ERYTHACUS RUBECULA.

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Robin, or Redbreast.

- Motacilla rubecula*, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 95.
Sylvia rubecula, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 520.
Curruca rubecula, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 25.
Erithacus rubecula, Macgill. Hist. of Brit. Birds, vol. ii. p. 223.
Erythaca rubecula, Swains. Faun. Bor.-Am., vol. ii. p. 488.
Dandalus pinetorum et foliorum, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 360.
——— *septentrionalis*, Brehm, ib., p. 351, tab. 21. fig. 3.
——— *rubecula*, Boie, Isis, 1826, p. 972.
Ficedula rubecula, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 553.
Lusciola (Erythacus) rubecula, Keys. & Blas. Wirbelth. Eur., p. 58.
Lusciola rubecula, Schleg. Rev. Crit. des Ois. d'Eur., p. 32.
Rubecula rubecula, Brehm, Isis, 1828, p. 1280.
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Of all the birds inhabiting our islands the Robin is the one most universally known, and the one which receives protection from every hand. The villager in his garden regards its presence with favour, and the lady in her greenhouse likes to see it hop before her from flower-stem to flower-stem. Its name is a hallowed one in our memories, from the pleasing associations imprinted thereon by the nursery rhymes and tales of our infancy. "Who killed Cock Robin?" and the "Babes in the Wood" are never forgotten.

The universal acquaintance with the Robin is mainly due to its general distribution; for there is no bird that is more widely spread, or that frequents such varied situations. The garden, the shrubbery, the neatly mown lawn, the hedgerow, the green lane, the gully, and the centre of the most extensive wood are alike resorted to by this familiar bird. In each and all of these situations, he evinces no fear and no excitement at the approach of intruders; his curiosity is soon appeased; and if a picnic luncheon be spread, he hops from his twig for a crumb, or waits to take his turn of the spoils after the party has left. The presence of dogs gives him no uneasiness, and the strangeness of the scene excites but little surprise. Always alone, and always quiet (for the silkiness of his plumage renders his movements noiseless, and the rustling of his wings is never heard—any more than his tread on the earth, over which he bounds with amazing sprightliness), but little difference is seen in the manner of the bird in the wood from that of the one which, having become the familiar pet of the garden, has been allowed to enter the breakfast-room for his share of the meal, or has been fed in company with the Sparrow, on the snow in the midst of winter. Is it not, then, evident that in disposition, habits, and economy the Robin differs very considerably from other birds? Compare it for a moment with the gregarious Sparrow, or, if you will, with the Wheatear, the Whin-, or the Stone-Chat (birds to which it is more nearly allied), and it will be seen that they have scarcely one trait in common. The Robin has no associates, not even of its own kind, the company of the female not being tolerated except in the breeding-season. Every Robin has a limited area over which it reigns supreme, until a stronger one either kills or drives it away and takes its place; and its general conduct towards other birds is that of a tyrant rather than a friend. Pugnacity is indeed one of the remarkable features of its disposition. The Robin not only fights with its own species but tilts with the Sparrow and every other bird over which, by activity and daring, it can gain mastery. Even its own young are not allowed to live peaceably, but are beaten off as soon as they are able to shift for themselves, and compelled to begin the world on their own account.

The foregoing characteristics of the Robin are not, however, sufficient to account for its being so great a favourite. He is clearly not a courtier; for he is as much at home with the poor as with the rich, equally at ease on the settle where sits the old man of the village and in the verandah of a palace, and will receive contributions from the tenants of both without regard to rank or distinction. Not even his bright bold eye or his showy breast can claim so much admiration or call forth the many poetic effusions of which he is the theme. What, then, is it that renders the Robin so popular? It is the pleasing character of his song, and the charm which it gives to solitude at the fall of the leaf—a song which increases in sweetness and intensity as the day wanes toward the end of autumn; even in winter, if the weather be open, its clear and sharply terminated strain may be heard both in the morning and the evening. At the period of the year's decadence all other birds are mute; and hence, having no competitor, his voice attracts exclusive attention, and his strain, tinged with melancholy, harmonizes with the wintery scene around, and seems, as it were, to foreshadow the close that awaits us all.

