LOXIA PITYOPSITTACUS, *Bechst.*

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Parrot Crossbill.

Loxia curvirostra (var. γ) *major*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 843.

— *pityopsittacus*, Bechst. Orn. Tasch. Deutsch., vol. iii. p. 106.

Crucirostra pinetorum, Meyer, Vög. Liv- und Esthl. p. 71.

— *subpityopsittacus*, Brehm, Handb. der Naturg. Vög. Deutsch. p. 242.

LITTLE philosophy is required to divine the purpose of the curiously formed bill of this bird, since even the most careless glance would convince us that it has been designed for some special object connected with the bird's economy and mode of life. Had there been no coniferous trees, the form would probably not have been in existence, any more than there would have been honey-feeding Parrots had there been no *Eucalypti*. So far from an error, a defect of nature, and a useless deformity, as stated by Buffon, a more perfect instrument than the bill of this bird for extracting the seeds from between the scales of the fir-cones can scarcely be conceived, just as the bill of the Bullfinch is fitted for shelling the embryo flowers and buds of trees. I might, were it necessary, cite numerous other instances of adaptation to a special purpose; but I may content myself by stating that the variation in form and structure observable in all animals is accompanied by some speciality in their means of obtaining their subsistence. The home of the Parrot Crossbill is among the cones which hang on the trees of the interminable forests it inhabits—such forests as formerly existed in Scotland, but which are now only to be found in Norway, Sweden, Russia, and Siberia. It is true the peculiar class of trees of which these forests are formed extend still further south, both in the old and new worlds, and, wherever they exist, Crossbills of one or other species are also found. In countries south of the equatorial line, firs and Loxiine birds form no part of their floræ and faunæ; and neither the one nor the other, if introduced, will, in my opinion, ever thrive there. I could enlarge upon this subject to any extent, were it not foreign to my present purpose; but I merely record my opinion that none of these isolated forms will live out of their own country, and that it is futile to attempt to alter the nature and condition of one or the other.

Crossbills are wandering birds, moving about from one part of the country to another, according to the season and the abundance of cones hanging on their favourite trees; sometimes they even leave their primeval forests, and for a short time visit other districts, as will be seen in my account of the *Loxia curvirostra*. Mr. Wheelwright, who has paid special attention to their habits and economy in the neighbourhood of Gardsjö in Sweden, states that if there be an abundance of fir-cones in autumn, plenty of Crossbills will be found breeding there in the following spring—a circumstance which appears to happen about every third or fourth year; and he has observed that, if large flocks are seen in the autumn, the chances are that there will be very little snow during the following winter.

Ornithologists are divided in opinion as to the specific value of the Parrot and Common Crossbills, some believing that the former is merely a large race of the latter, or *vice versâ*. If this be really true, we may also unite with them the Crossbills of Japan, North America, Mexico, and the small species found in the Himalayas; but I do not coincide with this opinion, for the following reasons. When Crossbills are found in the Swedish forests, they are almost exclusively of the large or the smaller kind, and seldom, if ever, are they found breeding in company. Further, if the Himalayan and American birds are one and the same with our own, and the *Pityopsittacus* be merely a larger race, why should it not be found in those countries also? Such, however, is never the case; and I therefore think that such an opinion must fall to the ground. To go into the origin of species would be entering the region of speculation, without obtaining any satisfactory proofs as to how these somewhat trifling yet constant differences have been brought about; and my duty in the present work is to deal with things as we find them. I know that Mr. Wheelwright is of opinion that the two birds are perfectly distinct.

Since writing the above, I have read a passage on this very subject from the pen of Mr. Blyth, so perfectly coincident that I could scarcely persuade myself that I had not read it beforehand; but I can assure my readers that both my own and Mr. Blyth's opinion were formed independently of each other. The following is the passage referred to:—

“Mr. Bree doubts the existence of the Parrot Crossbill as a species. If that bird is to be united to *Loxia curvirostra*, why not also the small species of the Himalayas, *L. himalayana*, in which case the difference of size in the two extremes is great indeed? In America the *L. mexicana* corresponds to the *L. pityopsittacus* of Europe; but on the former continent *L. mexicana* is a more southern species than *L. curvirostra*, whereas in Europe *L. pityopsittacus* is the more northern species of the two. If all these are to be regarded as varieties of one species, why not also the two White-winged Crossbills of Europe and America respec-

