CALANDRELLA BRACHYDACTYLA.

Illustr. by H. B. S. & H. B. S.

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CALANDRELLA BRACHYDACTYLA.

Short-toed Lark.

- Alauda brachydactyla*, Leisl. Ann. d. Wetter. Gesell., tom. iii. p. 357, tab. 19.
—— *arenaria*, Vieill. Faun. Franç., p. 169, tab. 74. figs. 1, 2.
—— *pispoletta*, Pall. Zoog. Rosso-Asiat., tom. i. p. 526.
—— *calandrella* (Bonap.), Savi, Orn. Tosc., tom. ii. p. 67.
Melanocorypha itala, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 311.
—— *brachydactyla*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 311.
—— *arenaria*, Bonap. Geog. & Comp. List of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 38.
Calandrella brachydactyla, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 39.
Phileremos brachydactyla, Keys. und Blas. Wirbelth. Eur., p. 37.
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THAT a species of Lark so common on the continent of Europe, and so abundant in all eastern countries, from Palestine to China, as the *Calandrella brachydactyla* should have been taken in the British Islands need not excite surprise; we ought rather to be astonished that, instead of having been met with only once, it has not been more frequently seen; indeed, when we remember the extent of our island, and how few are the real observers of our native birds, we may very reasonably suppose that many other examples have, from time to time, visited us without their differences from the other members of the family having been detected. "At the end of October 1841," says Mr. Yarrell, "I received a letter from Mr. H. Shaw, of Shrewsbury, informing me that an example of the Short-toed Lark had been caught in a net near that town on the 25th of the same month; and shortly afterwards he very obligingly sent the specimen up to me for my examination.

"This species, having some resemblance to our Wood-Lark, is yet immediately to be distinguished from it by its stouter beak, its nearly plain unspotted breast, and its very short hind toes and claws—from which last peculiarities it has received its name. The whole length of the Shrewsbury specimen was five inches and three quarters; the tarsal bone three quarters of an inch; the hind toe half an inch, the claw of it only one quarter of an inch; the wing, from the carpal joint to the end of the longest quill-feather, three inches and a half; the second quill-feather the longest in the wing, the first and third feathers a little shorter; the tertials extend backwards as far as the end of the closed wing."

As I have never had an opportunity of becoming personally observant of the habits of the Short-toed Lark, I must, in order to make my readers acquainted with them, draw somewhat largely upon the writings of others; and this, with due acknowledgment, I accordingly shall do.

Temminck states that is very abundant in Sicily, in the kingdom of Naples, in Spain, and in Italy, and that it is equally numerous in the central parts of France, and along the shores of the Mediterranean, but not in the north of France nor in Holland; Bailly that it is found in Piedmont, but not in Savoy. Polydore Roux includes it in the birds of Provence; and Brehm in those of Germany, which appears to be the boundary of its range northwards. Temminck further states that it migrates to the continent of Africa; and Loche informs us that it is found over the whole of Algeria. Mr. Salvin remarks that in the Eastern Atlas it is "much more local in its distribution than the Crested Lark (*Galerita cristata*), its range being confined to a few favoured spots in the elevated plains. About Ain Beida it is abundant, and throughout the great plain of El Tharf it may be commonly met with; it also occurs in the neighbourhood of Djendeli. Like the rest of its congeners, it places its nest on the sheltered side of a bush—the scrubby vegetation which clothes the whole of that arid district affording the necessary protection for its offspring. The eggs of this species vary very much; even in the same nest hardly two similar ones are to be found. So different were some of the varieties, that the greatest care was requisite in identifying their true parentage." In his notes 'On the Ornithology of Northern Africa,' the Rev. H. B. Tristram says:—"Many flocks occur in winter in the neighbourhood of the oases, and on the northern limits of the Sahara. It breeds abundantly under the slopes of the Atlas, but not, so far as I am aware, in the Desert. It is extremely local in the choice of its breeding-places. Confined to the barren salt-plains in the steppes on the verge of the Desert, where the vegetation is very scanty, its nest seems to be invariably placed under the lee of a thyme-bush, in a depression much deeper than the nests of other Larks."

