CURRUC ATRICAPILLA.

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Blackcap.

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

——— *moschita*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 970.

Curruca atricapilla, Briss. Orn., tom. iii. p. 380.

Sylvia atricapilla, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 508.

Monachus atricapillus, Kaup.

Curruca Heineken, Jardine, Edinb. Journ., 1830, i. p. 243.

As a songster, the Nightingale must ever rank first among the sylvan birds of Great Britain, and next to it the Blackcap, whose richly modulated and melodious notes salute the ear of every one who visits the woodland parts of the country at the commencement of spring, at which time the bird arrives from the warmer parts of Europe or direct from Africa. In all probability, those individuals which make our island their summer home have wintered in Morocco, while those which have been absent from Central Europe during the cold season, it is almost as certain, have spent the winter further east, in Algeria. Instances are on record of examples having been seen long after other migrants have left us, and it is no unusual occurrence for one or other sex to be met with in the depth of winter, which induces me to believe that the bird is more hardy than most of its sylviine congeners. Dr. Heineken states that it inhabits Madeira; and I may add that during my visit to Malta, in February 1854, I observed it to be numerous among the olive- and caroba-trees of the gardens and rocky gulleys of that island. It will be seen that I have placed Sir William Jardine's *Curruca Heineken* (the "Tinto negro de capello" of the Madeirans) among the synonyms of this bird, in deference to the general opinion that the darker-coloured individuals thus designated are merely examples of the present species in some abnormal state of plumage.

To particularize the parts of the British Islands frequented by the Blackcap would be of little interest; instead of so doing, I may briefly state that it is very generally distributed over the southern and western counties, and becomes gradually more and more scarce as we proceed northwards; consequently it is far less numerous in Scotland than in England. The Duke of Argyll informs me that it is found at Inverary, but not at Balmoral; on the other hand, Mr. Osborne, of Wick, states that he has obtained it in Caithness, as will be seen by the following extract from his obliging note to me on the subject:—"With all diffidence, I think the fact of a male and a female Blackcap having been obtained in Caithness in the month of October is worthy of your notice. They were shot by me on the 16th and 28th of the above month, 1861; and on the 8th of November 1862 I saw a female feeding on the same tree from which I shot the others: I did not molest her, and I do hope she will again visit the far north." Under the date of May the 11th, 1852, the late Mr. St. John records, in his 'Natural History and Sport in Moray,' "We heard a bird singing in the garden, whose note was new to me; on watching, we found it was a Blackcap—a very rare bird so far in the north: I have only on one other occasion ascertained the presence of the bird."

I have mentioned that the Blackcap is occasionally met with in the depth of winter, in confirmation of which I may cite the following passage from Mr. Rodd's 'List of British Birds as a guide to the Ornithology of Cornwall:—"The Blackcap is sometimes found in the winter months sparingly, in the neighbourhood of Penzance. It has been observed in ivy against walls—the most favourable locality for insects, spiders, &c." In a letter addressed to me by Mr. Isaac Illsey, dated Daylingworth, near Cirencester, February 28th, he says, "A summer bird of passage appearing at this season is, I think, a somewhat unusual occurrence; this afternoon, however, I observed a bird catching flies in a sheltered place near the garden, which, to my surprise, turned out to be a hen Blackcap. It was evidently much exhausted, and with some little trouble I contrived to catch it. It was as sleek and trim in every respect as any I had seen in the summer. I placed it in a basket, covered with a net, in the greenhouse; and it soon became sufficiently reconciled to eat freely of privet-berries, which I observed it was doing before capturing it."

In Ireland the Blackcap is less numerous than with us, but it is everywhere sufficiently abundant to be considered a common bird. On the continent of Europe, it proceeds far towards the north: Magnus von Wright enumerates it among the birds of Finland; and, according to Nilsson, it also visits Lapland. Temminck states that it is found in Japan; but I have never seen any evidence that such is the case, neither is it, I believe, an inhabitant of India or China. The area over which it extends is nevertheless very great; for, besides being abundant in all parts of Europe, it is generally distributed over Africa northward of the equator. Like all other birds, the Blackcap has its favourite places of resort—plantations of moderate growth, thickets, and shrubberies: here its merry note often indicates its presence, while, from its shy and secluded

