RUTICILLA TITHYS.

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Black Redstart.

Sylvia Tithys, Scop. Ann. Hist. Nat., tom. i. p. 157.

Motacilla tithys, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 335.

——— *Phœnicurus*, var. *δ*, *Gibraltariensis*, et *atrata*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. pp. 987, 988.

Ruticilla Tithys, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 365.

——— *Cairii*, Gerbe.

Phœnicura Tethys, Jard. and Selby, Ill. Orn., vol. i. pl. 86. figs. 1 & 2.

THAT there are exceptions to all rules, applies to natural history as well as to other things, and we have an instance in point in the present species; for, whereas its ally, the Common Redstart, comes to us in spring for the purpose of spending the summer, the Black Redstart arrives in autumn, and takes its departure when the winter is over. Had it been a species which breeds in high northern latitudes, like the Bramble Finch and the Greater Redpole, its appearance in autumn would not elicit a remark, neither would its occurrence have caused so much thought to British ornithologists. The Bramble Finch and the Redpole are hard-billed birds, and mainly live on seeds; the Black Redstart, on the other hand, feeds exclusively on insects; and hence we might naturally suppose that, in common with all insectivorous migrants, it would cross the Mediterranean in autumn, and the greater number do really proceed in that direction; but a partial migration westward also takes place, and seldom do the months of October and November recur without this bird appearing in one or other of the southern and western counties, particularly those of Sussex, Devonshire, and Cornwall. That it proceeds still further west, and crosses the Irish Channel, is certain; for it is occasionally found in many parts of Ireland at the same season. It there also arrives with the fall of the leaf, and departs when the trees are putting forth their spring foliage. In the counties above mentioned, we may one day walk along the rocky coasts or among the cavernous sand-hills of their bays without seeing a single example, while if we pursue the same track twenty-four hours after, one, two, or three may be observed sitting solitarily on a stone, or flitting before us to a hiding-place in the cleft of the rock, where it will remain for a short time, or, if there be an opening, pass out on the opposite side. Sometimes an old cock may be seen in the black dress, but females and young males are ten times more frequently met with. That the specific name of *Cairii* is merely a synonym there can be no doubt; for it is certain that the numerous skins which we receive from the Continent, with that name attached, are young males of this species. I do not for a moment doubt that these young males pair with the opposite sex, and perform every function necessary for reproduction; but, in all probability, the black livery is not assumed until the bird is two or three years old.

As the bird breeds in Belgium, the north of France, and the whole of southern Germany, we might readily believe that it would perform the same duty in the British Islands; but I have never heard of an authentic instance of its so doing.

Although the habits and economy of the *Ruticilla Tithys* are very similar to those of the Redstart, still they differ in certain points. They are less arboreal than those of that bird, and present a striking resemblance to the habits of the more typical *Saxicolinæ*—Wheatears, &c. The Black Redstart evinces a greater partiality for stony and rocky places; and although I have seen it nesting in the outhouse of a German garden, the nest is more frequently placed in a crevice of a stone wall or in the cleft of a rock. Its eggs are white. In this respect it also differs from its ally, as well as from the Wheatear; for the eggs of the latter bird are not so blue as those of the Redstart and many others of the *Saxicolinæ*: the sexes, when fully adult, present the same difference that is seen in the Redstart; but the females of the two species are very similar.

I believe I was the first to notice this species as a British bird, since I find no record of it as such prior to the instance of its occurrence communicated by me in 1829 to the 'Zoological Journal,' and published in the fifth volume of that work. The example there noticed had been killed by F. Bond, Esq., a gentleman who has spent a long life in closely studying the works of nature, particularly the birds of this country, and than whom no one can be more courteous, more willing to impart the knowledge he has acquired for the advancement of science, or whose remarks may be more implicitly relied on. Another friend—Mr. John Gatcombe, of Plymouth—has also paid great attention to our native birds; I shall therefore append some remarks on this species with which he has favoured me.

