ANTHUS PRATENSIS.

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Meadow-Pipit, or Titlark.

Alauda pratensis, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 287.

—— *campestris*, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 495.

Anthus pratensis, Bechst. Naturg. Deutsch., tom. iii. p. 732, tab. 36. fig. 2.

Alauda sepiaria, Brehm.

Anthus sepiarius, Vieill.

Leimoniptera pratensis, Kaup.

THE Titlark is distinguished by four very opposite features—the plainness of its plumage, its general dispersion, the tameness of its disposition, and by the circumstance of its being preeminently the foster-parent of the Cuckoo. As to its distribution, it is so general that it may be said to be everywhere, but more particularly in those parts which have a tendency to humidity—the salt flats of the sea-shore, the watery meadows of our inland valleys and undrained lands, the highland glens, and the crowns of mountains, from the Peak of Derbyshire to the Grampians. The maid who gathers a handful of cowslips in our sunny meads, and the tourist who breasts the wind, sleet, and rain on the top of Snowdon, equally flush this little bird from under their feet, and whenever this occurs it merely flits off to the distance of a few yards, utters its short *peep-peep*, and pitches again into the grass. When my thoughts are directed to the Cuckoo and its mysterious ways, I feel that I know little more respecting it than that it is a parasite, and depends upon other birds for the rearing of its progeny. But how strange is it that it should select so frail a creature as the Meadow-Pipit in preference to most other birds for this purpose. What a task it must be for this little insect-eater to supply the demands and rear the young of so large a bird as the Cuckoo, which is twenty times its own weight, and with a mouth sufficiently large to engulf the head and body of the bird which brings it food! yet so it is.

In point of structure this delicately formed species is allied to the Yellow Wagtails (genus *Budytes*). Like them, it runs nimbly over the grass and among the clods of earth; like them, also, it makes a similar movement with the tail; on the other hand, in the colouring and the character of its plumage, it offers an alliance to the true Larks. In its mode of nesting and in the colouring of its eggs it may be said to be intermediate between the two.

To say that the Titlark has no song would be untrue, at the same time it is only an apology when compared with that of the Skylark. Its mode of rising and singing in the air in the exuberance of its feelings during the pairing and breeding-season is also a very feeble representation of the actions of that bird. “The song of the male,” says Macgillivray, “is composed of a series of sharp modulated notes, which it utters on wing, first ascending silently, or emitting its usual cheep, to the height of about twenty yards, and then descending with expanded wings and tail. Sometimes also it sings when perched on a stone or crag. Its song may be heard from the middle of April to the end of July.”

The Titlark is a constant resident with us; and although I have spoken of its frequenting the summits of our highest mountains, it is only in open weather that it is found in such situations; for, unlike the Ptarmigan, which burrows in the snow when those elevated regions are covered with the white fleece, the Titlark must then descend to the running springs and rills of the mountain-side, or change its residence to the low lands, or even to the sea-shore; and if the weather be unusually severe, to a more distant part, where, the temperature being higher, it can still find food. It soon returns, however, to the drear heathery land; for there, in the company of the Grouse and the Plover, it is more at home.

The sexes are so much alike that it is impossible to say offhand which is a male and which is a female of any two birds that may have been shot. Fresh-moulted specimens are brighter, and have a yellower tinge of green than those whose feathers have been carried for a long time; still there is little difference observable among specimens procured at any season. The long, straight, and finely-formed hind claw indicates that the ground is the Titlark's natural province; and accordingly it is seldom seen to perch, except on the top of a stone or the wall of a dyke.

The distribution of the Titlark over other countries is considerable. It is a common bird in Iceland, and is stated to have occurred in Greenland. Its range extends to the extreme limit of northern Europe; and Mr. Wolley states that it is as common in some parts of Lapland as in England. In all countries lying southward, as far as Algeria, it is as frequently to be met with as in the British Islands. It also doubtless occurs in Eastern Asia; but I question whether it is ever found in India, and I fear I must have misled Mr. Yarrell when I stated that I had seen specimens from thence. Temminck includes it

in his 'Catalogue of the Birds of Japan;' but the Japanese bird is now recognized as distinct, and called *A. japonicus*.

