OTOCORIS ALPESTRIS.

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Shore-Lark.

Alauda alpestris, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 289.

——— *flava*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 800.

Phileremos alpestris, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 313.

Otocoris alpestris, G. R. Gray, List of Gen. of Birds, 1841, p. 62.

Otocorys alpestris, Cab. Mus. Heine., Theil i. p. 121.

THIS pretty species has of late occurred so frequently in various parts of England, that there are few collections of British birds which are not adorned with examples. Some of these have been shot, while others have fallen victims to the nets of the bird-catchers. The introduction of the bird into the English avifauna was made by the late Mr. Yarrell, who, in his 'History of British Birds,' states that, in 1831, Mr. John Sims informed him of a specimen which had been shot on the beach at Sherrington, in Norfolk, in the March of the previous year. Since that period so many other instances of its occurrence have been recorded in 'The Ibis,' the 'Zoologist,' and other journals, that it would be tedious to quote more than a few of the more interesting of the notices that have appeared therein.

In a communication to 'The Ibis,' dated Brighton, Nov. 16th, 1861, Mr. George Dawson Rowley says:—"November might be called the ornithologist's month, at least on the south coast; for in it all the rare birds have been found which have come under my observation.

"On Friday (15th) two fine specimens of the Shore-Lark (*Alauda alpestris*) were taken by a bird-catcher at Rottingdean, in clap-nets; the decoy-birds used were Common Larks (*A. arvensis*), for which he at first mistook these rare northern wanderers: the man who caught them said there were five. On the following morning at the same place he took a third. These arrivals were probably due to the late severe gales; yet all three birds were fat and healthy, with no appearance of privation. The first two were males, in good plumage, and had the elongated and pointed black feathers over the eye well developed."

In the same volume of 'The Ibis' Mr. Stevenson, of Norwich, says:—"In addition to the three specimens of the Shore-Lark taken at Brighton, in 1861, I am now able to record the capture of five others, in Norfolk, between the first week in November 1861 and the 10th of January 1862. The first was killed at Yarmouth, on the 17th of November, the second at Sherringham, on the 9th, and the third at Yarmouth, on the 12th; and no others were apparently noticed on any part of our coast until the last pair were also procured at Sherringham, during the first week of 1862. Having been shot in different localities, I have been unable to ascertain how many of these birds were seen on each occasion, or whether they were the only ones seen at the time. Most probably there were others, which escaped destruction; and as these birds were performing a southward migration, it is by no means impossible that the five specimens seen by the Brighton bird-catcher were the remnant of a flight already thinned on their passage down our eastern coast.

"Besides these recent specimens, occurring in so singular a manner about the same time, I know of three other examples killed in this county:—a young male, in March 1830; an adult male, at Yarmouth, in November 1850; and a third male, also adult, at Holkham, in December 1855. I have before alluded to the curious fact of all those procured being male birds; and it is worthy of notice in so accidental a visitant, that, with one exception, all in the above list appeared in the winter months." On a subsequent page Mr. Stevenson records that another specimen (a *male*, like the others), which had nearly assumed its full summer plumage, was killed at Yarmouth, about the 24th of April, 1862; and in a letter received from him while the present page was passing through the press is an enumeration of at least ten other examples which have been killed on the coast of Norfolk.

Among my MSS. I find a note by W. P. Turnbull, Esq., to the effect that Mr. Gray, the Secretary of the Natural-History Society of Glasgow, had informed him that three specimens were shot in the Tyne estuary in 1861. More recently (in December 1869) W. Thompson, Esq., of Weymouth, sent for my inspection a specimen which, with three others, had been killed on the 3rd of that month, on Lodmoor, a tract of marsh-land, within half a mile N.E. of that town, and separated from the sea of Weymouth Bay by a shingle beach and a turnpike road. Mr. Thompson's specimen was feeding in a dry portion of the marsh, apparently on grass-seeds.

