CORACIAS GARRULA, Linn.

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Roller.

Coracias garrula, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 32.

Galgulus, Briss. Orn., tom. ii. p. 64, pl. v. fig. 2.

——— *garrulus*, Vieill. Nouv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat., tom. xxix. p. 428.

Coracias germanicus, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 158.

——— *planiceps*, Brehm, ibid., p. 159.

——— *garrulus*, Cab. Mus. Hein., Theil ii. p. 117.

ALTHOUGH the avifauna of the British Islands is generally destitute of the gorgeous hues which distinguish the birds of the tropics, still some three or four species conspicuous for the beauty of their plumage either reside with or pay us occasional visits. The Roller is one of them; and but few of the birds of the torrid zone are more gaily attired, or more striking in appearance. That the clear blue skies and the pure atmosphere of the European continent are more in harmony with the tints which adorn this bird than the humid, uncertain, and foggy climate of our islands cannot be denied; and it is in the countries across the Straits that it is most frequently found; still we have been, and probably ever shall be, favoured with its occasional visits, the recorded instances of which, from the Land's End to the northernmost part of Scotland, are already very numerous. Nor has Ireland been unvisited by this fine bird; for Thompson informs us that the late "Mr. R. Ball, when walking through the demesne at Carton, the seat of the Duke of Leinster, in the middle of September 1831, had his attention attracted by a bird pursued by a great number of Rooks, which, instead of flying off to avoid, continued for a considerable time to dash into the midst of them, apparently for the sake only of annoyance. From the size, brilliant plumage, and singular flight of this bird, my friend was satisfied that it was a Roller." Thompson was told of another being shot in the county of Sligo, and a third in the south of Ireland; but adds, "as yet no example of the bird unquestionably killed in this island has to my knowledge come under the inspection of the naturalist." In Mr. Rodd's 'List of Cornish Birds' it is stated that a specimen had been seen near the Land's End, and that a female shot at St. Levan is in his own collection. I might continue to cite instances of its capture from this end of England to the Orkneys, were it worth while to do so; but such notices may be found in many, if not all, the works treating on our native birds, from Bewick to Macgillivray. As recently as the months of May and June 1865 I received three notes giving me accounts of its appearance, one in Devonshire, another in Essex, and a third in Dumfriesshire. The first, Mr. Gatcombe states, was killed by a farmer's boy on Spriddlescombe Farm, near Plymouth, the property of J. H. Eccles, Esq.; on dissection this proved to be a male, and its stomach contained the remains of beetles and the skins of several long whitish grubs or caterpillars; a female was seen in its company, but was not obtained. The Essex bird, Mr. Travis of Saffron Walden informed me, was shot on the 17th of May, by the gamekeeper of G. Sanders, Esq., of Little Chesterford Park; this was a male bird, and just before it was shot had been sucking an egg. The bird observed in Dumfriesshire, I learn by a note from Sir William Jardine, was seen during the previous November by the keeper of Mr. Yonstoun, of Tortherwold, flying about a thorny hedge; it could not be approached within shooting-distance; but its remains were afterwards found, and the wings and tail sent to Sir William. This poor straggler from a foreign land was evidently bewildered, and should have been in a more southern climate at that period; for be it known that the bird is strictly migratory in all parts of Europe, and is only found there in summer, as in autumn it crosses the Mediterranean for the more congenial climate of Africa, where insect food is abundant, and a genial sun reigns, under which it may preen its beautiful feathers.

Mr. Stevenson, after enumerating the numerous instances of the occurrence of the Roller in his county, remarks:—"The earliest record, however, is contained in the following remarkable note by Sir Thomas Browne, made just two hundred years ago:—"On the 14th of May, 1664, a very rare bird was sent me, killed at Crostwich, which seemed to be some kind of Jay." After giving a description which proves that the bird was a Roller, Sir T. Browne assigns to it the name of *Garrulus Argentoratensis*."

During the summer months the Roller is found in many parts of Spain, Italy, Germany, and Turkey, to the eastward of which country it proceeds as far as Affghanistan and Cashmere; but I have not yet seen specimens from India proper, though Mr. Jerdon states that it is now and then found in its north-western provinces.

