PICUS MAJOR, *Linn.*

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Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Picus major, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 176.

— *cissa*, Pall. Zoog. Ross. Asiat., tom. i. p. 442.

— *pipra*, Macgill. Hist. Brit. Birds, vol. iii. p. 30.

— *varius major*, Briss. Orn., tom. iv. p. 34.

— *discolor*, Frisch, Vög., pl. 36.

Dryobates major, Boie, Isis, 1826.

Dendrocopus major, Koch, Baier. Zool.

Picus Baskhiriensis, Verr., 1854.

— *brevirostris*, *P. alpestris* et *P. mesopilus*, Reichenb. Handb. Spec. Orn., p. 365, pl. DCXXXIII. fig. 4212.

— *pityopicus*, *P. montanus*, *P. pinetorum*, *P. frondium*, *P. leucorum* et *P. sordidus*, Brehm.

Who can take a fresh-killed specimen of this bird and open its wings without being struck by its varied markings of black and white, relieved by just sufficient red to render the contrast pleasing to the eye? with what mathematical precision are all these markings placed! in what graceful curves are the white spots arranged across the outspread wing! and how truly have these markings been retained without any variation occurring between specimens killed at the present time and those which have been in our museums for more than fifty years. Were it not so, there would be an end to specific characters, and to Ornithology as a science.

The *Picus major* is universally dispersed over the British Islands, being found in England, Scotland, and Ireland. It is also very plentiful in Norway, Sweden, Russia, Central and Southern Europe. It may be regarded as one of the most typical of the Woodpeckers, and belongs to that section of the family for which the Linnæan name of *Picus* is alone retained. Its natural province is the larger trees, from the boles and branches of which its diet is obtained. I have said that the Great Spotted Woodpecker is very generally dispersed over the British Islands; and it is so; but it is more numerous in the central counties of England than elsewhere; and if it be not seen in every extensive wood, or its loud ringing hammering be not resonant in every timbered estate, it is because the collector, the keeper, and the sportsman have not been able to refrain from levelling their guns whenever their attention has been attracted to this singular bird. I feel that I have never written a more truthful remark than this; and were it not for that extensive nursery of European birds, the densely wooded and thinly peopled country of Norway, whence we constantly receive accessions, I very much doubt if the few remaining in this country would not soon disappear.

At present the New Forest in Hampshire, the sunny and beautiful woods of Cliveden, Hedsor, and Taplow, wherever suitable trees occur, and the bird is free from molestation, are places where it may be found. In its habits there are few birds more shy and recluse. Unlike the Green Woodpecker, it seldom approaches the dwelling of man, but keeps to the topmost branches of the large trees; occasionally, however, it deviates from this kind of life and descends to the pollard oak, the willow, or the fence-rail, and in autumn resorts to gardens, for the sake of the wall-fruit. The young birds of the year are particularly mischievous in this way, and are often caught in the garden-net, or destroyed by the gardener's gun. Most persons must be so well acquainted with the mode of progression of this and all other Woodpeckers, that a description is almost unnecessary; but I may state that it traverses in a series of jumps both the larger stems and the smaller branches by means of its short tarsi, strong zygodactyle toes, and sharp curved claws, and is supported, when at rest, by the close application of the stiff tail-feathers to the trunk or branch. While thus rambling over their surface, it carefully scrutinizes every crevice for spiders, coleoptera, and the larvæ of insects. The flight is performed in a series of dippings, produced by the sudden expansion and contraction of the wings.

This bird makes no nest, but deposits its six pinky white eggs in an aspen, apple, oak, or other tree. When able to fly, the young differ from the parents in having their crowns red instead of black.

It may not be out of place if I here mention that great accessions to the numbers of this bird take place in autumn. The numbers which arrived in 1861 were so great that they attracted the notice of many observers, as will be seen in various works. Of these records, the following, respecting the occurrence of the bird in Shetland, appears to be the most interesting:—"I have already recorded," says Mr. Henry L. Saxby, "the capture of two specimens of the *Picus major*, in the island of Unst, on the 3rd of September. During the next few weeks many more were killed, not only in Unst, but also throughout nearly the whole of the Shetland Isles; the wind was blowing steadily from the south-east at the time.

