CYPSELUS APUS.

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Swift.

Hirundo apus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 344.

Cypselus apus, Ill. Prod. Syst. Mamm. et Av., p. 230.

——— *murarius*, Temm. Man. d'Orn., p. 271; and 2nd edit. tom. i. p. 434.

——— *vulgaris*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. x. p. 72.

Micropus murarius, Meyer, Taschenb. deutsch., tom. i. p. 281.

Brachipus murarius, Meyer, Vög. Liv- und Esthl., p. 143.

ADMITTING as I do that, in structure, habits, and economy, the Swifts differ considerably from the Swallows and Martins, I do not think it necessary or desirable, in a work of such limited extent as one on the "Birds of Great Britain," to place them far from each other, the more so as they are generally associated by every observer of our native birds. Structurally they are all admirably adapted for flight, but the Swifts much more so than the Swallows and Martins. The latter descend to and even spend a part of their time on the ground and on the branches of trees. The Swifts, on the other hand, as if disdaining this nether world, are strictly denizens of the air; it is in that element alone that they obtain their insect-food, and in the pursuit of which they will ascend to an almost incredible height, while they are equally expert in their pursuit when the state of the temperature induces insects to remain near the ground. The wing-powers of the Swift are indeed enormous, and the number of insects they must take to keep up their muscular condition defies calculation. Its evolutions in the air are most perfect, and it often, while flying, forms lengthened sweeps and curves of the most graceful description; so easy and buoyant, in fact, are all its movements that language fails to portray that of which the eye alone can convey to the senses a full conception.

In the British Islands the Swift is a constant summer resident, and at that season may be seen in all parts of the country; but in the northern districts, particularly in some parts of Scotland and in the Orkneys, it is less abundant than in England and Ireland. From the vast wing-powers which this bird possesses, it would naturally be supposed that its range is more extensive than it really is, but it is not so widely extended as that of many other birds whose power of flight is much more limited. I have a specimen in my collection from Trebizond, but I have never seen examples from India. Mr. Adams states that it is common in Cashmere, which is probably its extreme eastern limit. The centre of its area would appear to be the middle of Europe: from this point it is distributed in summer over the other parts of the continent, as far north as Sweden, Norway, and Russia, while Northern Africa and Arabia as far as the tropics are probably its winter residence and the farthest extent of its range in that direction.

I suspect that all migrants, whether in the northern or southern hemisphere, are guided by the sun,—that is, that at stated periods they impulsively follow its course, the genial rays of that luminary having, as is known to every one, an especial influence both on vegetable and insect life. In the northern hemisphere we know almost to a day the arrival of the Stork and the passing of the Crane to its summer home. The Swallow and the Martin visit us at the latter end of March or the beginning of April; the Swift, on the other hand, is more tardy in its arrival, for it is not until the first week in May, when the spring has far advanced and insect life is almost at its height, that it makes its appearance in any number. Not only is it one of our latest spring birds, but it is also one of the earliest to depart, for it generally leaves us early in August; or, if a solitary pair remain, the delay is due to some extraneous cause: their affection for a late-hatched brood will occasionally induce them to extend the period of their stay until September. I shall here give some remarks on the arrival and departure of the Swift, and on its nidification, which have been kindly forwarded to me by P. J. Martin, Esq., of Pulborough in Sussex, who, having a great partiality for this bird, always affords it his protection, and allows it to breed undisturbed under his hospitable roof. In a letter, dated August 16, 1858, this gentleman says,—“I send you herewith some Swifts' nests taken from under the eaves of my house, where from ten to twenty pairs have bred for the last ten or twelve years. They appear to appropriate for their own use the straw and feathers carried up by the Sparrows, for they are never seen to collect any of these materials themselves. I generally send my servant on to the roof to collect the Sparrows' eggs when the Swifts arrive, which is generally in the second week of May, a few days earlier or later according to the season; but this is not done every year, and I do not observe but that they go on amicably enough together when let alone. My boy sometimes finds three eggs in a nest, but more usually two. We generally lose the Swifts before the 12th of August. In the box you will find some of the droppings, which always appear to me to be chiefly composed of the elytra of beetles. Do they emigrate as soon as this kind of food ceases to exist?”