tively? And why does not the allied *Strobilophaga enucleator* vary in like manner? I have seen many Parrot Crossbills, and consider them to be better distinguished from the common species than are the greater and smaller European Bullfinches of the French, the former of which is the true *Loxia pyrrhula* of Linnaeus, and the latter, of course, the *Pyrrhula vulgaris* of Ray." To these remarks of Mr. Blyth I may add that the Parrot Crossbill differs far more widely from the common species than that bird does from any of the smaller members of the genus, even from *L. mexicana*. Independently of its larger size, its much thicker, shorter, and deeper bill, it never, in my opinion, assumes so deep a red colouring as *L. curvirostra*. Mr. Wheelwright has also suggested that in some instances the male assumes the red plumage immediately after the first moult, without any intermediate yellow livery; and this suggestion is partly confirmed by the condition of a specimen, in its striped dress, now before me, and shot, in the end of July 1860, in Wermland. In this example, the red feathers are appearing both on the cheeks and on the upper part of the back; and if there be any value in the law of representation, I may state that I have seen similarly coloured specimens of *L. mexicana*.

In the British Islands the Parrot Crossbill has never been known to breed; and its occurrence among us is so unfrequent and uncertain that it may be regarded, not only as one of our rarest birds, but as one which we cannot look for with the certainty of finding it. If the forests bordering the Spey and the Dee be diligently searched, the chances are that the common species may be observed; but years may elapse before a Parrot Crossbill would be met with. Still there are too many instances of its occurrence on record for me to enumerate half of them in the present work. Pennant first brought the bird under the notice of English ornithologists, two specimens having been sent to him from Shropshire about 1776; since that time, I believe, it has only been found once in Ireland and twice in Scotland: on the other hand, many instances of its occurrence in England are on record; and perhaps greater numbers have been obtained within fifty miles of the metropolis than elsewhere. Dr. Bree states that three specimens, obtained near Colchester, were brought to him in the flesh, on the 21st of February 1862; and Mr. Bond has received recently killed specimens within the last year or two. Mr. Alfred Newton has recorded, in the 'Zoologist' for 1851, the occurrence of a specimen of this bird near Riddlesworth Hall, in Norfolk, several years previously. He also mentions that he had obtained another, shot at Saxham, in Suffolk, in November 1850. From him I further learn that during the past winter (1863-64) several have been killed near Brandon, on the borders of these two counties, a couple of which, both males, are in the possession of E. C. Newcome, Esq. On the Continent, as in England, this species is far from being abundant. The countries in which it is most frequently found are Germany, Russia, Sweden, and Norway. Its extreme northern range does not seem to be known with accuracy; but Mr. A. Newton tells me he has received a single nest from Kyrč, on the Kemi River, in Lapland, about lat. 68°. It has also been taken in Holland, Belgium, and France; but in those countries, as in Britain, it must be regarded as an accidental visitor.

With respect to its nidification, Mr. Wheelwright, who has observed it in Sweden, states that "the nests of both the Common and Parrot Crossbills are almost invariably placed in a small pine, near the top, close to the stem, never in a deep forest, but always on a stony rise, where the pines are small and wide apart. The Parrot Crossbill generally goes to nest a little later than the Common one. By the middle or end of April the young birds are strong fliers, and we never find a nest with eggs after that month. The nests of both species are very much alike; but that of the Parrot Crossbill is thicker and larger than the other; it is built outwardly of dry sticks and with moss of two kinds, and lined with shreds of the inner bark of the fir tree, with here and there a feather or two. The eggs of the Parrot Crossbill are often scarcely larger than those of the Common species; but they are usually shorter, and their markings are of a bolder character. Their full number appears to be three; for we very rarely find four in a nest." They are greenish ash-colour, stained with spots of a pinkish hue, amidst which are a few others of dark umber-brown.

I am indebted to Dr. Bree for the loan of the three specimens killed near Colchester: they differ from all others I have seen—in the females being of a more sordid or dark greenish olive—and particularly from the one figured on the accompanying Plate; the male is also less brilliantly coloured, the feathers being dull red, intermingled with which are patches of sordid yellow.

The young very closely resemble the young of the Common Crossbill, figured on my Plate of that species. When they are able to leave the nest and sit upon a branch, the mandibles are just beginning to cross, and are of a purplish flesh-colour; the feathers of both the upper and under surface are striated with brown down the centre, and have greyish margins, except those of the breast, back, and rump, which are washed with yellow; the incipient primaries are dark brown, slightly margined with tawny.

Those who may wish for a minute anatomical description of the remarkable bills of these birds may consult with advantage the interesting paper on that of the Common species, with woodcut illustrations, given by Mr. Yarrell, and which is equally applicable to all the members of the genus.

It will have been understood from the description of the changes of plumage given above, that the female is dressed in grey and dull yellow, while the male is more or less orange-red, according to age and circumstances.

The Plate represents the two sexes, of the size of life.

Gould, John. 1873. "Parrot Crossbill, *Loxia pityopsittacus* [Pl. 46]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323936>.

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