SAXICOLA CINERASCENS.

SAXICOLA CENANTHE.

Wheatear.

Motacilla cenanthe, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 93.

Sylvia cenanthe, Lath. Ind. Orn. vol. ii. p. 529.

Motacilla vitiflora, Pall. Zoogr. Ross.-Asiat., tom. i. p. 472.

Saxicola cenanthe, Bechst. Orn. Taschenb., tom. i. p. 217.

Vitiliflora cenanthe, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 21.

THE natural abodes of the present bird are open downs, warrens, commons, heaths, and moorlands; the more sterile and stony the better are they adapted to its wants. Neither is any situation too solitary for it; the most chaotic gorge, the rocky mountain tarn, the wildest moorland, where sheep cannot live and the Blue Hare can scarcely exist, are among the favourite places of its resort. If you ascend a glen in the Highlands from the sea-shore to its upper limits, the Wheatear is sure to be one of the few birds which greet you at every turn in the valley, and may be seen on every stony projection livelyly flitting its tail and showing the conspicuous patch of white on its rump as it flits bobbingly from stone to stone or rock to rock.

The Wheatear is a truly migratory species; for it quits the hot plains of Africa in the early spring and distributes itself during the months of summer over all suitable parts of Europe, our own islands, and Iceland, some few even proceeding still further north, as will be seen in the sequel. My son, Dr. Franklin Gould, who noted it on its spring passage at San Remo, writes under date of February 23, 1868, "the Wheatear has appeared to-day for the first time." It comes to England early in March, and any day in the latter end of that month it may be seen on the downs around Brighton, Beachy Head, and other parts of Sussex; and soon afterwards the more central parts of England, the Wolds of Yorkshire, the hills of Derbyshire, and every suitable locality from Cornwall to Cape Wrath are enlivened with its presence; some remain to breed and spend the summer here, while others proceed further north to more inhospitable and barren countries. One was observed by Captain James Ross, flying round his ship in Felix Harbour, 70° N., 91° 58' W., on the 2nd of May, 1830; and specimens were brought to me by the Arctic traveller Dr. Rae, to prove that the Wheatear really visits the northern parts of the American continent, in proceeding to which they had probably passed over the British Islands.

Summer having passed away, and the Wheatear reared its young and moulted into its winter garb, the whole gradually proceed southward preparatory to their flight across the ocean to Spain, and thence over the Mediterranean to Morocco and other parts of the African continent, where they winter among the desert plains of that hot country, and return again to us when the sun, in his daily progress towards the north, has prepared our islands for their reception.

During the autumnal migration of the Wheatear, when both old and young assemble on the Sussex downs prior to their departure, vast numbers are captured for the delectation of the wealthy epicure. From time immemorial, when Brighton was a mere fishing-village, and Hastings a mere hamlet, the Wheatear has been captured and sold for the purposes of the table. The bird, however, is now less plentiful than it was formerly, and the supply certainly does not keep pace with the demand; it is only a favoured few, therefore, who can now regale on autumnal Wheatears. On this head Yarrell says:—"The extensive downs between Eastbourne and Beachy Head are visited by the Wheatear from the end of July to the middle of September, by hundreds daily. Other portions of the downs along the southern coast have their share of these migrants; and as they are then fat and of good flavour, it is customary to dress them by dozens at the inns of the numerous watering-places on the Sussex coast. The birds are supplied in profusion by the shepherds, who form numerous traps for them in the turf of the downs over which their flocks and cattle graze. The trap is formed by cutting an oblong piece of turf from the surface, about eleven inches by eight, and six inches thick, taking it up in a solid mass, and laying it the contrary way both as to surface and direction over the hole, thus forming a hollow chamber beneath it. Besides this chamber two other openings are cut in the turf, about six inches wide, and of greater length, which lead into the chamber at opposite ends, that the bird may run in under the turf through either of them. A small straight stick, sharpened at both ends, not very unlike the old-fashioned brimstone-tipped match, but stouter, is fixed in an upright position a little on one side of the square chamber; this stick supports two open loops of twisted horse-hair placed vertically across the line of passage from either entrance to the opposite outlet; and the bird, attempting to run through, is almost certain to get his head into one of these loops and be caught by the neck; upon the least alarm, even the shadow of a passing cloud, the birds run beneath the clod and are taken.

"However inefficient this trap may appear to be, the success of the shepherds is great. It is recorded in

the Linnean Transactions that as many as eighty-four dozen have been caught by a shepherd in one day; and Pennant states that the numbers snared about Eastbourne amounted annually to about 1840 dozen. It is not unusual for a shepherd and his lad to look after from five to seven hundred of these traps. They are opened every year about St. James's Day, the 25th of July, and are all in operation by the 1st of August. The birds arrive by hundreds in daily succession (but not in flocks) for the next six or seven weeks, probably depending on the distance northward at which they have been reared. The season for catching is concluded about the end of the third week in September, after which very few birds are observed to pass."