It is evident that during the short stay of the Swift in this country, almost its whole time must be spent in

the duties of reproduction and the capture of insects for the sustenance of itself and its progeny. Immeasurably great indeed must be the amount of insect life destroyed by this bird; and as it feeds exclusively on perfect insects, it becomes a greater check to their undue preponderance than if they formed even a part of its diet in their larva state. I transcribe a note, as illustrative of this part of the bird's economy, made during my annual summer visit to Maidenhead and its neighbourhood:—"June 28. Took two very young Swifts, apparently hatched about four or five days previously; they were round, black, heavy-bodied nestlings, without feathers; their eyelids were much contracted, and their eyes but half open; no dilatation of the gape, as in the Swallows and Tits (*Hirundinidæ*, *Paridæ*) and many other young birds; weight, three-quarters of an ounce. July 8. Took from a neighbouring nest two young Swifts, considerably advanced in size and plumage; the entire body and tarsi were covered with dark-grey down; stub-feathers were appearing on the crown of the head, and the wing- and tail-feathers were much developed. July 12. Took two other neighbouring Swifts. The size and plumage of these were greatly advanced over those last mentioned; the whole of the head and body was covered with perfect feathers, resembling in colour those of the adult; the wings were considerably developed, and the birds would have flown in four or five days; weight two ounces." Now if all these were hatched about the same time, as they probably were, what a vast amount of insect life must have been taken by each young Swift between the 28th of June and the 12th of July! In this fortnight alone the young birds had increased in weight from three-quarters of an ounce to two ounces; and, bearing in mind that the adults as well as the young have to be sustained, we may form something like an estimate of the amount of insects destroyed by these birds during the summer months. From the earliest dawn to sundown, and even later, the Swift is constantly hawking in the air, through which its various journeys must, at the most moderate computation, amount to many hundreds of miles a day. It probably reposes for short intervals during the heat of the midday sun; but the time thus lost is made up by later evolutions in the evening, when the males scream and chase each other from place to place, at one moment over water or a lofty church spire, at the next over the tops of houses, darting, circling, and joyously pursuing and rivalling each other in the number and rapidity of their evolutions. When feeding their young, the parent birds dash into their dark recesses with the quickness of thought, going in and returning a hundred, nay, many hundred times a day. The structure of its tarsi and feet quite unfits the Swift for moving on the ground, whence its specific name of *apus* (footless), and, if once on a level surface, I question if it has the power of again rising in the air; but any slight inequality in the soil would enable the bird to effect its purpose. When roosting, or resting from the midday heat, the Swift retires to some lofty steeple or a more humble cottage roof, to the walls of which it clings with its curiously formed toes and hooked nails. From such places of rest, and on leaving the nest, it drops into the air, and, with a few strokes of its powerful wings, sweeps away with the utmost ease and grace.

That an individual pair annually return for many years to the same site is certain, marked birds having proved this fact over and over again. And wonderful, indeed, is the instinct which directs this bird to return repeatedly to the same breeding-place. Going to and fro is the province of the Swift: in winter it flies over African soil; in summer it dwells in the more invigorating climate of England and the continent of Europe, which latter countries may be considered its native home, for it is there that it procreates its kind.

The sites chosen for the purpose of nidification are much varied, cathedral spires, lofty towers, crevices in rocks, and the holes in lofty trees being alike resorted to; the eaves of church-roofs and the houses of the humble villagers are also much frequented by it; and the poorer the cottage, the more it appears to be preferred. The space between the rafters and the roof, to which admittance is gained by a broken tile or any interstice through which the bird can squeeze its lengthened body, is a situation for which it evinces a decided preference. Within such openings as these in the roof of the humble tenement, the Swift either constructs its own shallow, saucer-like nest of the straws, feathers, and other materials caught while floating in the air on a windy day, or appropriates those collected by the common Sparrow; whichever course is pursued, these light materials are agglutinated together with a viscous substance secreted by the salivary glands of the bird. I have even found fresh petals of the yellow buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*) glued on the inner side of the walls, which the Swift must have taken while skimming over the mead. This thin crust of a nest is often placed near the entrance, but sometimes on a rafter under the ceiling, at the distance of a yard from the inlet. The eggs are of an oblong form, about an inch in length, and of a pinkish white; two is the normal number, but I have heard of three, and even four, being occasionally found in one nest.

The males and females are so closely alike in size and colour that, to be quite certain of the sex of any individual that may be shot, dissection must be resorted to. The young soon assume a plumage very like that of the adult, the only difference being that they have more white about the face, and that some of the darker feathers of the body are very narrowly fringed with grey.

The entire plumage, with the exception of a patch of dull white on the chin, is very dark brown, glossed with purple and green; irides dark brown; bill black; toes and claws blackish brown.

Gould, John. 1873. "Swift, *Cypselus apus* [Pl. 3]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, –.
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