PICA CAUDATA.

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Magpie.

Corvus pica, Linn. Faun. Suec., No. 92.

Pica caudata, Linn. Syst. Nat., edit. 6, gen. 40, sp. 8.

— *Europæa*, Cuv.

— *Melanoleuca*, Vieill. Ency. Méth. Orn., part 2. p. 883, pl. 139. fig. 1.

I TRUST the day may arrive when the people of this country will have acquired a greater taste for the ornamental than at present; they may then have their eyes opened to the charms of that one of our native birds in which is combined all that is graceful and elegant in form and beautiful in colouring: I mean the British Magpie—the Magot Pie of the immortal Shakspeare. For my own part, I never see this bird in a state of nature without a feeling of admiration. I watch all its actions with interest and pleasure. I do not fail to notice how its varied plumage contrasts with the greensward over which it walks, and, when it is flying towards a coppice or tree, with what regularity and precision its wings are marked with black and white. I also admire its pertness, and the elegance of its actions among the branches. I observe how in this country it sedulously avoids man, and particularly the keeper of game, while he walks, gun in hand, his daily rounds; while in others, such as Norway and Sweden, it is just as familiar in the approaches it makes to the gardens and to the houses, to the roofs of which it flies for protection, if protection be necessary. How fortunate, then, are the Magpies of those countries, and of France, where they are similarly treated! Surely this will awaken some of our landed proprietors to the necessity of at least in some degree rendering its existence here a more happy one.

If Mr. Waterton can keep the Magpie within proper bounds, and find that its propensities are not fatal to the reproduction of other birds within his walled demesne, and if Sir William Jardine (who, I know, affords it his protection), has not his Pheasants' eggs destroyed, or his garden ravaged of its summer fruits, surely others may allow it to live and ornament the scene. But is the Magpie so ornamental? some of my readers will ask: black and white, it is true, form the most striking contrast; but where are the beautiful colours? This the accompanying Plate will show, although it but faintly represents them; for it is almost beyond the power of the artist to give their faithful portraiture in an ordinary illustration. It will show, however, that many beautiful tints of purple, blue, and green are comprised in the colouring of the tail. The wings, too, are ornamented with two distinct colours—lively blue and bronzy green; and thus it will be seen that there is much less black in the Magpie's dress than is usually supposed. Where the black does occur, however, it is intense; and the same may be said of the purity of the white, which, with the rest of the colours, is well disposed. When on the ground or on the branches of trees, the breadth and boldness of the markings form a most harmonious combination, well worthy the attention of the artist. Let me ask those of my readers who are not well acquainted with the colouring of the Magpie's tail to give it a careful examination: they will find it far more beautiful than they had previously imagined.

The Magpie is so generally dispersed over the British Islands, that any minute account of its distribution is unnecessary; but I may state that it does not go so far north in Scotland as the Orkney, Shetland, or Western Islands. In Ireland it is said to have been introduced about the time of Elizabeth; a long dissertation on which subject may be found in the valuable work, on British Birds, by my late friend Mr. Yarrell. On the continent of Europe it is nowhere more common than in Norway and Sweden; and, indeed, it occurs throughout Europe to the borders of the Mediterranean. In an eastern direction its apparent limit is the neighbourhood of the rivers Don and Volga; at least we find, to the east and south of this, Magpies which, although bearing a general resemblance, are specifically distinct. The one from Siberia I have lately named *P. leucoptera*: the Magpie from Mesopotamia has yet, I believe, to be characterized. In the great Himalayan range there are at least two—the *P. Bactriana* and *P. Bhattanensis*; while in China and Japan there exists a closely allied one—the *P. media*. The northern parts of America give us two, which appear to represent each other in the respective countries they inhabit, viz. the *P. Hudsonica* of the east, and the *P. flavirostris* of the west. In Northern Africa (the temperate climate of the great Atlas) occurs another very distinct bird—the *P. Mauritanica*.

In my history of the Jay, I alluded to the wide distribution of the genus *Pica*: I may now add that no one species of the family is found very far south, either in the Old or in the New World. The sexes in our bird, as well as in all the other members of the genus, closely assimilate in their colouring, and, moreover, are not subject to any seasonal change: from the nest, they are Magpies to a feather. Of course, the mature bird excels in brilliancy those of extreme youth; and that is all. As an architect, perhaps no bird is more clever; and the