The food of the Robin principally consists of insects, to which worms, caterpillars, and a fair share of

fruit, in due season, are added. As regards reproduction, the Robin may be said to have accomplished this duty once before the ordinary spring birds have arrived, and a second brood will be ready to compete with the young of the migrants by the time insect life has become most abundant. The situations chosen for the nest are very varied:—in the garden the ivied wall, the bank-side, an inverted flower-pot, any hole or corner in the greenhouse; in the wood the stub of a tree, or on the ground, the side of a ditch. No place appears to be too quiet or too turbulent and noisy. Dr. Percy informs me that a Robin has been known to fly through the flywheel of a copper-rolling mill, with six arms and going at the rate of 120 revolutions a minute; and Thompson mentions “that the noisy operations of the shipbuilder will not prevent the selection of a place for nidification in his immediate vicinity;” for he saw a nest built inside a vessel under repair in the dry dock at Belfast, which was placed in a small round hole of one of the timbers, and during its construction the deafening process of driving in the trenails was carried forward occasionally close to it. To reproduce here the hundreds of anecdotes which have been recorded respecting the tameness and the pugnacity of the Robin would be useless, but I may be excused for transcribing the following curious instances of the latter propensity from Thompson’s ‘Natural History of Ireland:’—

“Robins being so wholly absorbed during combat as to be regardless of all else was ludicrously evinced at Springvale by a pair fighting from the air downwards to the earth, until they disappeared in a man’s hat that happened to be lying on the ground, and in which they were both captured. Two caught fighting in a yard at Belfast were kept all night in separate cages. Early in the morning one was set at liberty, the other, being tamer, kept with the intention of being permanently retained. So unhappy, however, did the prisoner appear, that it was set at liberty in the yard, which was believed to be its chosen domicile. The other came a second time and attacked it, when my informant, who was present, hastened to the rescue, and the wilder bird flew away. The tamer one was again caught and brought into the house for safety. The intruder was now driven off the premises; and in the evening, when it was supposed that he was in a different locality, the other bird was turned out; its wicked and pertinacious antagonist, however, still lay in wait, a third time attacked, and killed it: the tamer bird, though the inferior of the other in strength, always ‘joined issue,’ and fought to the best of its poor ability. Some years ago, at Merville (co. Antrim), a Robin kept possession of the greenhouse, and killed every intruder of its own species (amounting to about two dozen) that entered it. This had been so frequently done, that an examination of two or three of the victims was made, to ascertain the cause of death; and a deep wound was found in the neck of each, evidently made by the bill of the slayer. The lady of the house hearing of the bird’s cruelty, had the sharp point of its beak cut off; and no more of its brethren were slaughtered; but it did not long survive this slight mutilation.”

As an evidence that the Robin can appreciate kindness and evince gratitude, I may cite the following anecdote communicated to me by Mrs. William Fowler, of Whittington Hall:—“In the winter of 1862 a Robin was brought to me with a broken pinion; I bathed the injured limb with warm water for several days, and in about a month it was so far recovered as to be able to fly about the room. During this time it would hop about, and eat from my hand, jump from the table to my lap, or, if on the ground, settle on the skirt of my dress and sing. It commenced singing on the third day, apparently in joy and gratitude for the attention it received, and ultimately became completely domesticated.”

Besides being very generally dispersed over the British Islands to the outer Hebrides, Orkney, and Shetland, the Robin is abundant in all parts of Europe, from Sweden and Norway to the shores of the Mediterranean; it is also found in all the islands of that sea, the whole of North Africa, as far east as Smyrna and Erzerum, Madeira, the Azores, and Teneriffe—in which island I killed it in 1838, and the specimen I then obtained still graces my collection. In many parts of the continent it is a migrant, and, contrary to what obtains with us, is there treated as a vagrant; for there is scarcely a country across the water in which it is not shot down and eaten.

The materials of which the nest is composed vary according to the situation in which it is placed; but moss and hair always form a part. The eggs, which are four or five in number, are dull pinky white, blotched with pale reddish brown; they are about nine lines and a half long and seven and a half broad.

Some persons are of opinion that there is a great difference in the colouring of the male and female; such, however, is not the case. The young, at their first moult, which takes place about a month after they are able to fly, throw off the speckled plumage of immaturity, and assume the colouring common to both sexes.

A minute description of the Robin is quite unnecessary, since a glance at the accompanying Plate will surely be sufficient for the recognition of the male, the female, and the young, which are there represented of the natural size. The principal plant is the common Ivy, *Hedera Helix*, Linn.

Gould, John. 1873. "Robin or Redbreast, *Erythacus rubecula* [Pl. 48]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323862>.

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