It will be seen from the above quotations that, although the Shore-Lark does not breed with us, we are almost yearly visited by sufficient numbers to render it no longer a scarce bird in England. There is no record of its occurrence in Scotland or in Ireland, which leads to the supposition that those which have

visited this island have not come from America, but from the northern portion of the European continent, where the bird breeds in tolerable abundance. Some ornithologists (Dr. Cabanis of Berlin among others) go so far as to state that the European and American birds of this form are distinct; but the difference between them is so slight that they must probably be regarded as mere races of one and the same species. If we separate them, we must go still further in subdivision than we have hitherto done; for the specimens from the Altai, although they have yellow throats and are otherwise similarly coloured, differ from the European and the North-American birds in having rather longer bills. The English, Heligoland, Swedish, Norwegian, and Lapland bird is, doubtless, the one to which Linnæus gave the specific name of *alpestris*, and, of course, is that represented with its young on the opposite Plate, from examples obtained by the late Mr. Wheelwright at Quickiock. The North-American bird merely differs in being a trifle larger, more rufous in colour, and in having a somewhat larger bill; the Altaian, on the other hand, is the smallest of the three, but has a more lengthened bill. These remarks are not made without an abundance of materials for examination and comparison, nor without my being acquainted with the whole of the described species of the genus, specimens of all of which are now before me. Here it may be desirable to state over what parts of the globe these birds are found. In the Old World some members of the genus are distributed over most parts of Eastern Europe, North Africa, Asia Minor, Persia, Western India, Afghanistan, Thibet, China, and the Amurland; while in the New World two or three species, as the case may be, are found from the United States, through Mexico and Central America, to the high lands of New Granada. I may perhaps be excused for not giving a more detailed list of the species, as much confusion exists with regard to their nomenclature, and to define them correctly would require a more careful scrutiny than is necessary in a work on the birds of Great Britain.

"The Shore-Lark," says Mr. Wheelwright, "is the common fell-Lark, and appeared to be more numerous around Quickiock this year (1863) than usual. On the 28th of April I shot the first specimen, close to the house; and after that small flocks kept dropping in for about three weeks, when they all left and went up to the fells to breed. When in the lowlands, they kept in small flocks on the bare patches of cultivated land which the snow had left by the river-side. They were not at all shy, but very restless, sweeping just over the surface of the ground, uttering their feeble single call-note, never flying far, and soon pitching again. That they arrived in considerable numbers may be inferred from the fact that in about three weeks I obtained more than fifty specimens, all of which, with a single exception, were males. By all the Swedish naturalists the Shore-Lark is considered to be very rare in Sweden; but I think it must have been overlooked. I consider the Swedish appellation of 'berg larkä' or Rock-Lark much more appropriate than our British name of Shore-Lark. The colours of this bird appear to be much brighter and richer in the spring than at any other season. There is then but little difference between the male and female externally; but one of the latter sex, which I shot on the 2nd of July, had a very pale yellow forehead, the horns scarcely perceptible, the top of the head and the forehead only speckled with black, a little darkish on the forehead, throat very faint yellow, the black gorget on the breast small and not nearly so dark as in the male. In the female, which I shot on the 28th of April, the ovaries were small, but very distinct. Her colours were much brighter than in summer; and she closely resembled the male, save that the yellow was not so brilliant, although the black was nearly as deep. I have observed that twenty-four hours after death the yellow begins to fade, and that in the spring there is always a faint musky odour about these birds. Sommerfeldt describes the nest and eggs thus:—'They breed as well close to the sea as further inland—not always among grass and moss, but in gravel and among the dead leaves which have fallen from the birch bushes. The nest is built of grass, and I never saw any feathers in it. Their three to five eggs are in general yellow, or yellowish grey, with greyish blue and brown spots, often crowded at the large end. You find them breeding early in May, and also in July.'"

The late Mr. Wolley informed Mr. Hewitson that he "found the Shore-Lark very common in East Finmark on all the cultivated lands near the sea, and also, but less numerously, on the hills. It was very delightful to hear it singing as it sat on a post, a rail, or a barn-top. It used to come on the roof of one house where I was staying soon after midnight, and sing for several hours in the cool sunshine. The nests were placed like those of the common Lark, in a depression of the ground, often near a stone; when removed they are found to be of a loose structure, and are generally lined with the down from the willow or other plants. The bird breeds on the high lands in the interior of the north of Lapland. In the autumn, flocks of it are to be seen in the corn-fields, like common Larks in other countries, on their way south along the course of the rivers."

The figures are of the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Shore-Lark, *Otocoris alpestris* [Pl. 18]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323909>.

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