"The Black Redstart is a regular winter visitor to the coasts of Devon and Cornwall, arriving generally the first week in November, and leaving at the end of March or the beginning of April. On two occasions only have I observed them so early as the 29th of October. They frequent the cliffs and rocks along the

coast above high-water mark ; and quarries, ramparts of fortresses, railway-cuttings, and garden-walls in the vicinity of the sea are also attractive to them. They may also be seen hopping about the grass on the top of the cliffs ; and you will sometimes find them in churchyards, flitting about on the tombstones, and making short excursions into the air after insects, much in the manner of the Flycatchers. They are also very partial to the vicinity of stone arches and caverns, where they will immediately hide when pursued, and remain concealed for a length of time. They will sometimes perch on bushes. During the first week of their arrival in the neighbourhood of Plymouth these birds are, in some seasons, rather plentiful, but after that time disperse, though some remain ; and I find that a favourite locality is seldom without its Blackstart during the winter, and, should one be killed, another soon takes its place. I have never seen the bird in summer, but meet with it throughout the winter, from November to April. I often find it during severe frost and snow in the middle of winter, fresh birds from time to time making their appearance among the rocks of the sea-shore, driven, no doubt, from places further inland by the inclemency of the weather, and which is also the case just before they leave our coasts in spring. On November 2nd, 1853, after a severe gale, I saw one of these birds near the village of North Petherton in Somersetshire, not many miles from the Bristol Channel. This species appears very liable to be caught in traps ; for I have, on several occasions, obtained them with their tails clipped, apparently with a pair of scissors ; and in one instance I shot one with its tail cut short, and a piece of red worsted tied round its leg. At the time of their migration they have been known to alight on board ships in the Channel. The majority of Blackstarts which visit us are young birds of the year, old males being very scarce and shy. In many of their actions these birds resemble both the Robin and Wheatears. Indeed, they appear to take the place of the latter birds on our coasts during the winter, and leave, just as they arrive, in spring. I have seen both species at the same time in March, on one or two occasions. In plumage this species varies considerably, but I have no doubt that the old male never loses the black plumage after having once attained it ; and the only difference I have observed between the winter and spring plumage of the old male is this :—in November the plumage is long, and more or less tipped with brown and grey ; but towards April these tips become abraded or worn off, leaving the black plumage underneath much more clear and distinct, which is likewise the case with the plumage of many of our small birds in spring. I feel certain that the Blackstart is some years in attaining its full plumage, and that consequently young birds in their plain grey dress may often be found breeding on the Continent ; and which circumstance has given rise to the supposition among continental ornithologists that there are two species of this bird. Young males, with partially black breasts, have seldom any sign of the white patch on the wing ; but on one occasion I met with a specimen in its plain grey plumage, without a sign of black on the breast, but with the white on the wing as strong as in the old black male. This I cannot account for, as the black almost invariably appears before the white. Young males of the year may be distinguished by their tails being of a brighter red, and the whole plumage of a clearer grey, with less of the brown shade so observable in the females. The stomachs of all I have examined contained the remains of flies and beetles ; but in the gullet of one I found an entire and large specimen of *Ligia oceanica*, an animal found creeping on the rocks, and much resembling an immense woodlouse."

Independently of the temperate and southern parts of Europe, this species ranges over the greater portion of North Africa. I believe it never visits India, its place there being supplied by several allied species.

The Baron de Sélvs-Longchamps states, in his 'Faune Belge,' that the Black Redstart arrives in Belgium from the 20th to the 25th of March, and that it inhabits the large towns on the banks of the Meuse and Ourthe. It nests in the holes of walls and crevices of rocks ; each couple selecting a hill or an edifice, whence they drive away all others of their species. The male, perched up on the summit of a church, upon a chimney, or top of a rock, pours out day and night its monotonous chant. It is common at Liège, Namur, and Brussels ; and migrates in October.

According to M. Bailly, the nest is composed exteriorly of the fallen leaves of trees, moss, roots, straw, and small pieces of wool or cotton bound together, lined with hair, feathers, and grasses. The eggs are from four to six in number, of a pure and shining white.

The Plate represents a male and female, of the size of life, with a nest and eggs in a cleft of rock.

Gould, John. 1873. "Black Redstart, *Ruticilla tithys* [Pl. 52]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323866>.

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