Aëdon Galactodes.

Rufous Sedge-Warbler.

Turdus arundinaceus, var. $\beta$, Lath. Ind. Orn., tom. i. p. 335.


rubiginosus, Temm., ib. vol. iii. p. 129.


Aëdon galactades, Boie, Isis. 1826, p. 972.


Thus a very attractive species has at least been killed twice in England, and is therefore entitled to a place in our avifauna. The southern and eastern portions of Europe, North Africa, Asia Minor, and Persia are its natural home, in some of which countries it is as common as and well known to their birds'nesting boys as the Nightingale and the Reed-Wren are to those of our own country. Its general colouring, like that of Curcurus and some other eastern birds, is very similar to the sandy districts in which it dwells; just as the Pternagan in winter assimilates to the snow with which it is surrounded; but the Aëdon galactodes can at pleasure render itself conspicuous by spreading out and exhibiting the contrasted markings of its tail, which it often does, perhaps to a greater extent than any other species of the Sylvicae. The markings of birds, often hidden when not in action, are of great interest to the ornithologist; since observation has shown him that such adornments are not given without a purpose, and that their owner has the power of exhibiting them to the greatest advantage, whether it be the train of the stately Peacock, the decorated tails of the Polypterus and the Turkey, or the fan-shaped tail of the present bird. It is said by those who have seen the present bird alive, that a more attractive little creature can scarcely be found—its actions, as might be inferred from its form, being sprightly and graceful as it flits from hillock to hillock with its tail at one moment erect, and at the next spread out to its fullest extent.

A record of the first specimen known to have been killed in our island will be found in the 'Zoologist' for 1854, p. 4411, where Mr. William Borrer, Jun., says:—"As G. Swaysland, a bird-stuffer, of Brighton, was driving near a part of the South Downs, about six miles from that town, known as Plumpton Boshill, on the 16th of September, he noticed a bird which he supposed to be a cream-coloured variety of the Nightingale. Having no gun, he proceeded about four miles to obtain one, and returning to the spot found the bird about twenty yards from where he first observed it. It was very wary, flying always to the further side of some furze-bushes, mounting into the air some fifteen yards, and settling on the side furthest from him. Swaysland describes its flight as resembling that of the young of the Red-backed Shrike. He at last got a shot, at about forty yards, and killed it. On dissection it proved to be a male, and would shortly have moulted, one or two young primaries having made their appearance; they were darker-coloured than the old ones. The feathers also on the back and tail, especially the central ones of the latter, are much worn." Mr. Borrer borrowed the bird and sent it to Mr. Yarrell; and it is from this specimen that the figure in the second Supplement of the 'British Birds' was taken. It is now in the possession of Fuller Maitland, Esq.

The occurrence of the second English example is thus recorded by Mr. G. R. Gray in the 'Annals and Magazine of Natural History,' vol. iv, 3rd ser., 1850, p. 399:—

"A second specimen of the Rufous Sedge Warbler (Aëdon galactodes) was killed near Start Point, South Devonshire, on the 25th of September last. It was shot by William D. Llewelyn, Esq., by whom it has been presented to the British Museum. That gentleman observed that its flight much resembled that of a Lark, and that it was exceedingly thin. Its visit was probably occasioned by the strong southerly wind which had prevailed for several days."

According to Temminck, it was first obtained at Gibraltar, by M. Natterer, a distinguished traveller and naturalist attached to the Imperial Museum of Vienna, who subsequently secured other examples at Algiers. Latham (who, in his 'General History of Birds,' calls it Gibraltar Warbler, from the place of its first detection) says it arrives there "the last week in April, is a familiar bird, void of fear, perching on the tops of shrubs, hedges, and walls in the manner of the Redstart."