construction of its nest is well worthy of our attention. Think not, my readers, that the huge pile you see in yonder tree is the work of an ordinary bird; for the labours of the Crow, the Rook, the Daw, or the Jay may hide their diminished heads when brought in comparison with the skill of the Magpie. A minute description of this fabric would fill a page of this work: briefly, I may say that the foundation is composed of crossed sticks of various sizes; next follow shreds of bark, earth, clay, moss, or any similar material near at hand; then comes a lining of fine roots and tendrils; and lastly, a thick and impenetrable dome, which, with the nest, forms a spherical mass. No basket-work was ever more complete than is that part which unites the rim of the nest to the dome; and when the materials used are those of a cut quickset hedge, as is often the case, such a nest is worthy of being placed in a museum, large as it is; for it will serve to show that the bird has displayed no ordinary skill. Generally there is but one entrance to the nest; but sometimes there are two, so that the bird can take advantage of either when disturbed in the duty of incubation. The situation of the nest is most varied, sometimes on the top of a high silver fir in a plantation, on an elm or other tree on the field-side, or in a low thick thorn-bush in a hedgerow, whence the name of Hedge-Magpie is given to those that choose such situations for their nest. This name, however, should be abolished; for I am certain that no specific differences occur in the Magpies of this country. I have been looking for the supposed second species from my childhood, but have not yet found it; my opinion may therefore, I hope, have some weight. The eggs are usually six or seven in number, of a pale-bluish white, spotted all over with ash-grey and two tints of greenish brown; they are one inch four-and-a-half lines long, by one inch broad. The young generally follow their parents during the first autumn; and it not unfrequently happens that, in those districts where they are not hunted down, several broods unite; and the little flock becomes still more ornamental than when seen singly or, as is usually the case, in pairs. The food of such assemblies consists principally of worms, grubs, and insects; but they will readily eat carrion of any kind, and a stranded sheep or sick lamb must carefully guard their eyes, or a worse calamity may befall them. To this kind of food the eggs and young of the Pheasant, the Domestic Fowl, or of almost any bird, are added, if opportunities for pilfering them be afforded: they also consume fruits of every kind, and berries of various sorts. In its disposition it is prying and most inquisitive; in actions pert and cunning; somewhat garrulous during the months of spring, if anything strange, such as the discovery of a sleeping Owl, a Fox, a wired Hare, or a nest-robbing Squirrel excites its ire; it then utters a peculiar chattering noise, betokening that something wrong or unusual has taken place. Hold council with yourselves, good keepers, and spare the Magpie for the information he has afforded you.

When taken young, the Magpie may be readily reared and domesticated. Confined, as it frequently is, in a willow cage, far too small for its comfort or the display of its agile actions, it exhibits a degree of cheerfulness and apparent happiness almost to be envied. In this limited prison it lives to amuse the humble cottager, who usually greets it with its common sobriquet of "Mag," or attempts to extend its vocabulary by more lengthened sentences, the bird sometimes acquiring the vernacular quite equal to many of the passers-by. In some individuals the power of mimicry is complete and very extraordinary: the mew of the cat, the sawyer at his work, the young chanticleer, the whining dog, are each successfully imitated.

The flight of the Magpie, though apparently laboured, is easy and graceful, but, as its rounded wings would indicate, is not of long duration: if assailed, however, by a Hawk or a Falcon, it displays a quickness of movement perhaps unequalled by any other bird; and I believe I am right in saying that if a covert be gained it could not be followed; for, leaping from branch to branch, it dives about the wood with the utmost agility. A pinioned Magpie in a coppice will give half a dozen boys an appetite before they get hold of its wing or tail; and then the punishment inflicted by its sharp-pointed bill will leave a lasting remembrance of their capture of a wounded Magpie. When hawking was in vogue, this was considered one of the birds which afforded the greatest amount of sport: see an interesting note on this subject from the pen of Sir John Sebright, in Yarrell's 'British Birds,' vol. ii. p. 109.

Crown black, slightly glossed with purple; remainder of the head, neck, back, and breast black; the throat-feathers open in their texture, and terminating in a bristle; scapularies, abdomen, and flanks pure white; across the lower part of the back a band of dark grey; upper and under tail-coverts, vent, and thighs black; lesser wing-coverts black; greater coverts, spurious wing, secondaries, and tertiaries glossed with blue and green; central portion of the inner webs of the primaries pure white, their margins and the outer webs black, glossed with olive; two centre tail-feathers bronzy green nearly to the end, when that colour gradually passes into rich purple, then blue, and lastly deep green; the lateral feathers are precisely similar on their outer webs, but their inner webs are dull black, except at the tip, where they are green, like the outer ones, the iridescent colouring near the tips of the feathers forming a beautiful zone; irides dark brown; bill, legs, and feet black.

The figure is of the natural size, on a branch of the Spruce Fir (*Abies excelsa*).

Gould, John. 1873. "Magpie, *Pica caudata* [Pl. 63]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, –. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323951>.

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