CALAMOHERPE PALUSTRIS.

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Marsh Warbler.

Sylvia palustris, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iii. p. 639, tab. 26.

Calamoherbe palustris, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 552.

— *pulstris*, Saville in Zool. 1861, p. 7755.

Calamodyta palustris, G. R. Gray, Cat. of Brit. Birds in Coll. Brit. Mus., p. 45.

Salicaria palustris, Keys. et Blas. Wirbelth. Eur.

I NEVER took up my pen to write on any ornithological subject with a fuller sense of the difficulty with which it was surrounded than in the present instance, inasmuch as it is questionable to me whether the Marsh and the Reed Warblers are, or are not, one and the same species, and, if the latter, whether they both frequent this country in summer. I certainly should not have entered upon this matter in the present work, had I not been desirous of complying with the wishes of some of its supporters, by giving figures of both the birds to which the names *Calamoherbe palustris* and *C. arundinacea* have been applied. I will now endeavour to point out the slight differences which have presented themselves to my notice when examining the skins forwarded for my inspection, or shown to me by many friends interested therein. In size the two birds are nearly the same, and they differ little in colour; but the *C. palustris* is of a lighter or more sandy brown, both on its upper and under surface, than *C. arundinacea*; its bill is also a trifle shorter, its tail somewhat more square, and its legs light fleshy brown instead of lead-colour; the primaries are found to be variable in their length, and consequently are considered to be of little value in determining the identity or distinctness of the two birds. Far greater differences have been observed among birds of many other genera, which have nevertheless been regarded as constituting only one species; yet Mr. Bond, Mr. Howard Saunders, Mr. Harting, and Dr. Bree, are all in favour of the *C. palustris* being distinct from *C. arundinacea*. Mr. Harting, one of our most active ornithologists, says, in the 'Field' of May 6, 1871, "Before another summer has passed away, I am anxious to direct the attention of naturalists to the occasional, probably annual, occurrence in England of the Marsh Warbler. From its general resemblance to the Reed Warbler it has no doubt been overlooked; but when its distinguishing characters have been duly noted, it will in all probability be found to be a regular summer migrant to this country. The characters by which it may be distinguished are briefly as follows:—

"Although the colour of the upper portion of the plumage in the Reed and Marsh Warblers is a uniform olive-brown, the latter is yellower, is a somewhat longer bird, has a shorter and broader bill, and a buffy white line extending from the base of the bill over the eye is clearly defined. The readiest means of distinguishing the two birds at a glance will be by the colour of the legs and toes. In living or freshly killed birds the tarsi and feet of the Reed Warbler are slaty-brown, while those of the Marsh Warbler are flesh-colour. In dried skins the former turns to hair-brown, the latter to yellowish brown. The tarsi of the latter, moreover, are rather longer and stouter than those of its congener.

"It would be extremely satisfactory to establish the fact of the regular migration to this country in spring of the Marsh Warbler; and it is to be hoped that ornithologists in all parts of the kingdom will not omit to investigate the subject and record their observations."

Mr. Robert Mitford has for more than three years endeavoured to convince me that the Marsh Warbler breeds annually in his garden at Hampstead, making its nest in lilac trees far from water; but I am sure that the birds he has observed are examples of *C. arundinacea*, which has a similar habit of breeding among those trees, as may be seen, at the proper season, among a hundred other places, in both the high and low grounds of Taplow, in Buckinghamshire, where I have had opportunities of observing the bird during the last forty years, and where I expect it will give me a cheerful greeting on my next visit to that agreeable part of the country.

Dr. Bree states that the Marsh Warbler "has a wide range in Europe, being found in Russia, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, and France."

Count Mühle says, "the Marsh Warbler is a very neat, merry bird, quick in all its movements, and as active in skipping through the bushes as in flight. Bold and enterprising, it becomes arrogant and tyrannical in its combats with other birds dwelling around it. It seems never to repose; and hardly does the eye catch it than its voice is heard perhaps a hundred paces further off. Of all the Reed Warblers it has the most beautiful and varied song, enlivening an otherwise dull and monotonous part of the country. It is a master of imitation, and knows well how to blend, in a delightful whole, the different songs of the

surrounding birds. In warm summer it sings all night through, and so charmingly in the stillness of the time and scene that we are tempted to compare it with the Nightingale. Its call-note is similar to that of other Reed Warblers, but is not often heard. Its nest is never placed over water, nor even over marshy ground, but is found in shrubs and bushes from one to three feet above the ground; the inside is deep like that of other Reed Warblers' nests, and formed of delicate grass blades, straws, nettle fibres, and spiders' webs, lined with very fine straws and a quantity of horsehair. It lays four or five eggs, which are bluish white, sparingly spotted with delicate grey dots and olive-brown and ash-grey spots."