Temminck says the Wheatear is found in Dalmatia and Morea; both the late Mr. Strickland and Mr. Keith Abbott found it in Persia; and we learn from Mr. Jerdon that it is found in India: he obtained a specimen near Mhow in the cold season; and it is known to have occurred in the upper provinces.

"In pursuit of flies," says Macgillivray, "the Wheatear performs a short excursion in the air, springing from an eminence or even from the plane ground. Its song is a short, lively, and pleasantly modulated warble, which it performs sometimes when perched on a rock, wall, or turf, but more frequently when hovering at a small height in the air, and often in the midst of its short flights, when pursued or disturbed."

The situation of the nest and the materials of which it is composed vary according to the nature of the locality. In the 'Journal of a Naturalist,' Mr. Knapp says:—"one had made her nest deep in the crevice of a stone-quarry, so carefully hidden by projecting fragments as not to be observed from without until part of the rock was removed; her fabric was large and rudely constructed of dried bents, shreds, feathers, and rubbish collected about the huts on the down, and contained four pale-blue eggs." According to the late Mr. Salmon, the Wheatear is very abundant on the warrens in Norfolk and Suffolk, and there usually selects a deserted rabbit-burrow, in which it places its nest at some little distance from the entrance; it is composed of dried roots, intermixed with feathers, rabbit's down, and other light substances.

The late Mr. Sweet informs us that the Wheatear is a very interesting bird for the aviary, as it is almost continually singing, that it will sing by night as well as by day if a light be kept in the room in which it is confined, and will continue to sing its "very pleasant and variable song all the winter. When a pair are kept in a large cage, it is very amusing to see them at play with each other, flying up and down, spreading open their long wings in a curious manner, dancing and singing all the time."

Dr. Saxby states that the Wheatear is so clever at imitating the notes of other birds that it would often require a practised ear indeed to discover the deception. He has often heard it imitate the notes of the Oystercatcher, Golden Plover, Rock-Pipit, Wren, and even part of the song of the Skylark.

That two very marked races of the Wheatear occur in this country, I have abundant evidence: examples of the same age and sex and killed at the same time are very similar in colour, but in size differ so much as to excite attention, and to lead to the belief that they are distinct species. I was at one time impressed with the idea that all the birds that passed along our eastern coasts early in March were of the larger race, and that those which frequent the western coast were of the smaller; but on the 9th of May 1866, Tart, the fisherman, of Dungeness, forwarded me two males and a female, which completely dissipated this notion; for one of the males was of the smaller, and the other of the larger kind; and never, in all my experience, have I met with so great a difference in size and weight of birds of the same species. The least of the two, which was fully adult, as shown by its grey back, white forehead, and its nearly white breast, measured in its total length $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches, from tip to tip of the outstretched wings $10\frac{1}{4}$, from the carpal joint to the tip $3\frac{1}{2}$, bill $1\frac{3}{8}$, tail $2\frac{1}{4}$, tarsi $1\frac{1}{4}$, weight 1oz.; while of the larger, which was suffused with brown on the upper surface, the total length was $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches, extent of outstretched wings $11\frac{3}{8}$, from carpal joint to tip 4, bill $1\frac{5}{8}$, tail $2\frac{1}{2}$, tarsi $1\frac{1}{4}$, weight $1\frac{3}{4}$ oz. Both exhibited new black feathers on the outer wing-coverts, near the shoulder, which contrasted strongly with the brown feathers of the remaining portion of the wing. The larger one had entirely new tail-feathers, which were black, with white tips; in this specimen also there was a smaller amount of white on the forehead, and the breast and under surface were deep buff; it was very fat, and appeared to be a bird of the preceding year. The female, which was of the larger race, weighed $1\frac{1}{2}$ oz., measured $11\frac{3}{8}$ inches from tip to tip of the outspread wings, from the carpal joint to the tip $3\frac{3}{4}$, bill $\frac{3}{4}$, tarsi $1\frac{1}{4}$, tail $2\frac{1}{4}$.

In spring the two sexes of the Wheatear differ very considerably in appearance; and the autumn young birds differ from both; it is a question, however, if they are not all very much alike in winter; when the spring arrives, a transformation in the dress of the male takes place, of so marked a character as to render him at that period a most beautiful bird.

The Plate represents two males and a female, of the natural size. The plant is the Spider-Orchis, *Ophrys aranifera*.

Gould, John. 1873. "Wheatear, Saxicola oenanthe [Pl. 45]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323859>.

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