tyrol, Switzerland, and the districts on the northern side of the Apennines, whence it passes to Provence and Tuscany. In France, as in this country, it is of rare occurrence, and is unknown in Holland. Mr. Jerdon states that, "although generally spread throughout India, it is nowhere very common; I killed it on the Neilgherries, in the Carnatic, and in Central India; it is not very unfrequent in Lower Bengal and the neighbourhood of Calcutta during the rainy season only. It is found all along the Himalayan range; and I procured examples at Darjeeling."

As Mr. Jerdon justly remarks, not much is known of its habits; but that little I will here give in the language of those who have written a few brief notes respecting it. Pallas states that the birds he saw hunt towards evening, killing spiders, water-insects, and, occasionally, swallows, and breed in deserted crows' nests; the stomachs of those examined by Mr. Jerdon contained the remains of insects only. Fellows says it is very common in Asia Minor, and that it builds its nest under the roofs, and sometimes even in the interior of houses. The Rev. H. B. Tristram, in his 'Notes on Birds observed in Southern Palestine,' states that this pretty little Hobby is a summer migrant, but returns earlier than the common species. The absence of suitable woods is probably the reason of its being a rare bird and confined to the central districts;

a few pairs were seen among the large terebinth trees near the foot of the hills of Judæa. They seem to roost and build there, feeding only in the plains, over which they hover, resembling the Kestrel in their habits and flight rather than the Hobby.

"The Orange-legged Hobby (*Erythropus vespertinus*)," says Lord Lilford, in his 'Notes on the Birds observed by him in the Ionian Islands, &c.,' "arrives in Corfu, occasionally in great numbers, about the latter end of April. In the spring of 1858 it was very abundant, particularly at Fano, a small rocky island to the north of Corfu, celebrated as a favourite resting-place for immense flights of quails during their vernal migration. It appears to be very fearless of man. I have watched a flock of five or six for upwards of an hour, during which time they often approached within ten or fifteen yards of where I sat, though I was in no way concealed. As far as my observation goes, this species only remains for a few days in Corfu, on its passage northwards; and I have never heard of its occurrence in the island, except in April and May. The stomach of a specimen I saw skinned contained the remains of large night-flying moths. Both this species and the Common Hobby are to be observed on the wing as late as 8 or 9 p.m. The Orange-legged Hobby often alights on the ground, and runs with great ease and speed."

About Talien Bay, in North China, "This handsome little bird-slayer," says Mr. Swinhoe (his remarks probably applying to the white-winged bird), "was not unfrequently met with flying along overhead or hovering poised in the air. Judging from the contents of the stomachs of the two I procured, I should say it committed great havoc among the Larks and other field-birds. It certainly caused considerable consternation wherever it appeared among them. I have had two opportunities of observing the nest of this species; one was placed among the topmost boughs of a willow, the other amid the leafy foliage of some umbrageous tree. The nests were large and round, and built of sticks, resembling somewhat those of the Magpie. When the old birds visited the nest, the young (balls of white down, with bluish bills) set up a chattering cry."

"This pretty little Hawk," says Mr. Wright, in his 'List of the Birds observed in the Islands of Malta and Gozo,' "visits us in the vernal and autumnal periods of migration, and in some years in much larger numbers than in others. It is sometimes to be met with in small flocks, when they will allow repeated shots to be fired at them without taking alarm."

Lord Lilford remarks that he once saw an *Erythropus vespertinus* in Andalusia, and that there is a specimen in the Museum of Valencia; but it is not, he thinks, a common bird in any part of Spain.

Turning to another part of the world, Africa—"The birds of this species," says the Rev. H. B. Tristram, "have the same gregarious habits in Algeria that Mr. Cochrane has stated them to have in Hungary; they are, however, very rare. The only breeding-place known to me is on the edge of a pine forest, near Djelfa, in Algeria proper; and there there are not more than four or five pairs; while in the eastern province of Constantine they do not seem to occur, except as stragglers. They return late from the south; and on my visiting their rookery in June, 1856, they were employed in repairing old nests, and had not yet commenced laying."

In Dr. Kirk's paper 'On the Birds of the Zambesi Region of Eastern Tropical Africa,' it is stated that "this pretty little Hawk is found near the river. It appears only at sunset and in the dusk, when, coming in great numbers from the shady forest or from among the fronds of the lofty *Borassus*-palm, it hovers, swallow-like, over the plains and water, catching dragonflies and locusts, which, with other insects, caught on the wing, seem to constitute its chief or only food. In February and March it was seen in numbers on the Shiré, where the bush-vegetation and palm-forest come down to the river." This note also probably refers to the bird with white under wing-coverts.

With respect to the nidification of this species, Mr. Cochrane (who had the good fortune to meet with it in Hungary during the breeding-season) informed Mr. Hewitson that it arrives in that country about the middle of April, and lays its eggs early in the following month. "They make no nest for themselves, but, after a fight with the lawful owners, take possession of those of the Crow, Rook, or Magpie, altering or repairing them to their own taste. Mr. Cochrane says he has found their eggs in a nest of *Corvus corone*, that they are sometimes six in number, but most commonly four or five. 'Sometimes in isolated trees, at others as many as six or seven pairs in one tree, in a rookery, exactly as Rooks in England.' The eggs most nearly resemble those of the Kestrel, being, however, for the most part considerably less; like the eggs of that bird they are sometimes finely freckled throughout, and much resemble those of the red Grouse."

The Plate represents an adult male and a female, of the size of life.

Gould, John. 1873. "Orange-legged Hobby, *Erythropus vespertinus* [Pl. 20]." *The birds of Great Britain* 1, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323800>.

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