Brehm, in Bäder's work on European eggs, remarks that "the nest has a loose substructure, and is by this and its half-globular form, suspended on dry ground between the branches of the bushes or nettles, easily distinguished from the strongly formed nest of *C. arundinacea*, which is, moreover, built over water. The ground-colour of the eggs too is clear and very different from the muddy tint of those of the Reed Warbler."

Bailly, after mentioning that the *Calamoherpe palustris* is nearly as abundant in Savoy as *C. arundinacea*, says:—"During their stay with us they frequent thickets bordering swamps and pieces of water, small willows, and clumps of poplars, together with fields of hemp, maize, and rye, in the neighbourhood. I have frequently met with it in the more humid parts of the Alps, notably at Mont Cenis, at the base of Rivers and upon the wooded borders of the lakes which dominate it (1900 or 2000 metres above the sea-level); it is also met with in all similar situations in most of the alpestral regions of the Tarantaise. It arrives in Savoy about the middle of April, and may be found in the meadows, vineyards, &c. till the 10th of October. The male is a great chatterer, from the month of May till towards the 20th of July, in the plains and in the Alps; during the month of August he scarcely ceases to warble during the morning and evening. While thus engaged he may sometimes be seen at the end of a branch or on the top of a plant, but is more often concealed in the thickest of the bushes, occasionally in the centre, at the base, or in a tuft of leaves. His song is very variable, and he readily imitates the voices of other birds; he mimics sometimes the notes of *Calamoherpe arundinacea* so well that he might be mistaken for it, some phrases of the *Phyllopneuste polyglotta*, the call-cry of the *Porzana maruetta* during the breeding-season, that of *Lanius minor* and *Enneoctonus collaris*; and in the Alps he tries to counterfeit those of *Plectrophanes nivalis*, of *Accentor alpinus*, and *Saxicola ananthe*. In the plains it begins to build its nest in the middle or end of May, and in the Alps in June. It is of a spherical form, and is generally placed in the midst of a thick bush or small shrub near the ground, or among the roots of willows and poplars near water, sometimes in tufts of grass in damp situations; it is externally composed of fine straw, stems of dried grass, and fibrous roots, lined with horse- and other hairs and fine grasses, or the down of the *Tussilago* thistles, or the cotton of the willows, according to situation. The eggs are five or six in number, of a light grey or ash-colour, with spots of greenish brown mingled with others of an ashy blue or ash-colour a trifle deeper than the ground-colour. The Marsh Warbler feeds on caterpillars, small winged insects, also larvæ and worms. At the end of summer it becomes very fat, acquires a particular flavour, and is excellent eating."

Mr. Howard Saunders shot one of a pair which evidently intended to nest in the marshy bottoms of the Tagus, near Aranjuez, in May 1870; and he informs me that the *light flesh-colour* of the legs was very noticeable; the note was also different from that of the Reed Warbler, which likewise occurs and breeds in Spain. The Rev. H. B. Tristram noticed it among other Warblers in Palestine.

After what has been said respecting the slight difference between this species and its near ally, a minute description would be superfluous. I have given the correct colouring of its legs on the opposite Plate; but inadvertently the legs of *C. arundinacea* have been represented much lighter than they really are, in some of the copies issued to my subscribers; but this defect may be easily remedied by the addition of a wash of a dark tint over the tarsi and toes till they accord with the description in the letterpress; if there be any difficulty in the matter I shall be happy to make the correction in any copies sent to me for the purpose. Dr. Bree describes the legs of *C. palustris* as light; but in his figure of the bird they are represented as of a darker hue even than those of our Reed Warbler.

The figures are of the natural size. The plant is the Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum Salicaria*).

Gould, John. 1873. "Marsh-Warbler, Calamoherbe palustris [Pl. 74]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323888>.

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