CERTHIA FAMILIARIS, Linn.

J. Gould & H. C. Richter del. a. lith.

Walter. Imp.

CERTHIA FAMILIARIS, Linn.

Tree-Creeper.

Certhia familiaris, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 38.

——— *scandulacæ*, Pall. Zoogr. Ross.-Asiat., tom. i. p. 432.

——— *macrodactyla*, *septentrionalis*, *brachydactyla*, et *megarhynchos*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 208, 210, 211, pl. 15. fig. 5.

THERE are few persons, I presume, who have given a passing thought to the many interesting objects which surround them during their walks through the woods and shrubberies of our islands, that have not often noticed a little, creeping, mouse-like bird traversing the boles and horizontal branches of the larger trees, the palings of an enclosure, or (among other places) the upright sides of an old wall; this is the Common Creeper, *Certhia familiaris*, a bird known to every country-boy in the British Islands from north to south, and which is almost as numerous in Sutherland- and Rosshire as in Middlesex, Dorset and Cornwall, Wales and Ireland. It is generally solitary, or at most in pairs, but is sometimes seen in company with Gold Crests and Tits—the latter frequenting the branches, while the admirably adapted structure of the Creeper enables it to seek its spider and coleopterous food among the corrugated interstices of the boles and larger limbs.

One of the great difficulties I experience in writing a history of our native birds is to find something to say respecting them that has not been previously written; but the subject is a hackneyed one, and every detail relative to their habits, manners, and actions has been fully recorded by one or other of my contemporaries, leaving little or nothing that is new to be said; it has been my practice, therefore, to select those passages from such authors as MacGillivray, Yarrell, Selby, Thompson, and others, upon which I could not improve, and to give additional information as to the area over which the particular species may range, its alliance to other members of its genus, and the countries they inhabit, believing that I am better able to do so than either, or all, of the worthy authors above mentioned, from the circumstance of my having studied ornithology in a more extended sense. I shall now, then, give a brief enumeration of the known species of the genus *Certhia* and the countries in which they are found, and particularize the area over which our own species is said to range. America is tenanted by two birds of this form—the *C. Americana* of Bonaparte, inhabiting the Eastern portion of North America, and the *C. Mexicana* of Gloger, frequenting the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific and Mexico,—both of which are very nearly allied to *C. familiaris*. India, or rather that portion of it which includes the southern slopes of the great Himalayan range, is inhabited by four species, namely, our own *C. familiaris*, *C. Himalayana*, *C. Nipalensis*, and *C. discolor*. If the *C. Nattereri* of Bonaparte, vel *C. Costæ* of Bailly, of the lower alpine region of Europe, should prove to be identical with *C. familiaris*, as I believe it to be, then the range of the latter species will be wide indeed; for it will extend throughout Europe from Quickiock, in Lapland, to the shores of the Mediterranean; over the province of Algeria, according to Loche; Western India, as evidenced by a specimen killed therein by Captain Stackhouse Pinwill; Amoor-land, as recorded by Schrenck; and Japan, whence the younger Mr. Whitely brought a beautiful specimen, killed at Hakodadi, and which is now in my collection. I have, in fact, at this moment before me examples which I believe to be true *Certhiæ familiares*, from Hampstead, in Britain, from the neighbourhood of Paris, from Western India, and from Japan, whence to draw my conclusions.

The following truthful and elegant account of the Creeper is extracted from the work of the departed MacGillivray, and is here given to render it more familiar to some of my readers.

“If, early in December, you should fall in with a flock of *Reguli* and *Pari* scouring a wood, you may be pretty well assured that a few Tree-Creepers will be found at no great distance. There, clinging to the rough bark at the base of that old elm, you see one advancing upwards by short jerks. At each movement it emits a shrill but feeble cry. See how it climbs, searching every crevice, now proceeding directly upwards, now winding round the trunk, presently passing behind it, and in a short time appearing on the other side. Observe it well and you will see that it crouches close to the surface, presses its tail against it, now and then picks something from a cleft, jerks itself forwards, never rests for a moment, but seems in the utmost haste, and expresses its anxiety by continually emitting its lisping cry. Yet its efforts are not laborious; it seems to hold on with perfect ease and unconcern, and, although it is now halfway up, it exhibits no sign of fatigue. There it passes off from the trunk, creeps along a nearly horizontal branch, winding round it, adhering even to its lower surface, with its back towards the ground. Having gone as far as it finds convenient, it flies back to the trunk, which it ascends, until you lose sight of it among the twigs