Macgillivray states that "during the breeding-season the male is easily alarmed, and flutters over an intruder, emitting its shrill notes; but while incubating, the female will allow a person to walk close to her without rising; and when she does fly off, it is with a cowering fluttering motion, with the tail expanded, as if she were under the influence of disease or extreme terror." The following interesting account of another of the artifices employed by this bird for the protection of its eggs, has been kindly transmitted to me by Edward Romilly, Esq., of Porth Kerry, Glamorganshire:—

"The following circumstance, which I observed in the spring of 1858, would tend to show that birds are endowed with something more than instinct. A Meadow-Pipit had built her nest on a sloping bank of grass, a few yards from a path which was at the bottom. On my passing near the nest, the mother left it, and, after the fashion of her race, ran limping along the ground, as if wounded, and looking at me with an anxious and imploring expression, to attract apparently my attention to her and save her nest, which had five little brown eggs in it. The next morning the same scene was repeated; but on the third, as I passed by to look at my feathered friend, I found to my surprise two withered oak leaves placed upright on the edge of the nest, which more effectually concealed it from the path, and the mother quietly sitting behind her simple but ingeniously constructed fan in apparent security. Whether she trusted to her new defence, or had learnt to know me better, I cannot say; but we looked at each other for some seconds with mutual confidence, and I left her to her maternal cares."

To this I may append the following instance related by the late William Thompson, Esq. "Mr. J. R. Garrett has frequently found the nest of the Meadow Pipit on the banks of watercourses and drains, as well as on the level ground in fields. One which was known to him at the side of a drain, was discovered by some bird-nesting boys, who pulled the grass away that concealed it. On visiting the nest the next day, he observed a quantity of withered grass laid regularly across; having removed the grass, which, from its contrast in colour with the surrounding herbage, was supposed to have been placed there as a mark by the boys, the bird flew off. The grass was found similarly placed on the following day; and he perceived a small aperture beneath it, by which the bird took its departure, thus indicating that the screen which harmonized so ill with the surrounding verdure, had been brought there by the bird itself."

The nest is usually placed in a slight depression of the ground, often beside a tuft of grass, the better to escape notice, and is composed of various grasses, with a finer lining of the same material and a few hairs. A nest brought to me by Mr. Smither, of Churt, was externally formed of reindeer- and other mosses with an interior lining of fine grasses. The eggs are from four to six in number, 9 lines long by 7 lines broad, and of a reddish brown mottled all over with darker brown.

The birdcatchers of the neighbourhood of London affirm that this species performs a partial migration in spring and autumn, passing Primrose Hill (where some of my specimens were taken) in April, and repassing it again on the approach of winter. Independently of the difference in the hind claws of this bird and of the Tree-Lark, the two species are readily distinguished by them from the variation in the colouring of the legs, those of the former being orange-brown, while those of the latter are fleshy white.

The food of the Titlark consists of insects, worms, small shelled Mollusks, and a few seeds.

The flight is usually of a wavering character, and is performed in a series of short unequal jerks; but when proceeding to a distance, it is executed with speed and in an undulating manner.

Feathers of the head, neck, back, wings and upper tail-coverts dark brown, margined with olive-brown; wing-coverts broadly margined with pale brown; primaries, secondaries, and tertiaries brownish black, margined with light brown; outer tail-feathers on each side white, with a patch of brown on the inner web, the next on each side brown, with a small patch of white on the tip of the inner web, the remaining feathers blackish brown; chin, throat, and sides of the neck tawny; ear-coverts brown; under surface tawny, spotted with dark brown on the breast and flanks; bill light olive-brown, the culmen and extreme tip darker; tarsi and toes orange-brown, joints rather darker, nails olive; irides dark brown, surrounded by a neat feathery yellowish-buff lash.

The Plate represents the two sexes of the size of life. The plant is the Sundew, *Drosera rotundifolia*.

Gould, John. 1873. "Meadow-Pipit, or Titlark, *Anthus pratensis* [Pl. 13]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323904>.

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