"About the wooded hills that skirt the elevated plains of the Eastern Atlas," says Mr. Salvin, "the Roller may not unfrequently be met with. In these districts it breeds in the month of May, choosing for the position of its nest a hollow in a tree, and usually preferring one that has a side entrance. In this the eggs

are deposited, on no softer nest than the chips of dead wood at the bottom afford. The Arabs used frequently to catch the birds at their holes, and bring them, eggs and all, to us. Their local name is '*Shrugurug*,' derived from one of the cries of the bird, which it well expresses." In his notes on the ornithology of the same country, Mr. Tristram says, "Occasionally the Roller would rise screaming from a chestnut-tree, and after making grotesque gyrations in the air, like those of a Tumbler Pigeon, drop headlong into the forest and out of sight."

Lieut. Sperling states that, like the Hoopoe, it is a common bird round the shores of the Mediterranean; and after mentioning that he had seen it at Malta, adds that he observed it to be very abundant in Syria, and says, "In most accounts of the Roller's habits, it is stated to be a shy bird, frequenting woods and forests; my experiences of it are exactly the reverse. On the Plain of Sharon, where the distance between trees is measured by miles, I have seen Rollers in the greatest abundance, their beautiful green bodies bending the slender reeds of a swamp, apparently waiting for deluded frogs to make their appearance from the cool depths below. I could certainly have shot twenty in a day without exciting myself about them."

Mr. Wright states that at Malta it "appears annually in spring and autumn, sometimes in small flocks of five or six. It is common in April or May, a few lingering till June. An instance is recorded of a pair breeding in a ruined house in an unfrequented part of the country. It is often called the Jay, or Blue Jay, by English residents and visitors."

Lord Lilford informs us "that it arrives in Corfu in great numbers about the middle of April, but only remains for a few days. It breeds on the mainland. I found a nest in the walls of a ruined house at Delvino in May 1857. The birds had quite lost their timidity, and flew round my head chattering and screaming as I approached the nest, which I suspect was an old one of some other bird. I discovered another nest in June of the same year, in the banks of the Kataito River near the village of Mursyah. In this instance the nest was in a hole in the bank, and consisted of a few twigs carelessly put together."

Dr. Henglin mentions that it is "very numerous in October and November in the woody marshes on the Somali coast. Here locusts abounded, and many birds were feeding eagerly on them. Specimens were shot on the island of Deber in the Red Sea on the 29th of July."

In Savoy, where it is known by the names of Jay-Parakeet and African Jay, on account of the mixture of blue and green colouring in its plumage, and its being known to come from that country, it appears twice a year—in the spring from the commencement of April to the middle of May, and again from the end of August to the beginning of October, when it retires to its winter quarters: at this latter season young birds are mostly seen, and adults are very rare. It generally appears one at a time, which is the reason of its being regarded as a wild bird peculiar to Africa. In the spring it is occasionally met with in couples, and in the autumn in small bands. During its spring passage a few remain among the great trees and the willows which border the lakes, ponds, rivers, and marshes; here it perches among the branches; and if it descends to the ground, it is to visit the freshly tilled fields and meadows in search of worms, grasshoppers, crickets, snails, and small frogs. In the autumn it is more frequently found in the thick wood and the little-frequented sides of the lower mountains; it there feeds on larvæ, caterpillars, and various kinds of insects, pulpy fruits, and berries. Vieillot says, its cry is sonorous, and the specific name of *garrula*, assigned to it by Linnæus, indicates that it is a chatterer.

It will have been observed that by some persons this bird has been described as shy and distrustful, and by others of habits and disposition directly opposite; I suspect that where undisturbed the latter description applies, and the former is due to the persecution to which it has been subjected consequent upon man's desire to possess an object of so much beauty.

Like the members of the genus *Eurystomus*, it is noisy and garrulous, particularly during the breeding-season. Although a forest-loving bird, it evinces a preference for those trees which skirt open plains or great glades; here it perches on the high dead branches, and thence sallies forth to capture any passing insect.

The situations selected for nesting are very similar to those resorted to by the *Eurystomi*, namely hollows in the branches and boles of trees. Here it lays on the bare wood its three or four pure white-eggs, the shining character of which reminds us of those of the Kingfisher, to which group of birds the Roller is somewhat allied. They appear to vary in shape; for Mr. Wolley mentions that he has found them to differ in this respect even in the same nest.

The accompanying Plate, which furnishes an accurate illustration of an adult male, renders a detailed description of that sex unnecessary. The female, which is represented in the reduced figure, differs in being somewhat paler and in having a wash of grey over the chestnut-red of the back, but when old is very like the male; the young merely differ in being somewhat paler than the female.

Gould, John. 1873. "Roller, *Coracias garrula* [Pl. 11]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323826>.

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