habits and the sombre style of its colouring, it is rarely visible. It is far more restless than the Nightingale, and is constantly engaged in flying and leaping among the thickest foliage of the shrubs and the leafy tops of the highest trees. The female is even more shy than her mate; and as she is generally mute, her rusty bonnet is seldom brought into view. The situation of the nest is somewhat varied; sometimes it is placed near the ground, in a small shrub interlaced with tall weeds, at others high up among the branches of trees, and not unfrequently among the Portugal laurels of the pleasure-ground. A nest taken from a tree of this kind, at the Holt, Preston Hall, Kent, on the 25th of April 1858, was a slight, round, cup-shaped structure of dried grasses, with a little moss on the exterior, and lined with exceedingly fine hair-like fibrous roots, and a few long hairs coiled round with them. The eggs were four in number, of a dull stone-white, obscurely blotched all over with umber-brown, and here and there a still darker irregular-shaped spot, and in some instances a zone of this colour near the larger end. Another nest, taken in Berkshire, May 12, 1859, was outwardly composed of fine dried grasses, thinly lined with extremely fine hair-like roots, and was so loosely put together that it might be seen through. The eggs, like those above described, were four in number, of a pale reddish stone-colour blotched with olive-brown, particularly at the larger end, where these marks formed a zone.

From the charms of its voice and its pleasing contour, few birds are more desirable for the cage than the Blackcap; and hence attempts are yearly made to render it docile, to accustom it to its artificial home, and to acclimatize it to the heated atmosphere of our rooms. When these are carried out successfully and the bird has performed its regular moult, I do not know of any sylviine species that is more interesting. That some, if not all, of these ends may be accomplished I know to be the case; for, in the month of December 1864, a pet Blackcap was shown to me by one of the daughters of Lady Mildred Beresford Hope, which was in every way entitled to admiration, being tame and docile in disposition, clean and silky in its dress, and, moreover, in the best of health. Miss Catherine Hope had evidently great love for her little charge, and it was equally evident that the feeling was reciprocated by the bird. Descanting on the value of the Blackcap as a cage-bird, the Hon. and Rev. W. Herbert has recorded some interesting details of its management in captivity, in his notes to White's 'Natural History of Selborne,' one or two of which are here transcribed:—

"This is certainly by far the most desirable of all birds for the cage, and there is none that can be more easily kept. Their general food is bruised hemp-seed and bread, with some fresh, lean, raw meat mixed up with it; they do not even refuse a bit of fat and a little yolk of egg; occasionally a few insects may be given, particularly if the birds appear not well, now and then a fly, a green or brown caterpillar from a cabbage, or a spider; they care very little for insects, if they have plenty of fruit and other changes of food, although, like other birds of this tribe, they are particularly fond of the larvæ in the wasp- and hornet-combs. The Blackcaps are very vivacious in a cage, if well taken care of. They are very fond of a boiled carrot mashed and moistened, or beet-root boiled and mashed. A boiled carrot will keep fresh for many days in a basin of cold water, and is an excellent substitute for fruit in feeding them. Boiled cabbage, cauliflower, and green peas are good for them, as well as all sorts of puddings. The standard food is hemp-seed ground in a coffee-mill, and bread-crumbs scalded and mashed up together and fresh every day. They are very fond of ripe pears, elder-berries, currants, cherries, honeysuckle, and privet-berries.

"What makes the Blackcap most desirable is that it is more hardy than any other species except the Whitethroat, which is also a delightful bird. The Blackcap sings almost the whole of the year, if kept in good health, only stopping a few weeks while moulting; and even then I have known it to break out into song. If bred up from the nest, it may be taught any tune, or the song of one or more sorts of birds."

Gilbert White says, "its common note is full, sweet, deep, loud, and wild; but that strain is of short continuance, owing to the bird's desultory motions; when, however, it sits calmly and engages in song in earnest, it pours forth a very sweet but inward melody, accompanied by a great variety of soft and gentle modulations, superior, perhaps, to those of any other of our warblers, the Nightingale excepted."

The chief food of this bird in a state of nature is insects and their larvæ; when these are not attainable, it feeds on berries, particularly those of the privet, elder, and ivy. It also readily attacks the ripening fruit of the garden, such as currants, cherries, and figs; but whatever harm it does in this way is amply compensated by the good it effects in destroying the far more damaging insects.

The sexes offer a marked difference in the colouring of their crowns, that of the male being of a raven-black, as is also its bead-like eye, while that of the female is russet brown. In the young of the year of both sexes, I believe, a brown cap prevails, and that the black colouring is not assumed by the males until the second moult.

The figures represent the two sexes, of the natural size, on a flowering branch of the Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*).

Gould, John. 1873. "Blackcap, *Curruca atricapilla* [Pl. 60]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323874>.

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