at the top. What next? will it creep down again? No; there it comes with headlong flight, glancing like an arrow, curves as it comes near the ground, alights at the very root of the next tree, and commences its ascent. You may watch it for an hour and you will find it as fresh, as lively, and as keen as ever. Should it happen to observe you, it will run up the back of the tree, appearing now and then on the sides, until it is perhaps halfway up, when it will search all parts alike, being free from the apprehension of injury. But now, hearing its friends the Tits and *Reguli* at a distance, it looks abroad for a moment from the top of the tree, and, uttering a few cries, sweeps away in a curving, somewhat undulatory course. Such is the ordinary action of the Creeper; and I have seldom observed one a single minute at rest. Yet, like other birds, it has its periods of cessation from labour; and in the breeding-season it is amusing to observe the gambols of a pair chasing each other along the trunk of a tree, perching for a moment on the branches, and then succumbing away, all the while emitting their shrill and feeble notes. These birds are easily shot; for they seem to pay little attention to a person approaching them, insomuch that I have been within six feet of one, which yet did not fly off, but merely crept round to the other side of the tree. I suppose that it is destitute of song, never having heard it emit modulated sounds. Its flight is generally short and rapid, from the top of one tree to the base of another; but it may sometimes be seen traversing a space of several hundred yards, with a quick and undulating motion, and at a considerable elevation.

"It is a permanent resident, occurs in all parts of the country, but is nowhere numerous, and never appears in flocks. In winter it shifts about from place to place, generally accompanying a flock of Tits or Kinglets, but sometimes seeking for its food solitarily, seldom entering small gardens, but often appearing in woods near houses, hedgerows, or even on large single trees. It pairs in April, and about the beginning of May commences the construction of its nest, which it places in a hole in a tree or rock, or among the roots in a mossy bank. It is composed of withered stalks and blades of grasses, moss, fibrous roots, and other materials, and is lined with feathers. The eggs, from five to seven or eight in number, are seven and a half twelfths of an inch in length, five twelfths in breadth, of a regular ovate form, glossy white, sprinkled with dots and small patches of brownish red, often disposed in a broad belt at the larger end, and leaving the narrower half unspotted. Montague states that 'during the time of incubation, the female is fed by the other sex, whenever she quits her nest in search of food.' The young are abroad by the middle of June, and I have reason to think that a second brood is frequently reared."

Probably there is no bird which selects a greater variety of sites for its nest, the side of a gate-post, the space beneath the tiles of a roofed shed, an interstice in the plaster of a wall, among the timbers in a wood-yard, or an old stack of hop-poles in a field, being all resorted to. I have many notes among my MSS. describing the different nests that have come under my notice; these are far too numerous for them all to be given here; but I select two or three of the more interesting examples.

A nest taken from under some tiles at Maidenhead was a ragged conglomeration of dried grasses, moss, leaves, and sawdusty cobwebs; the interior much neater, and lined with fine hair and grasses.

Another, from a fir-stack at Churt, near Farnham, presented a singularly beautiful yet strange appearance: it looked as if the bird had commenced by constructing a bristling platform of rough twigs with their ends all pointing outwards in different directions, after the manner of a "chevaux de frise;" the true nest, which was composed of coarse grasses, gradually becoming finer toward the interior, and lined with a few soft feathers and moss, was neatly placed in a slight depression in the midst of this platform, from which it was so distinct that one might fancy the bird had constructed the nest separately, and then placed it upon the platform. In it were five beautiful eggs, which were like, but very much smaller than those of the Willow Wren; their colour was pinky white, dotted all over with clear orange-red spots, but particularly at the larger end, where they formed a broken zone.

Mr. Smither, of Churt, informs me that if the nest be disturbed, the bird will remove the eggs; he has noticed that this has been done upon five different occasions, when he had taken some of the eggs from situations where he knew no one but himself could have been.

In justification of the epithet "mouse-like" I have applied to this species, I may mention that Professor Owen informs me that, while walking in his beautiful garden in Richmond Park, his son exclaimed "Why! a mouse has just run between the bark and stem of that Acacia." "Let's see," said the Professor, "what it means;" when out popped the little Creeper, and solved the mystery; and on examination its nest was found snugly ensconced in the crevice.

The sexes differ but little in size or in colour; but I have observed that very old birds when fresh moulted are more silvery in all their whiter parts than younger ones.

The Plate, which will give a better notion of the colouring of this bird than the most lengthy description, represents the two sexes and a brood of young, of the natural size. The Lichen is the *Usnea florida* of Linnæus.

Gould, John. 1873. "Tree-Creeper, *Certhia familiaris* [Pl. 64]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323878>.

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