PRATINCOLA RUBICOLA.

PRATINCOLA RUBICOLA.

Stone-chat or Furze-chat.

Motacilla rubicola, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 332.

——— *maura*, Pall., Bonap. Consp. Gen. Av., tom. i. p. 304, *Pratincola*, sp. 2.

Sylvia rubicola, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 523.

Saxicola rubicola, Temm. Man. d'Orn., 2nd edit. tom. ii. p. 246, and tom. iii. p. 168.

Pratincola rubicola, Koch, Bonap. Consp. Gen. Av., tom. i. p. 304, *Pratincola*, sp. 2.

Pratincola rubicola, Parz. Cat. des Ois. d'Eur., no. 163.

Cenanthe rubicola, Vieill.

Fruticicola rubicola, Macgill. Hist. Brit. Birds, vol. ii. p. 279.

GEOLOGISTS will tell us that certain physical features are perhaps more clearly defined in our little island than on the neighbouring continent; but a stranger landing in Sussex, and proceeding in a northern direction over the chalk-downs to Bedfordshire or one of the adjoining counties, would form a very unjust conception of the entire country unless he extended his journey to the districts of the coal-measures and the tertiary deposits. The ornithologist, however, from closely studying the habits and economy of our native birds, can at once infer the character of a district by the species he may receive from it; in all probability the entomologist could do the same, and the botanist also. The pretty little indigenous bird figured on the opposite Plate, which is commonly known as the Furze-chat, although generally dispersed over our island, from Cornwall to the Highlands, and in every part of the sister kingdom of Ireland, evinces a decided preference for localities of a certain marked character, perhaps more exclusively so than any other resident bird. These localities are always of a sterile and sandy nature, such as overtop the greensandstone formation and are favourable to the growth of the gorse—that plant to which Linnæus made his obeisance, if he did not kneel before it, so impressed was he with the beauty of its golden blossoms. It is on such land that this species abounds, and where its little body is carried by its short rounded wings from bush to bush and spray to spray when its precincts are invaded. Here, on the wild commons and heaths of our islands, the Stone-chat and the Donkey live side by side, with the Lapwing for their summer companion. The Stone-chat is one of the smallest and one of the hardest of our native birds; for it seldom leaves the bleak moorland, and even in winter may be seen, amidst the snow and frost, topping the highest bushes; and if compelled to resort to the hedgerow, it appears to be out of its element, and seldom removes far from its favourite common; indeed the tenacity with which it will cling to its usual haunt is remarkable. Long after the common has been brought under cultivation, it still lingers about the hedgerow, and resorts to the solitary furze-bush which may have been left at the corner of a field or by the roadside. The physical changes in the surface of the country effected by the progress of agriculture, however beneficial they may be to the farmer and the husbandman, must in the end lead to the extirpation of many of our native birds.

The Stone-chat may be described as a solitary species; for although several pairs may be found on a common of limited extent, two males are seldom seen together; if the females be not sitting on their nest, the mated birds may be observed facing each other on a neighbouring bush, or first one and then the other darting off to capture an insect, and returning to the identical sprays they had left. At times, particularly in spring, the male rises straight up in the air, and descends again with quivering wings, all the while pouring forth its feeble, pleasing ditty—an expression of joy very different from the *chat-chat* which it utters when under the influence of alarm from the presence of man, or excited by the sight of any other displeasing object. During these little paroxysms of anger it becomes very lively, tosses up its head, erects its little tail, and shakes its rounded wings after the manner of some of the other *Saxicolinæ*. “If you watch its motions, without alarming it,” says Macgillivray, “you observe that it flits about by short starts, with a direct flight, perches on a twig, jerks its body and tail, utters at intervals a sharp note resembling the syllable *snack*, now and then flies off in pursuit of an insect, creeps among the foliage, and sometimes hops along the ground, or takes its stand on a turf or other eminence.”

On the Continent, this bird, although possessing but limited powers of flight, is a migrant; but few remaining, according to M. Bailly, in Savoy, or even in Italy, during the winter; in some parts of Germany it is said to be scarce at all times; while in France and other adjacent countries it is very generally distributed in all dry and uncultivated districts, and there performs the same offices as with us. Two or three birds of the same form as the Stone-chat inhabit India, one of which was formerly considered identical; but this, as well as the bird from the Cape of Good Hope, which has also been supposed to be the same, are now known to be distinct.

The Stone-chat is an early breeder, and begins to construct its nest in the beginning of March ; consequently by midsummer the brood are strong fliers, and the old birds are occupied with a second hatching.

Mr. Weir informed Macgillivray that of all the nests of which he had been in pursuit, he found that of the Stone-chat "the most difficult to discover, as it is usually built in a collection of whins, and covered by them. The best way to find it is to watch the female when she comes off her eggs to take food. Even then, she will not go in until you retire to so great a distance that you will scarcely be able to observe her, she hops so quickly from bush to bush, and in a moment disappears. I have again and again beat the bush in which they had their nest before I could make them rise, so closely do they sometimes sit. The nest is composed of dry grass and moss, lined with hair and feathers, and sometimes with wool. The eggs are usually six in number, of a pale greenish blue, with small spots of reddish brown at the larger end. I have seen the brood, when they were very young, come out from under a bush to be fed by the old birds, and then immediately retire to their place of concealment."

"When the nest is approached," says Macgillivray, "the old birds evince much anxiety, flutter and flit about, incessantly emitting their sharp snapping note, and endeavouring to lead the intruder off in pursuit of them.

"In winter I have seen this species about the gardens and even the doors of cottages, apparently not much less familiar than the Robin. But this happens only in severe weather ; for at this season it generally continues in its summer haunts, or betakes itself to thickets and hedges. Its song is short, modulated, and not unpleasant, being very similar to that of the Whinchat, and frequently performed while the bird is hovering over a bush. It is seldom heard before the beginning of April, or after the middle of June."

A fine nest, sent to me by Mr. Smither from Churt, was mainly composed exteriorly of dried grass interwoven with moss ; the walls were thick, and the interior was neatly lined with horsehair, between which and the exterior was an interlining of fine dried grass-stalks : it contained five beautiful eggs, which are now in my collection.

The eggs seem to differ considerably in the intensity of the blue ground-colour, some being much deeper than others ; both, however, are finely freckled with light brown.

The food consists entirely of insects of various kinds, but principally of Coleoptera and their larvæ.

The sexes are at all seasons sufficiently different in colour to be readily distinguishable ; but a marked seasonal change takes place in spring and autumn, the male having those parts which are deep black in summer of a rusty brown in winter, the change apparently being effected by the loss, in summer, of the brown tips of the feathers, which before were so conspicuous, leaving the black bases more visible ; the rufous colour of the breast, too, is brighter, and the white on the wings purer.

Continental examples differ from those obtained in this country in being of a larger size, of a brighter colour, and in having a greater amount of white on the lower part of the back.

The Plate represents the two sexes, of the size of life, in summer plumage.

Gould, John. 1873. "Stone-chat or Furze-chat, *Pratincola rubicola* [Pl. 47]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323861>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/221554>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323861>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/323861>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries

Sponsored by

Biodiversity Heritage Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.