POECILE PALUSTRIS.

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Marsh-Tit.

Parus palustris, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 98.

—— *atricapillus*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 1008.

—— *salicarius*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 465.

Pœcile palustris, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 114.

WHETHER it be or be not to the advancement of ornithological science that such minute differences as those which are observable in the Marsh- and Coal Tits should be indicated by a distinct generic appellation is very questionable; certain it is, however, that those birds are now considered to be generically distinct, the term *Pœcile* being assigned to the former, and that of *Parus* retained for the latter. In habits and general economy the two birds are very similar; but a remarkable difference occurs in the colouring of their young, immature birds of the Marsh-Tit and of all the other members of the genus *Pœcile* assuming from the first the appearance of the adult, while the cheeks of the youthful Tits of *Parus major*, *P. ater*, and *P. cæruleus* are strongly stained with yellow during the first month after they have left the nest, in lieu of the white seen in the adult. This remarkable difference may not have been generally noticed; but that it really occurs may be verified by any one willing to investigate the subject.

The members of the genus *Pœcile* have longer feathers and a much denser plumage than the true *Parus*, are less sprightly and active in their actions, and do not cling or hang so much to the ends of branches and leaves in search of insects: at least these are the differences which have been noticed between the Marsh- and Coal Tits of our island.

The Marsh-Tit is very generally dispersed over England and Ireland from north to south, but becomes more scarce as we proceed into Scotland, being rarely found between Edinburgh and the border, and altogether absent from some parts of the north. St. John states that it is found in the fir-woods of Morayshire in winter; Macgillivray was not aware that it had been met with further north than Fifeshire; and the Duke of Argyll writes to me, "I have never seen it in Argyll- or Dumbartonshire, whilst its closely allied congener, the Coal Tit, is very abundant. This is a curious case of restricted distribution, which it is difficult to connect with any special conditions of food or climate. In the neighbourhood of London the Coal and Marsh Tits seem equally common; nor have I observed that, in England, marsh-lands are at all peculiarly the habitat of the Marsh-Tit. I may add that I have never observed the Marsh-Tit in Scotland at all; but my opportunities of observation have been chiefly in the western counties. It is undoubtedly a rare bird in Scotland generally."

Several species of the genus *Pœcile* inhabit Europe, and others America. Most of them affect the northern portions of their respective continents; and hence it is that I am surprised to find that the Marsh-Tit is comparatively rare in Scotland. On the continent it is very generally dispersed, and is doubtless found as far north as Sweden and Norway, where it meets its close ally the *Pœcile borealis*.

There is no difference whatever in the colouring of the sexes, and they differ so little in size that dissection must be resorted to to distinguish one from the other.

The Marsh-, like the Coal Tit, inhabits all the great woods in the neighbourhood of the Thames and other parts of England; it also frequents coppices, hedge-rows, and swampy grounds; and I have not failed to observe that it affects the lower trees and shaws, while the Coal Tit resorts to the higher branches of tall beech trees in chalky districts, as well as those of flat alluvial land: not so, however, the Marsh-Tit; for although not excluded from such situations, it is less frequently found there.

In its nesting and in its general mode of nidification it also slightly differs from its frequent associate the Coal Tit, the nest being generally placed in a stub near the ground, or in a bank-side. It varies in size according to the nature of the situation in which it is placed, being sometimes as small as a cricket-ball, at others half the size of a man's hat. Rabbits' down is a favourite material, and I have seen nests composed almost entirely of it. One taken from a hole in a birch tree was compact, cup-shaped, smooth both externally and internally, and mainly composed of rabbits' hair, interwoven on the inner side with minute chips of dried grasses, and on the outer side with fine moss; another, taken at Formosa, in Berkshire, was a thick matted structure of moss and dogs' hair, the former predominating on the outside, and the hair inside. As an instance of the great care some birds take to prevent the detection of their nests, Mr. Bond tells me that he once observed a pair of Marsh-Tits, who were excavating a hole in an old tree as a place of deposit for their intended nest, carefully carry away the bits of wood in their beak one by one, fly over a neighbouring hedge, and there drop them—a trait in the bird's economy which is not generally known,

although it had been previously noticed by the celebrated Col. Montagu, who "had seen it excavating the decayed part of the willow, carrying the chips in its bill to some distance, always working downwards, making the bottom for the reception of the nest larger than the entrance, and the nest composed of moss and thistle-down, sometimes a little wool and lined with the down of the thistle."

The eggs, before being blown, have a delicate fleshy tinge, produced by the colouring of the yolk showing through the transparent shell, and are very finely marked with reddish-brown specks, which are thickest at the larger end; when blown, the ground-colour is opaque white.

The food of the Marsh-Tit consists of insects and their larvæ, to which small berries and fruits are added in due season; and it is said that it will peck at the flesh of a dead animal.

"A snowberry tree (*Symphoria racemosa*) in my garden," writes Mr. Stevenson, "is regularly stripped every year of its pretty white fruit by a pair of these birds, who stick their bills into the side of the berries and carry them off on their beaks to another tree, as a Hooded Crow makes off with an egg. The berry is then divided down the middle, the two little kidney-shaped seeds extracted, and the husk dropped to the ground. Until I observed the whole process myself on one occasion, I was quite at a loss to account for the diminution of berries on one tree and the collection of opened skins at the foot of another."

Its note is louder and stronger than that of the Coal-Tit. One of its notes appeared to me like "*chipper, chipper*;" Morris describes it as "*chee-chee, chee-chee*;" Macgillivray as "*chica-chica-chee*;" and Meyer as "*tzit, tzit, dea-dee*" and "*witgee*" uttered many times in succession.

Macgillivray's description of this bird is so accurate that I cannot, perhaps, do better than transcribe it here:—

"The Marsh-Tit is considerably larger than the Coal Tit, from which, although very similar in colour, it is readily distinguishable by the dull or brownish black colour of the head and the want of the white patch so conspicuous on the nape of that species. The bill is very similar to that of the last species. The tarsi are of moderate length, stout, with eight distinct scutella, the hind claw very strong, and the anterior toes much larger than those of the Coal Tit. The plumage is blended, very soft and tufty, the feathers much elongated on the hind part of the back. The wings are semiovate, convex, rounded, and of moderate length; the tail is rather long, slender, a little emarginate, as well as rounded, the feathers pointed.

"The bill is black; the iris dark brown; the feet and claws livid blue; the upper part of the head and the hind part of the neck are black, with a tinge of brown; the cheeks and sides of the neck greyish white; the back, scapulars, and upper tail-coverts greyish brown, with a tinge of green; the quills, their coverts, and the tail-feathers dark brownish grey, margined with yellowish grey, the secondary quills with yellowish brown, the outer tail-feathers having their outer webs paler. The throat and foreneck are greyish black, the feathers tipped with greyish white; the rest of the lower parts brownish white, with a tinge of yellow.

"The female differs from the male only in having the colours somewhat duller, especially the black tints, which are more tinged with brown."

The figures are of the natural size, on a branch of the Birch.

Gould, John. 1873. "Marsh Tit, *Poecile palustris* [Pl. 27]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323842>.

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