LINOTA CANNABINA.

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Linnet.

Fringilla cannabina, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 87.

——— *linota*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 916.

Ligurinus cannabina, Koch, Syst. Baier. Zool., tom. i. p. 231.

Linaria cannabina, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 554.

Cannabina pinetorum, et *arbustorum*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 276, 277.

——— *linota*, G. R. Gray, List of Gen. of Birds, 1840, p. 45.

Linota cannabina, Bonap. Geog. and Comp. List of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 54.

THE Linnet is one of our strictly indigenous birds, as much so as the Thrush, the Blackbird, or the Magpie, but is less frequently noticed; for although it may often be seen on the wing, few who observe it know what it really is, or distinguish it from a Sparrow or a Greenfinch. When fully adult the males are extremely beautiful, their crown and chest being washed in early spring with a delicate rosy hue, which heightens as the season advances; hence at midsummer they are finer than at the nuptial period, the grey tips of the feathers, which overlap their roseate portions, having fallen off, leaving the underlying scarlet more exposed, besides which the colour itself appears to increase in depth until the autumnal moult, when the bird assumes the nearly uniform warmer clothing of winter.

The distribution of this common species over the three kingdoms is so very general that even the Orkneys and the Hebrides are not without its presence. Although its nature leads it to prefer barren tracts of country, furzy commons and wastes bordering woods, it readily accommodates itself to the most highly cultivated districts, often frequenting gardens, lawns, and shrubberies, especially those to which open fields are contiguous. In April and May it constructs a round cup-shaped nest among the shrubs of pleasure-grounds and the furze and gorse of our common lands; in the latter case it is subject to much persecution by the village boys who wantonly take its eggs, and in the former it is shot by the gardener on account of its habit of pilfering his radish-seeds while in pod.

When the breeding-season is over and the young have their pinions perfected, the Linnets become gregarious, and assemble in flocks. During the winter months they leave the gardens and furzy commons, where they have spent the summer, and betake themselves to the open parts of the country, visiting pasture-lands, clover-leys, stubble-fields, and even farm-lands; and should the winter prove rigorous, they seek the warmer counties, and perhaps leave our islands altogether for a time.

The Linnet, like the Goldfinch, the Siskin, and the Redpole, contributes greatly to the support of many poor people, being the principal "stock in trade" of the numerous bird-catchers and bird-dealers of the metropolis. The number of persons engaged in its capture and sale are indeed far greater than is usually supposed; and a statistical account of them, could it be correctly ascertained, would be both interesting and surprising. It is not its pleasing colour alone that renders the Linnet such a favourite cage-bird; being a seed-, and not an insect-eater, it is easily kept, readily succumbs to captivity, soon becomes tame and familiar, and during the months of spring constantly cheers its possessor with its pleasing innocent song. Its natural food is the seeds of many of our common weeds, the wild rape, and the dandelion; but it would seem that it occasionally does much damage among the fields of wheat and other grain. The gravest charge I have heard brought against it was made by Mr. Smither of Churt, a close observer of nature and no mean authority in matters of the kind. Writing to me in July 1863, he says:—"No one would believe the damage done to wheat this season by the Linnets, unless they saw it; in many places the ground is covered with chaff, and the ears entirely emptied. I have seen spots of standing wheat the ears of which were covered with Linnets; and a farmer I was with this morning estimates the loss by these birds at the rate of two sacks in an acre and a half of wheat; he was greatly pleased therefore at my shooting some of them. Whether they overbalance the damage they commit by the quantity of weed-seeds they consume, I cannot say. 'Punch' writes very strongly in favour of small birds; but I think he does not quite understand the nature of them."

Besides being very common in the British Islands, the Linnet is also found all over Europe from Lapland to the Mediterranean, in North Africa, and in Madeira; I have myself seen it in abundance in the Maltese group of islands; and that it goes as far east as Asia Minor and Persia is certain, as I have thence received specimens. I am not aware of its having been found in India; neither does it form part of the avifauna of America.

"Towards the end of autumn," says Macgillivray, "the Linnets collect into flocks, which unite as the winter

advances, and betake themselves to the lower districts. These flocks sometimes mingle with other allied birds; but for the most part they keep distinct, performing their various evolutions by themselves. They generally move in a rather close mass, advance in one direction by short leaps, crouching as they go on and searching for food with great assiduity, the stragglers every now and then flying up to the main body. The flight is rapid and undulated, and performed by alternate flaps and cessations in a curved line, after the manner of the Green Linnet, but with still more activity. As the flocks glide and wheel, the individuals composing them cross the direction of each other in a very beautiful manner. On the ground it is equally active. Its voice is soft and mellow, and its song varied and remarkably sweet."

"To witness a number of Linnets feeding," remarks Thompson, "is a very pleasing sight. Several may be seen in different attitudes busy in extracting the seeds from a single thistle or ragweed, which all the while keeps moving to and fro with their weight. The ear is at the same time gratified with the lively call which is constantly uttered by one or more of the party.

"Sir William Jardine has very pleasingly observed in a note to his edition of Wilson's 'American Ornithology,' that 'every one who has lived much in the country must have often remarked the common Linnets congregating towards the close of a fine winter's evening, perched on the summit of some bare tree, pluming themselves in the last rays of the sun, chirruping the commencement of their evening song, and bursting simultaneously into one general chorus, again resuming their single strains, and again joining, as if happy and rejoicing at the termination of their day's employment.' I had daily, for a season, the gratification of thus observing them at Wolf-hill, where the effect was heightened by the black Italian poplars which they alighted on and dotted with their numbers to the very apex, having pyramidal-formed heads, and accordingly presenting several pyramids of birds, each giving forth its peal of music; when this ceased the birds descended to roost in the fine large Portugal laurels growing beneath and around the trees."

"The common Linnet," says St. John in his 'Natural History and Sport in Moray,' "is spread abundantly all over the country, breeding in furze-bushes and other dense-growing shrubs, though more frequently in the furze than in any other plant. Its nest is made of grass and dried fibres, with a little moss, and lined with wool. The Linnets collect in immense flocks towards winter, sometimes covering the top of a large tree, or wheeling in clouds over stubble-fields where groundsel and other seeds which they feed on abound. They are very fond, too, of turnip-seed."

Of two very handsome nests taken in Hampshire, and obligingly brought for my inspection by Mr. Bond, one was composed externally of coarse roots, and internally of very fine ones mixed with wool, and was decorated on the outside with a few pieces of lichen; the other was composed of coarse roots and a little dried moss, lined with a mixture of cow-hair and wool; feathers are occasionally employed in the lining.

The eggs are four or five in number, of a pale bluish white speckled with pale purple and reddish brown, particularly towards the larger end.

The young usually leave the nest at the end of May; their plumage is then very like that of the old bird in winter; their bills are purplish-olive, and their feet flesh-colour. There are generally two broods in the year.

The principal characteristics of the male have been indicated above; the females and the fully fledged young are of a nearly uniform brown, or at most so little varied as not to catch the eye. Mr. Blyth informs me that very old females sometimes assume the colouring of the male.

The Plate represents an adult male in full summer plumage, a male in his early spring dress, and a female, all the size of life. The plant is the *Juniperus communis*.

Gould, John. 1873. "Linnet, *Linota cannabina* [Pl. 49]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323939>.

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