CIRCUS CYANEUS.

Hen Harrier.

- Falco cyaneus*, et *pygargus*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. pp. 126-128.
—— *strigiceps*, Nilss. Faun. Suec., tom. i. p. 21.
Circus Ægithus, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. & Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 9.
—— *gallinarius*, Savig. Descr. de l'Égypte, Hist. Nat., tom. i. p. 92.
—— *pygargus*, Cuv. Règn. Anim., edit. 1817, tom. i. p. 324.
—— (*Strigiceps*) *cyaneus*, et *uliginosus*, Kaup, Mus. Senckenb., p. 258.
—— *cyaneus*, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 549.
Pygargus dispar, Koch, Syst. der Baier. Zool., p. 128.
Strigiceps pygargus, Bonap. Geog. and Comp. List of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 5.
Buteo cyaneus, Jenyns, Man. Brit. Vert. Anim., p. 89.
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WERE I to say to the rising ornithologists of the present day, "If you wish to see the Hen Harrier and its consort the Ringtail performing their buoyant and elegant flight, and hunting in concert over an open part of the country, go to the Gossmoor of Cornwall, the lofty hills of charming Devon, the great heaths of Surrey, Sussex, and Hampshire, the flat fenny districts of Suffolk, Norfolk, Huntingdon, and Lincolnshire, the Yorkshire wolds, the fells of Westmoreland and Cumberland, the rushy hill-sides of the Scottish border, the Cheviots, and the Grampians, as far north as the land trends," I fear I should be sending them on a bootless errand; yet there was a time, and that within the present century, when the birds might have been seen in any of the localities above enumerated. Such, however, is now rarely the case. Nature and her productions have been greatly interfered with; some species have been extirpated from districts where they were formerly plentiful, while others have become abundant in situations where previously they were but little known. That the Harriers and other large predatory birds are no longer to be found in their wonted haunts is not to be wondered at when we remember how large a portion of the country formerly in a natural condition has now been brought under cultivation, and that the keeper and the shepherd exterminate them whenever they can. It is not to be expected that such people are imbued with the love for nature and her wonderful works which reigns in the breast of the true naturalist: they do not even care to read the many beautiful passages which have been written on our native birds, from the time of Gilbert White to that of those authors who have but recently passed away, among which none are perhaps more truly descriptive of the habits and actions of birds than Macgillivray's,—who, speaking of the *Circus cyaneus* says:—

"Having examined the form, and somewhat of the structure of the Hen Harrier, we are prepared for the exhibition of its faculties. Kneel down here, then, among the long broom, and let us watch the pair that have just made their appearance on the shoulder of the hill. Leave these beautiful flowerets to the inspection of yonder botanist, who, should he wander hitherward, will be delighted to cull the lovely tufts of maiden-pinks that surround us.

"How beautifully they glide along, in their circling flight, with gentle flaps of their expanded wings, floating as it were in the air, their half-spread tails inclined from side to side, as they balance themselves or alter their course! Now they are near enough to enable us to distinguish the male from the female. They seem to be hunting in concert: and their search is keen; for they fly at times so low as almost to touch the bushes, and never rise higher than thirty feet. The grey bird hovers, fixing himself in the air like the Kestrel; now he stoops, but recovers himself. A hare breaks from the cover; but they follow her not, though doubtless, were they to spy her young one, it would not escape so well. The female now hovers for a few seconds, gradually sinks for a short space, ascends, turns a little to one side, closes her wings, and comes to the ground. She has secured her prey; for she remains concealed among the furze; while the male shoots away, flying at the height of three or four yards, sweeps along the hawthorn hedge, bounds over it to the other side, turns away to skim over the sedgy pool, and hovers there a short while. He now enters upon the grass field, when a Partridge springs off, and he pursues it with a rapid gliding flight; but they have turned to the right, and the wood conceals them from our view. In the meantime the female has sprung up, and advances, keenly inspecting the ground, and so heedless of our presence that she passes within twenty yards of us. Away she speeds, and in passing the pool again stoops, but recovers herself, and, rising in a beautiful curve, bounds over the plantation and is out of sight.

"The Hen Harrier feeds upon small birds and the young of larger, on young hares and rabbits, on mice, frogs, lizards, and serpents. For the most part it pounces upon its victims as they repose upon the ground; but it also pursues birds in open flight; and, so far from confining itself to feeble game, it has been known to seize the Red Grouse, Ptarmigan, and Partridge.

