



PRATINCOLA RUBETRA.



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## Whinchat.

*Motacilla rubetra*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 332.

*Sylvia rubetra*, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 525.

*Rubetra major* sive *rubicola*, Briss. Orn., tom. iii. p. 432, tab. 24. fig. 1.

*Saxicola rubetra*, Meyer, Taschenb. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 252 B.

*Ænanthe rubetra*, Vieill.

*Fruticicola rubetra*, Macgill. Hist. Brit. Birds, vol. ii. p. 273.

*Pratincola rubetra*, Koch, Bonap. Consp. Gen. Av., tom. i. p. 304, *Pratincola*, sp. 1.

*Praticola rubetra*, Parz. Cat. des Ois. d'Eur., No. 162.

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THE Whinchat is one of the prettiest of the British summer visitants, and its presence is accompanied by many pleasing associations. It is by no means the earliest of our migrants, for it seldom arrives before the middle of April or the beginning of May; the great flights do not, in fact, appear before vegetation has put on a luxuriant garb, when the fields have become spangled with buttercups, and the May is in blossom, when the Swift spins over the mead, and the Landrail sends forth its craking note. At this exuberant season, when all nature is stimulated by the daily nearer approach of the sun, the Whinchat is to be seen in its greatest perfection; for now it is most gaily attired, and gives utterance to its cheerful song while perched on the outermost spray of the hedge-row, or on the bent-down grass in the meadow; at this time, too, it rises perpendicularly in the air, and sings as it descends to the ground, when the constant movement of its tail and its sprightly manners indicate the group to which it belongs. The Whinchats, Redstarts, and Wheatears were formerly included in one genus; but they are really three distinct forms, to each of which a separate generic appellation is now assigned. In other countries there are many species of Wheatear besides our own, many Redstarts, and not less numerous *Pratincolæ*, all of which, combined with some other forms I need not enumerate here, constitute a well-defined family of birds (the Saxicolinæ) which is peculiar to the Old World, and almost exclusively to that portion of it lying north of the equator.

The Whinchat winters in Northern Africa and Persia, and is as universally spread in summer over all parts of the European continent, from the shores of the Mediterranean and Black Seas to Lapland and Northern Russia, as it is in the British Islands. Unlike the sedentary Stonechat, it is distributed far and wide over the whole of the three kingdoms, but is much more numerous in some parts than in others; for instance, it is less abundant in Cornwall than in the midland counties, and there are districts in Scotland where it is still more unfrequently seen. Wherever it may be, it feeds upon insects, which it captures, while in their winged state, with an alertness only excelled by the true Flycatchers; it is particularly diligent in its search for small Coleoptera and their larvæ.

Although arriving late in the season, the Whinchat is said to be double-brooded; and I think this more than probable, since I have observed that it remains here long after many of our sylvan birds have departed for their winter quarters. At this time it has left the grassy mead and the furze-clad common, and betaken itself to the fallow fields, where, like the clodhopping Wheatear, it springs over the surface with an air of sprightliness peculiar to the birds of this group. These autumnal birds are so differently attired from those we see in spring, that it has always appeared doubtful to me whether the Whinchat is not subject to a marked seasonal change. In all I have seen at this season, the rich orange-buff of the breast is entirely absent, while the white of the throat, sides of the neck, and the breast is dotted with minute well-defined specks of dark brown, and the feathers of the back are narrowly encircled with greyish white. It is just possible this may be characteristic of the second moult of yearling examples; but it is a very different dress from that which the young assume immediately after leaving the nest, an example of which was kindly placed at my disposal by Mr. Bond, and I have it now before me. This individual, which had the wings sufficiently developed to enable it to fly, has the crown of the head, the ear-coverts, and the upper surface generally striated with buff and dark brown, the throat and abdomen nearly pure buff-white; while the breast-feathers have no appearance of spots in their centres, and are edged with dark brown. If the Whinchat does not undergo a seasonal change in the full sense of the words, I think it probable the males do not acquire their finest livery until the second year. We have ample evidence that this is the case with the Black Redstart; and why should it not be so with the Whinchat? The fully adult female, although possessing the general features of the male, has all her colours less pure and less strongly contrasted.

"The Whinchat is not," says Mr. Hewitson, "so exclusively an inhabitant of furze-covered hedgeless districts as its name would imply; for in one of the rich grassy vales of Westmoreland, where I went to school, it was abundant, and the name of Grass-chat given to it was suited to the nature of the country round.



There they were so numerous, that, any evening we bent our bird-nesting rambles to the enclosures, we were usually successful in finding two or three nests. These were either placed in a tuft of grass in a rough pasture-field or amongst the thick grass of the meadows, which in May or June was long and fit for cutting. On the furzy common it places its nest, like that of the Stone-chat, at the foot of a furze or stunted thorn-bush, sometimes amongst heath, and at others, though rarely, in the centre of a piece of thick furze a few inches above the ground. The nest is composed outwardly of the stalks of plants and dry grass, with a small portion of moss, and is lined with finer grass. Like the nests of most birds that build upon the ground, it is very slightly woven together, and is not easily brought away whole. The eggs, which are almost invariably six in number, are usually described as of a spotless blue; but they are quite as frequently very finely dotted, and sometimes, though very rarely, distinctly spotted with rust-colour."

A very beautiful nest sent to me by Mr. Smither, of Churt, was composed exteriorly of lichens and moss, very firmly woven together, within which was a lining, fully an inch thick, of fine dried grass, which became gradually finer towards the interior. Two other nests from the same locality, though not so handsome as the above, were composed of the same materials, with the exception of the lichens.

Macgillivray says that the Whinchat is generally so shy and vigilant "that it is not easily shot, unless in the vicinity of its nest, from which it endeavours in various ways to decoy the intruder. If wounded, it hides among the bushes, and is very difficult to be traced. When the nest is approached, the Whinchats evince great anxiety, but at first keep at some distance, perched on the top twigs of the bushes, and at short intervals emit a mellow plaintive note, followed by several short ones resembling the ticking of a clock, or that produced by striking two pebbles together, and at the same time jerk out their tail and flap their wings. When the plaintive note alone is uttered, they do not move the body or wings, but for every two ticks there is a jerk of the tail, accompanied by a slight elevation of the wings. The notes may be represented by the syllables, *peep, tick, tick, tick, tick*. Sometimes a single tick only is emitted, frequently four or five, rarely six. If you go nearer the nest, they advance, redouble their cries, flit about from bush to bush, and sometimes hover in a fluttering manner at the height of a few feet."

From M. Bailly's 'Ornithologie de la Savoie' we learn that the Whinchat arrives in that country, and takes up its abode in the cultivated districts, about the 30th of March, that it ascends the mountains to the height of from 1400 to 2000 feet above the level of the sea, and that, at the season of pairing, it utters a lively little love-song from the top of a bush, or while rising and dropping through the air; its manners, in fact, are precisely similar to those of the individuals seen in this country.

The Plate represents a male, of the size of life, on a branch of the May (*Cratægus Oxyacantha*): and a reduced figure of a female in the distance.



Gould, John. 1873. "Whinchat, Saxicola rubetra [Pl. 46]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323860>.

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