ATHENE NOCTUA.

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Little Owl.

- Strix noctua*, Retz. Faun. Suec., p. 85.
— *passerina*, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. i. p. 65.
Noctua passerina, Cuv. Règn. Anim., edit. 1817, tom. i. p. 332.
— *glauca*, Savig. Descr. de l'Egypte, Hist. Nat., tom. i. p. 105.
Athene noctua, Boie, Isis, 1826, p. 315.
Strix nudipes et *S. psilodactyla*, Nilss. Orn. Suec., tom. i. p. 68, tab. 2.
Athene psilodactyla, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 110. tab. 8. fig. 2.
Scotophilus nudipes, Jard. Nat. Lib. Brit. Birds, vol. i. p. 274.
Athene passerina, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 549.
Cephaloptynx noctua, Kaup, Mon. Strig. in Jard. Cont. Orn., 1850, p. 105.
Carine passerina, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 29.
Syrnia psilodactyla, Macgill. Hist. of Brit. Birds, vol. iii. p. 417.
Surnia noctua, Keys. et Blas. Wirbelth. Eur., p. 32.
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IF this little Owl were indigenous to Britain instead of an accidental visitor, it would doubtless be a general favourite; for its economy is interesting, and its manners somewhat singular. It is a very common bird, even so near to us as Holland, whence specimens in the flesh are frequently sent to the London markets, and, I fear, often palmed upon our collectors as British killed. On the continent of Europe it attracts especial notice by its habit of resorting to villages and towns, and taking up its abode in old ruins, church-steeple, and other lofty buildings. During the breeding-season, it is often seen flying about in the evening before the shades of night have closed in upon the day, and in the dawn before the sun has fairly risen. Its notes are singular and unearthly, so much so that it is regarded by superstitious persons as a bird of ill omen; in the mind of the ornithologist no such feeling exists, and, as before stated, we should be pleased if its visits to this country were more frequent; as it is, however, they have been sufficiently numerous to entitle it to rank among British birds, and there is at least one instance on record of its having bred with us. So far back as the time of Edwards, a specimen was caught in a chimney in London; and Mr. Yarrell states that a second was taken about the same time in a similar situation in the parish of Lambeth; and from that time until the present day instances of its having been shot in nearly every county are on record. Rennie saw one nailed to a barn-door in Wiltshire, doubtless with other spoils of a gamekeeper who regarded it as pertaining to his catalogue of "vermin;" and Mr. Hunt, in his 'British Ornithology,' says, "we recollect a nest of these birds being taken at no great distance from Norwich." The most recent historian of the birds of Norfolk county (Mr. Stevenson) states that two examples have come under his notice—one taken alive at Easton in 1846, which lived in confinement till December 1848, and another captured on board a fishing-smack, about ten miles off Yarmouth, in February 1862. Mr. Bond has a specimen which was shot at Sevenoaks, in Kent, in May the same year; Mr. E. H. Rodd, of the western county of Cornwall, records one killed near Helston, and two near Plymouth; as yet, however, no example has been seen either in Scotland or Ireland.

In Bailly's 'Ornithology of Savoy' it is stated that this species, "instead of dwelling in the forests, evinces a preference for the ruins of old edifices, houses, towers, and abandoned chateaus, the steeples of churches and convents, and the hollow trees in their neighbourhood; in such situations it breeds and passes the greater part of its life. Towards the end of March or April, the female lays four or five eggs on any soft deposit in a hole in a wall, or the inner timber of houses, and sometimes on the *débris* of roots, dried leaves and rags collected by the rats for their own use, but very rarely in the hollows of trees. The eggs, which are white, are of a rounded form, and a trifle larger than those of the Scops. The Little Owl being able to see in the daylight better than its congeners, hunts for its prey during the twilight of evening and on dull mornings in the woods around its residence, and when breeding is observed to go out earlier in the evening and to return later in the morning than other Owls. During autumn and winter, it is met with at those times in the hedges and on the trees bordering the roadside, and those which occur in the middle of fields and in the centre of towns and villages. When the ground is covered with snow, it approaches the farms, and lives upon the excrements of animals; at this time it also enters isolated buildings, caverns of rocks, vaults of old castles, and other similar situations resorted to by rats and bats. From such places its voice, which is less hollow than that of most other Owls, is frequently heard to resound. The cry, which generally resembles the words *hème* or *éedm*, is repeated several times in succession at intervals of two or three seconds, as one man calls to attract the attention of another. These cries, distinctly uttered in a strong voice during the shades of evening and in the stillness of the night, cause great alarm to those persons who are weak enough to