"When flying from one place to another, without searching the ground, it moves with considerable rapidity, at such a height as to clear the trees and other elevated objects without deviating. It is not known, however, to soar to a great height. On obtaining its prey it usually devours it on the spot, carrying it off only when it judges that it is liable to be molested. When satiated, it retires to some quiet place, or perches on a wall, a stone, or a stump, until digestion is advanced. In its rambles it searches the cultivated fields and pastures, but in summer and autumn is partial to heaths and commons; and in such places it reposes at night and rears its young. Although nowhere very common, it is generally dispersed, and in some districts pretty numerous, in the breeding-season. In Scotland it betakes itself to the hilly tracts and moors from the middle of spring to the end of autumn, but in winter frequents the lower cultivated districts. It is a permanent resident, and does not appear to receive any accession of numbers, or to undergo any periodical diminution."

Like Macgillivray, I have never had the good fortune to find its nest. I shall therefore transcribe a very valuable account of its breeding given by Sir William Jardine.

"In a country possessing a considerable portion of plain and mountain, where I have had the greatest opportunities of attending to them, they always retire at the commencement of the breeding-season to the wildest hills; and during this time not one individual will be found in the low country. For several days before commencing their nest the male and female are seen soaring about, as in search of or examining a proper situation, are very noisy, and toy and cuff each other in the air. When the site is fixed, and the nest completed, the female is left alone, and, when hatching, will not suffer the male to visit the nest, but on his approach rises and drives him with screams to a distance! The nest is very frequently made in a heath-bush by the side of some ravine, and is composed of sticks, with a very slender lining. It is sometimes formed on one of those places called scars, or where there has been a rut on the side of a steep hill after a mountain thunder-shower; here little or no nest is made, and the eggs are laid on the bare earth, which has been scraped hollow. In a flat or level country some common is generally chosen, and the nest is found in a whin or other scrubby bush at a short height from the ground. The young are well supplied with food, I believe by both parents, though I have only seen the female in attendance; and I have found in and near the nest the common small lizard, stone-chats, and young grouse.

"When the birds are perfectly grown, they, with the old birds, leave the high country, and return to their old haunts, hunting with regularity the fields of grain, and now commit great havoc among the young game. At night they seem to have general roosting-places either among whins or long heath, and always in some open spot of ground. On a moor of considerable extent I have seen seven in the space of an acre. They began to approach the sleeping-ground about sunset, and, before going to roost, hunted the whole moor, crossing each other often, three or four in view at a time, gliding backwards and forwards in easy graceful circles, with seemingly little effort or flapping of the wings. Half an hour may be spent in this way. When they approach the roost they skim three or four times over it to see that there is no interruption, and then at once drop into the spot. These places are easily found in the daytime; and the birds may be caught by placing a common rat-trap, or they may be shot in a moonlight night. In both ways I have procured many specimens."

The eggs, which vary from three to five in number, are bluish white, sometimes faintly dotted with brown, and are generally about an inch and three quarters in length by an inch and a third in breadth.

The preceding extracts from the writings of Macgillivray and Sir William Jardine must be regarded as descriptive of the bird at the time they wrote, some thirty years ago; but, as I have already said, it is now not nearly so numerous. Still it is to be found in many parts of England and Scotland; and the Duke of Argyll informs me that a pair of this species nested on one of the moors near his seat at Inverary in the spring of 1867.

Besides the British Islands, the Hen Harrier inhabits the whole of Central Europe, North Africa, Asia Minor, and Persia; and Jerdon states that it is a "winter visitant to India, Bootan, Kumaon, and the north-western Himalayas, perhaps extending to the plains in the Punjab only."

So much difference exists in the size and colouring of the sexes of this and other Harriers, that, had we not abundant proofs to the contrary, we might readily assume that they were distinct species. The adult male is always of a delicate grey; but the young of this sex, for the first, and probably the second year, is brown, like the female, and in this respect resembles the Kestrel and many others of our rapacious birds; and those from foreign countries require as close an investigation to arrive at as intimate a knowledge of them as has been achieved with regard to our own species.

The Plate represents a male, somewhat less than the natural size, with a reduced figure of the female or Ringtail in the distance.

Gould, John. 1873. "Hen-Harrier, *Circus cyaneus* [Pl. 26]." *The birds of Great Britain* 1, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323805>.

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