I am also informed that several were killed in Orkney about the same period. The sudden and almost simultaneous appearance of large numbers of this species in various localities where it is usually an uncommon visitor, is a fact well worthy of the attention of ornithologists, inasmuch as a careful investigation might tend to throw considerable light upon the question of migration. It would be interesting to ascertain the proportion of the sexes among those specimens which were obtained, as well as the direction of the wind at the time of their arrival. The first two presented nothing unusual in their appearance; but on examining the third, I at once remarked the worn look of the bill, tail, and claws. I immediately suspected that this was caused by the scarcity of trees having driven the bird to seek its food among stones and rocks; and upon opening the stomach, my suspicions were confirmed by the discovery, among other insects, of several small beetles which are only found upon the hills. I afterwards saw Spotted Woodpeckers on various parts of the hills, on walls, and even in high sea-cliffs. I also saw them on the roofs of houses, and upon dunghills; and although several were killed upon corn-stacks, I never found any grain in their stomachs. They were frequently to be met with upon the ground, among the heather, where at all times they were easily approached, particularly in rainy or misty weather, when, their plumage becoming saturated with moisture and rendering them too heavy for flight, many were stoned to death by the boys. Those in the garden fed largely upon seeds of the mountain-ash, which they procured by breaking open the berries, sometimes dropping a whole cluster upon the ground and descending to feed, but more frequently breaking the berries to pieces as they hung upon the trees. Even in the garden they did not confine themselves to the trees; at one time they might be seen busily searching among moss and dead leaves, at another in the midst of a tuft of coarse weeds, and again intently examining the spiders' webs upon the walls. It was quite a common occurrence to see them in open meadows scattering aside the horse-dung with their bills, and thus procuring abundant supplies of worms and grubs. I crept very close to one thus engaged, and was very much amused to observe how cleverly it used its bill, first striking off large masses, and then dashing them into fragments in all directions by a rapid and peculiar movement of the head from side to side. By means of a powerful pocket-glass I have seen them climbing the face of a large rock or of a rough stone wall, curiously peering into every crevice, and occasionally varying the amusement by a smart tap or two on the unyielding surface of the stone." (Zoologist, 1862, p. 7932.)

Mr. Stevenson informs me that in Norfolk this bird is "not very numerous, and somewhat local, but is resident throughout the year. There is no doubt that migratory specimens are more or less numerous in autumn, since the greater number of specimens are killed in October and November. In the latter part of 1861, many adult and immature birds were killed in Norfolk, between the beginning of November and the end of December, chiefly in the vicinity of the coast, as at Lynn, Yarmouth, Wisbech, &c. In Norwich alone, upwards of twenty were brought in to be stuffed." One can readily understand the birds resorting to Norfolk and similar counties; but what could have induced it to visit the Orkneys? The examples which there occurred must either have been on their travels from Sweden and Norway, or have been blown out of their usual course.

During the pairing-season, this bird produces a most peculiar, loud, jarring sound, by a rapid succession of strokes with its bill upon the dead upright branch of a tree; this extraordinary and indescribable noise resounds through the forest, and may be heard at the distance of a mile in this country, and even further in the still and almost lifeless woods of Norway. It also utters its "*gich*"-like note at intervals when perched on the pine and other trees; it was this latter note which generally drew my attention to the bird in the interior of the great pine-forests of Norway.

We learn, in Mr. Hewitson's 'Eggs of British Birds,' from a note communicated to him by Mr. H. Doubleday, of Epping, that in the three instances which had come under his notice, the eggs of this bird were placed "in the horizontal branches or arms of oaks, where a smaller branch had been broken off and the part had decayed; the place was carefully plastered up so as only to leave a hole just large enough for the bird to enter; in one instance, where the arm was hollow, the eggs were nearly three feet from the opening; they were laid upon the bare decayed and soft wood."

The sexes are alike in plumage, with the exception of a band of scarlet across the occiput of the male.

The Plate represents an adult male of the size of life, and a female and a young male in the distance, about half the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Picus major* [Pl. 70]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323956>.

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