PHYLLOPNEUSTE RUFÆ.

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Chiff-chaff.

Curruca rufa, Briss. Orn., tom. iii. p. 387.

Motacilla rufa, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 955.

Sylvia rufa, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 516.

—— *loquax*, Herbert, Notes to White's Nat. Hist. of Selborne, Bennett's edit. p. 81.

—— *hippolais*, Penn. Brit. Zool., vol. i. p. 508.

Motacilla hippolais, Mont. Orn. Dict.

Trochilus minor, Bew. Brit. Birds, vol. i. p. 268.

Regulus hippolais, Flem. Brit. Anim., p. 72.

Phyllopneuste rufa, Bonap. Consp. Gen. Av., tom. i. p. 289, *Phyllopneuste*, sp. 4.

Phylloscopus rufus, Blyth, Cat. of Birds in Mus. Asiat. Soc. Calcutta, p. 185.

To ordinary observers the Chiff-chaff, the Willow-Wren, and the Wood-Wren would all appear to be one and the same species; on a close examination, however, it will soon be found that they are quite distinct. The three birds not only frequent the same woods, but often even the same tree. Being desirous of obtaining examples of each for a scientific purpose, I, in May 1859, took advantage of this circumstance, and shot a male of each species on the branches of a single oak in the short space of fifteen minutes. They were all in full song; and I had not the slightest difficulty in distinguishing them. One of the objects I had in view in obtaining these birds was to determine their relative weights and measurements, which will be found at the end of this paper.

In colour the three birds bear a very general resemblance,—two of them especially. The distinguishing characters of the Chiff-chaff are its smaller size, the darker hue of its plumage, and the almost black colour of its legs; that of the Willow-Wren is the light fleshy-brown tint of its tarsi; and those of the Wood-Wren, its silvery-white abdomen, the bright-yellow hue of the eye-streak and the margins of the primaries, and its more lengthened wings. The song of the three birds is strikingly different; the “chilp-chilp” of the Chiff-chaff having no resemblance to the soft, plaintive note of the Willow-Wren, or to the reeling, sibilous “trit” of the Wood-Wren.

When on the trees, the movements of the Chiff-chaff and Willow-Wren are very similar: both keep to the small leafy branches, displaying great activity, examining every bud for larvæ, and prying beneath every leaf for Aphides and even still more minute insects, for obtaining which their bills and delicate structure are admirably suited: the Wood-Wren, on the other hand, although equally, if not still more active, spends much of its time taking insects in the air, or while clinging with tremulous wings to the extremities of the branches in the more shady parts of the woods. In the materials with which the nests of the three species are constructed, as well as in the situations in which they are placed, and in the markings and colouring of their eggs, some slight diversity also occurs, as will be seen on reference to the descriptions given with each species. Here then we have three birds so closely allied that, as I have before stated, no ordinary observer would distinguish one from the other, even though skins of all three were placed before him; yet they never interbreed with each other. If such alliances were to occur among birds in a state of nature, the constancy of species would be infringed, an endless mass of confusion would arise, and ornithology would no longer be a science.

One of the situations near London where these three birds may always be seen and heard during the summer months is the richly foliaged woods at Taplow, Cliveden, and Hedsor, and the underlying Garden of Formosa on the opposite bank of this very beautiful part of the Thames.

I shall now confine myself more particularly to the history of the Chiff-chaff, and may commence by saying that if there be any one of our spring or summer birds which, in small numbers, spends the winter in the more western and milder parts of England, it is this species. Indeed, I have been informed by E. Hearle Rodd, Esq., and Mr. Vingoe of Penzance that it is very frequently seen in Cornwall at that season, and that some few remain there during most winters; this, however, is quite an exception to the general rule, for the Chiff-chaff as regularly proceeds from our country to Spain and Africa as any other of our migrants. The time of its arrival in the midland counties of England differs from that of the Willow- and the Wood-Wren, for it precedes both by two or three weeks, and the well-known call of a solitary individual may frequently be heard as early as the middle of March; and from that time to the middle of April we have a constant accession of visitors, until the bird is generally, but not universally, dispersed over the British Islands. I say, not universally, because it is but rarely met with in Scotland. In Norway and Sweden it