Mr. E. Cavendish Taylor says that in Egypt, where it is mostly met with in small flocks, it is not to be seen before March. Mr. Chambers shot it in Tripoli, and Mr. C. F. Tyrwhitt Drake observed it on the plains of Tangier and Eastern Morocco.

Dr. Henry Giglioli, in his account of the birds observed by him in the neighbourhood of Pisa, mentions that "in spring large flocks appear, especially along the sea-shore, near the Gombo."

Lord Lilford notes that it abounds, with other Larks, near Aranjuez, in Spain, during the month of May, that in Portugal it is said to be common throughout the country, and that in Corfu and Epirus it is very numerous at all seasons.

The Rev. H. B. Tristram records that it is "common in the more barren districts of Palestine, is a summer migrant, revisiting the central country late in the spring, and not occurring in the plains or desert in the winter."

"This," says Mr. Wright, "is one of the most characteristic birds of Malta, where, in spring, it may be seen hovering over the rocky wastes covered with the aromatic-smelling *Thymus capitatus*. In the breeding-season (from April to June) it is abundantly spread in pairs all over the island; and the song of the male is then constantly heard encouraging its mate in the labours of incubation. Its mode of ascending in the air is different from that of the Sky-Lark, consisting of a succession of jerks, which may be peculiar to the species. It delights in the wastes and desert tracts of the island. At the commencement of autumn it assembles in flocks, which appear to be joined by numerous fresh comers from the north; but all speed away before the winter sets in."

The best account of the Short-toed Lark is contained in Mr. Jerdon's excellent work 'The Birds of India.' It is as follows:—

"This species is widely distributed throughout Asia, Europe, and Africa, and has even been once killed in Britain. It is found throughout India, but is more rare to the extreme south, and has not been observed in Ceylon, but is numerous in the Deccan, and thence northwards to the foot of the Himalayas, but not in the countries to the eastward.

"The Short-toed Lark appears in India in October and November in flocks, frequenting the bare grassy downs, damp spots near tanks, grain-fields, and ploughed land, and it almost always retires to corn-fields or grass for shelter during the heat of the day, whence it would seem not to issue again till next morning, for it is seldom seen flying about or feeding in the afternoon or evening. It feeds almost entirely upon seeds, both runs and hops on the ground, and has a call-note like that of the true Larks. Towards the end of March in the south (April in the north) of India different flocks often unite into vast troops containing many thousand birds and quite darkening the air, so close do they keep together even when flying. Great numbers are netted in some parts of the country, taken by birdlime, or shot; for when feeding they also keep close to each other. On one occasion, on the cavalry parade-ground at Kamptee, I bagged twelve dozen birds, after discharging both barrels, and many wounded birds escaped. They get quite fat about this time, are really very excellent eating, and are called "Ortolan" by Europeans in India. They leave the north of India about the end of April, or beginning of May; and they breed in the steppes of Central Asia, Eastern Russia, and Northern Africa—placing their nest on the ground, at the edge of a scrub or bush, and laying four or six eggs, usually marked with grey and rufous spots, but sometimes, it is said, unspotted yellowish-brown."

Captain Irby states that this Lark is exceedingly numerous in Oudh and Kumaon, where it is caught in nets by the natives, and sold to Europeans as "Ortolan;" Captain Beavan that it is common at Maunbhoom; and Mr. Allan Hume that in the lower and central portions of the Duab of the Ganges and Jumna the Short-toed Lark is found in countless flocks.

The sexes are not distinguishable by the colouring of their plumage; but, on a close comparison, the tints of the female are found to be somewhat duller than those of the male.

The top of the head and all the upper surface are of a yellowish or sandy brown, with the centre of each feather darker; quills and tail dusky brown, the two outer feathers of the latter externally edged with yellowish white; a whitish yellow streak over each eye; throat and abdomen white; ear-coverts dark brown; on each side of the upper part of the chest a blackish patch, which Mr. Blyth states is always present but in newly moulted plumage is but little seen; chest and flanks tinged with yellowish brown; bill and feet light brown.

The young, during the first autumn, have the outer edge of each feather margined with buff, similar to one of the birds on the accompanying Plate.

The figures represent an adult and a young bird, of the natural size. The plant is the *Dianthus deltoïdes*, Linn.

Gould, John. 1873. "Short-toed Lark, *Calandrella brachydactyla* [Pl. 21]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323912>.

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