Mr. O. Salvin, in his "Five Months Bird's-nesting in the Eastern Atlas" ('The Ibis,' 1859), says:—
"The head quarters of the Rufous Sedge Warbler seem situated in the Salt-Lake districts, where we found it abundantly through the months of May and June. It does not appear that marshy ground is an indispensable requisite to its haunts; for I observed it not unfrequently in the arid district of Gueul el Tharf. In the map this lake looks like a magnificent sheet of water, but in reality what most of the places similarly laid down are, viz. a wide expanse of sand covered with saline incrustation, which only in peculiarly wet seasons is flooded with water. Near Ain Djendeli I frequently noticed the bird about the trees that overhang the dry stony watercourses running from the hills into the plain beneath. We never found a nest, however, in one of the above-mentioned places; and it would seem the bird prefers a moister soil for its breeding-haunts, such as is afforded by the low lands near Lake Djendeli, where the Tamarisk-trees grow on the banks of the Chesnora and the small Ain or spring. The nest was usually placed conspicuously in the fork or on a branch of one of these trees, and apparently without any attempt at concealment. The heights at which it was placed varied from one to six feet from the ground. In one instance I found a nest among the roots of a tree in a bank-side, in a place where one would have expected in England to have found the nest of a Robin. The materials employed are the dead shoots of the Tamarisk, which form the outside, the inside and lining being usually Coot's or Duck's feathers, mingled with wool or camel's hair; and in nine cases out of ten a small piece of serpent's skin is loosely placed in the bottom of the nest; the eggs, which vary from three to five in number, are laid about the third week in May. I may here remark that they are not to be distinguished from those of Anthus rufescens, a bird equally or perhaps more common in the same districts of the Atlas; so that eggs ascribed to this species from that country, without undeniable proof that they are what they profess to be, can only be received with great doubt, and are, in fact, valueless to a collection. Among the Arabs of Djendeli this bird is known as 'El Hamara' (the Red Bird). In its habits it is shy, and is careful to elude observation. When it slights on a twig, it expands its tail, and shows the peculiar markings which terminate each feather, and while holding it thus extended raises it once or twice.

The most conspicuous and attractive of all the Warblers of Palestine," says Mr. Tristram, in "The Ibis" for 1867, "is Aedon galactodes; and it is perhaps the most abundant in summer; but it returns very late. On the 14th of April it appeared in great numbers, and overspread every part of the country, wet or dry, where there were bushes or reeds. The return was simultaneous; and from that time its bright chestnut plumage, with its black-and-white-tipped tail expanded like a fan, enlivened every thicket and thornbush. In no way whatever does it resemble the Marsh-Warbler in action or note. Its song is low, soft, and mellifluous. The bird is constantly seen, and, instead of skulking in thickets, hops here and there, perching on the topmost bough of a bush or on the stem of a tall cane, expanding and jerking its tail like a Wren. It is curious that a bird which remains all the winter in the Sahara should be so late a migrant in the warm regions of the Holy Land. The nest of Aedon is very easy to find; for the tamarisk is its favourite tree, and it piles its large nest in a low fork. As in Algeria, so here we found the serpent's skin an invariable ingredient in the lining of the nest, and the green lizards our provoking rivals in egg-collecting. The Palestine eggs are much more delicately and sparsely spotted than those of Africa, and, arranged together with them, would at first sight be pronounced to be distinct. Lindermayer gives April the 27th as the date of the bird's return to Greece. I found it breeding in case-blooms, by the shores of the Dead Sea, the last day of April, and in June on Lebanon, at a height of 7000 feet."

Lord Lilford twice met with this species in the Ionian Islands, once in Corfu, on which occasion a friend of his killed a fine specimen; and a few weeks afterwards at Katai, in Epirus, where he watched a pair for some time, but refrained from shooting them. He observed them to be "common in some parts of Spain, notably in Andalucia, in May, 1869; frequents the hedges of prickly pear, vineyards, &c. Has a habit of constantly lifting and spreading its tail, from which it derives its Andalucian name 'Almannaho,' i.e. tail-lifter."

The Rufous Sedge-Warbler is said to be a very frequent visitor to Portugal. In Malta, according to Mr. Wright, it is rare and does not occur annually; when it does occur, it is mostly seen in September. Lastly, my friend Mr. J. Clarke Hawkshaw met with this species at the upper Cataracts of the Nile, whence he brought some fine specimens, now before me.

There is but little difference in the size and colouring of the sexes; but the female appears to be the smallest of the two, and to have the markings of the tail less strongly defined.

The figures are of the natural size. The plant is the Cichorium intybus.

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