certainly does not go so far north as the *P. trochilus*; but I both heard and shot a single individual near the celebrated waterfall at Drontheim. This, however, is the furthest point in that direction at which, so far as I am aware, it has ever been met with. On the continent of Europe it is very generally spread over all the southern and central countries, but it is nowhere so plentiful as the *P. trochilus*. It is more local than that species, and never ascends to so great an elevation on the mountains. With us it affects woods, coppices, gardens, and thick hedge-rows, the tops of the highest trees as well as those of the lowest growth being equally frequented by it. In its manners it is very tame and fearless, admitting of the nearest approach without evincing any signs of alarm. If the situation of its nest be intruded upon, it becomes restless, and continues to flit to and fro from branch to branch, thereby often betraying that which it is desirous to conceal. Besides its ordinary bi-toned note of *chilp-chilp* or *cheep-cheep*, likened by some to the syllables *chiff-chaff* (whence its trivial name), it utters a mournful, piping call whenever it is disturbed or alarmed. This alarm-call is also uttered by the Wood-Wren, and, I believe, by its still nearer ally the Willow-Wren.

The situation of the nest of the Chiff-chaff is more varied than those of its immediate congeners; it is also much more perfect in its structure, being both well and neatly built. It is of a domed form, very similar to that of the common Wren (*Troglodytes Europæus*), but with a larger opening near the top: sometimes it is placed on the ground, among thick herbage and grasses; at others, in a tuft of grass on the sunny side of a shelving bank; and occasionally among the thick branches of furze, bramble, and other bushes. I found a very beautiful one in a tuft of grass near the bridge in Mitcham Grove. The exterior of this nest was composed of leaves, thin shreds of bark, and grasses; next to this was a series of finer grasses, then a layer of cow-hairs and feathers, and lastly an inner lining of the breast-feathers and hackles of the domestic fowl; the whole forming a very warm receptacle for the seven eggs contained within. Two nests found on the 9th of May, 1859, in Cliveden Woods, were placed, one in a tuft of grass, the other in a bramble-bush one foot from the ground; both were dome-shaped, and built of grasses and leaves, and lined with feathers. There were six eggs in one nest, and two in the other. The eggs are of a delicate pinky flesh-colour, sparingly dotted with purplish brown; when blown, the flesh-tint, which appears to be due to the colour of the yolk showing through the almost transparent shell, disappears, the ground-colour becomes an opaque milky white, and the spots, of course, darker and more conspicuous.

Another nest, taken at Formosa on the Thames, May 14, 1860, had a rough outside covering of coarse dry grass, next to which was a series of fine straws compactly interwoven, and within this an inner lining of hair, moss, and a few feathers. It was built in a laurel-bush overhanging the water. The eggs were five in number, and, like those above described, were finer, both as regards the delicacy of colour and the sharpness of the outline of the spots, than those of the Willow-Wren (*Phyllopneuste trochilus*). About twelve days are occupied in the duty of incubation; and at least two broods are reared during the bird's summer sojourn in this country, which commences in April, and terminates in August, when, with the other little warblers, it departs for Africa,—the adults probably going at one time, and their progeny at another; for we may readily suppose that they remain to the last, in order to gain strength and vigour for the arduous journey they have to perform: and how wonderful is the power granted to these frail and recently helpless little birds of migrating to so great a distance, and of effecting a successful passage over our usually tempestuous seas!

The sexes are alike in plumage; and the young closely resemble the adults in colour before they leave us for their winter quarters; still their plumage is more suffused with yellow.

Head, all the upper surface, and wing-coverts dark olive-brown, becoming paler or more yellow on the lower part of the back and upper tail-coverts; primaries brown, edged with olive; tail brown; under surface dull or brownish white, suffused with yellow; under wing-coverts pale sulphur-yellow; over the eye an obscure yellowish stripe; irides very dark brown; upper mandible dark olive; under mandible fleshy; legs blackish brown; soles of the feet yellow; claws black.

Willow-Wren:—weight 160 grains; total length $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches; wing $2\frac{1}{8}$; tail $2\frac{1}{8}$; tarsi $\frac{3}{4}$.

Chiff-chaff:—weight 124 grains; total length $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches; wing $2\frac{7}{8}$; tail $2\frac{1}{4}$; tarsi $\frac{3}{4}$.

Wood-Wren:—weight 160 grains; total length $4\frac{7}{8}$ inches; wing $2\frac{1}{8}$; tail $2\frac{1}{4}$; tarsi $\frac{1}{4}$.

The Plate represents the two sexes of the natural size, on a branch of the *Ulmus major*, as it appears in the month of April.

Gould, John. 1873. "Chiff-chaff, *Phyllopneuste rufa* [Pl. 66]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323880>.

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