believe in ghosts, especially during its breeding-season, when it also emits a peculiar kind of languishing sigh. Like the Scops and Barn Owls it has also the habit of pursuing by night, and especially in the early morning, with loud cries all who may pass along the roads bordered with trees near the places in which it is searching for prey. I have several times been accompanied by this Owl along the pathways and fields when going out shooting in the autumn. Near Chambéry one followed me for half an hour, jumping from tree to tree, and from house to house. Two shots fired at it, at random, did not prevent its following me; on the contrary, they caused it to redouble its cries; and in an instant afterwards I found myself accompanied by two others, which had doubtless been attracted thereby. The little Owl seems to feed on small birds, mice, young rats, large insects, especially grasshoppers and crickets, small reptiles, especially the wall lizard (*Lacerta muralis*) and the spotted Salamander (*Salamandra maculosa*), little frogs, fish-spawn, but rarely upon anything destitute of life. A living one I had in 1847 was sensible of kindness, and would allow me to rub its breast, back, and head, during which operation, which seemed to give it pleasure, it remained as without life, sometimes lying on its back, at others on its breast. The fowlers of our country do not make use of this species to attract birds to their snares, but prefer for that purpose the Scops Owl."

Naumann, in his 'Vögel Deutschlands,' confirms much of the preceding account of this bird, and says that its true home is Central Europe, but that it is sometimes found in Sweden and Livonia. In Germany it is a bird of passage, although a number remain there all the year; it is fond of the neighbourhood of man, dwells on old town-walls, at a moderate height in church-steeple, and in the holes of trees, is often seen about the heads of pollarded willows, and sitting on old stone bridges and on the upright gravestones in church-yards, and is therefore considered by some people a bird of ill omen; during the nesting-season it often utters its discordant cries in the daytime, is of an untamable disposition, and in its flight differs from that of other Owls in its being less easy and soundless, and of an undulating character like that of the Woodpecker and Hoopoe. Its food consists of mice, bats, small birds (such as sparrows and larks, which it surprises in their sleep), and insects; of mice it is said to eat as many as five or six at a meal, and it frequently hoards up a supply of food, apparently in anticipation of inclement weather. As in Italy, it is used by the bird-catchers as a decoy to attract the smaller birds towards the limed twigs. Old birds are sometimes employed for this purpose, but young ones are more easily tamed and answer better.

The *Athene noctua* is generally spread over central and southern Europe, and, if the *Noctua bactriana* of Blyth be the same, Thibet and Afghanistan. I am aware that some ornithologists consider the Little Owls of Eastern Europe and Northern Africa distinct, and have applied to them the specific names of *persica*, *meridionalis*, and *numida*; but whether they are really different is still undecided; if they are not, then the range of this species is indeed an extensive one. Temminck says that it does not go further north than the fifty-fifth degree of latitude, which proves that it is a southern species, Lord Lilford having found it nesting in the ruins of Nicopolis, in Epirus, in March, and at Santa Quaranta in May.

I may remark that by Latham, Cuvier, and others this species has been treated of as the *Strix passerina* of Linnæus; but this is an error, the bird characterized by the learned Swede under that name being a still more diminutive one.

The sexes are alike in colour, and the young differ merely in being less bright, and by the redder tint of the spots on the neck.

The Plate represents the bird, of the natural size, with the nearly fledged young, from a drawing by Mr. Wolf. The little quadruped is the Short-tailed Field Mouse (*Arvicola agrestis*).

Gould, John. 1873. "Little Owl, *Athene noctua* [Pl. 37]." *The birds of Great Britain* 1, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323816>.

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