YUNC TORQUILLA.

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Wryneck.

Yunx torquilla Linnæi et auctorum.

WRYNECK, Cuckoo's mate, Snake-bird! How shall I commence its history? For its every action and whole economy are as singular as the markings of its plumage are chaste and beautiful. Mate of the Cuckoo it has been called, because it arrives in the spring, foretelling, like that bird, that summer is near at hand. Its peculiar cry is known to every cottager, and welcome is its monotonous and repeated call of *pee, pee, pee*. Africa, which it has lately left, is its winter residence; but as the sun advances towards the north, it follows in his path, well knowing that it will find a congenial home in Great Britain. What, if I depict it in one of its grotesque attitudes, when it writhes its head, snake-like, from side to side, with its neck contracted to the size of a quill; or in the period of courtship, when, with erected crest, drooping wings, and outspread tail, it is bowing and coquetting before the object of its attention? If I had portrayed it thus, it would scarcely have been recognized. The accompanying illustration presents the Wryneck mated and sobered down for the important duty of reproduction; the hollow branch will afford the eggs and young birds protection from all intruders, and enable it to rear its numerous progeny to an age when they may wing their way to the distant lands from which the parents had lately arrived.

Not only is the Wryneck a summer visitant to Great Britain; for in all, or nearly all, of the countries of the Old World lying under the same parallel of latitude is it to be found, even as far east as India, China, and Japan, from all of which countries, as well as from Western Asia, I possess specimens; it will be obvious, therefore, that few birds are more widely distributed. In the British Islands, where the Wryneck arrives at the latter end of March or the beginning of April, it is very generally, though not universally, dispersed over all the southern and midland counties, gradually becoming scarce and scarcer still until we reach the border-line of England and Scotland, which may be considered the extent of its range in that direction. I believe it to be more common in the eastern part of England than in the western. Mr. Rodd, in his "List of British Birds, as a Guide to the Ornithology of Cornwall," states that it is "rare in all parts of the county; occasionally observed in the neighbourhood of Penzance in the autumn, near the coast, probably preparing for migration." In Ireland it is unknown. Having remained with us during the summer, and reared its progeny, it departs southward again in August and September, passing through Spain to its winter abode in Morocco. I know that the Wryneck is occasionally found in the neighbourhood of Rome and at Marseilles in winter; but doubtless the same great migratory movement takes place on the continent of Europe as in England; indeed, I know that such is the case. Always solitary and recluse in its habits, its presence would rarely be detected by any but the most keen observer, were it not for its peculiar and loud cry, which, once heard, can never be forgotten. I know of no bird whose colours are less attractive at a distance, or whose flight, when it rises from the ground, from the rail of a fence, or from the bole of a tree, is more like that of a Sparrow; and hence, when flying, it seldom attracts notice; but when closely watched, especially during the pairing-time, as before stated, it will be seen that it performs a number of singular and extraordinary evolutions. Like the Woodpecker, the Wryneck has a tongue equal in length to that of its entire body; and truly complete must be the muscular arrangement connected with an organ which the bird has the power of protruding and retracting at will to such an extent that the deepest interstices of the bark of trees, as well as the terrestrial ant-hill, are probed with ease. Insects and their larvæ, ants and their eggs, constitute, I believe, the principal food of the Wryneck; and beautifully, indeed, is its whole structure adapted for obtaining this kind of diet.

"The anatomical construction of the tongue," says Mr. Yarrell, "and the consequent mode of taking its food, will amply repay the closest examination. By an elongation of the two posterior branches of the bones of the tongue, and the exercise of the muscles attached to them, this bird is able to extend the tongue a very considerable distance beyond the point of the beak; the end of the tongue is horny and hard; a large and long gland is situated at the under edge of the lower jaw on each side, which secretes a glutinous mucus, and transfers it to the inside of the mouth by a slender duct. With this glutinous mucus the end of the tongue is always covered for the especial purpose of conveying food into the mouth by contact. So unerring is the aim with which the tongue is darted out, and so certain the effect of the adhesive moisture, that the bird never fails in obtaining its object at every attempt. So rapid also is the action of the tongue in thus conveying food into the mouth, that the eye is unable distinctly to follow it; and Colonel Montagu, who had an opportunity of seeing this bird feed while confined in a cage, says that an ant's egg, which is of a light colour, and more conspicuous than the tongue, had somewhat the appearance of moving towards the mouth by attraction, as a needle flies to a magnet."

Like those of the Woodpecker, the toes of the Wryneck are zygodactyle; that is, two of them are placed anteriorly and two posteriorly, the outermost of the latter being the longest,—an arrangement which affords the bird ample support while clinging to the upright boles of trees; not that this is its exclusive habit, for it as frequently perches across a small branch, or takes up a position on the top of a post, rail, or dead limb. The moth-like markings of its plumage assimilate it most closely with the bark of trees and the objects with which it is generally surrounded. Its bill is conical, and terminates in a sharpish point, but is not so wedge-shaped as that of the Woodpecker; it is formed, indeed, for a different end and purpose, the bird never, I believe, even attempting to make a hole for itself, let the tree be ever so rotten,—the hollow spout of an apple branch, a decayed hole in a willow or other tree, being selected as a place of deposit for its ten or twelve pinky-white eggs, which are laid on the bare wood, or upon the rotten dust in the cavity.

There is something so odd and indescribable in this bird, when captured and held in the hand, that language can scarcely convey an adequate idea of it. Many of its actions are indeed snake-like; if held by the legs, the writhings and contortions of the head and neck, with its tail outspread like that of a Peacock, are ridiculously grotesque. If the hole in which its eggs are deposited be approached, the intruder is met with a rustling noise and serpent-like hisses, the bird frequently rushing to the entrance, and as quickly retiring, until at length it darts forward with arrow-like swiftness, and dippingly flies off to the nearest tree. The number of eggs laid by the bird appears to vary very considerably; from nine to twelve is probably the usual number; but I have known several instances in which they were more numerous; and Mr. Salmon relates that, upon one occasion, he induced a female to lay no less than twenty-two, by repeatedly disturbing an old nest of a Redstart, which the bird had selected for a place of deposit. The eggs, which before being blown are of a delicate flesh- or rosy-white tint, are about nine lines and a half long by seven lines broad. The birds are said to frequent the same hollow in a tree for several successive years.

Mr. Yarrell says, “the young birds are easily tamed, and are great favourites with boys in this country; but still more so in France, where it is customary to tie a piece of thin string to one of the legs of the bird, and, carrying it from one tree to another, allow it to search the bark for insects; and when brought back to hand by the string, it climbs with equal facility over any part of their clothes.”

In plumage the sexes are precisely alike, but the size of the male rather exceeds that of the female; the young, too, at once assume the plumage of the adult, the only exception to this strict similitude being that their general tint is somewhat darker, and the spots and bars rather more conspicuous; crown of the head grey, crossed by narrow irregular bands of brown; sides of the head and neck, lower part of the back, and upper tail-coverts grey, minutely freckled with brown; from the occiput, down the centre of the neck, and between the shoulders, a broad mark, composed of mingled streaks of black and brown; wing-coverts brownish grey, each feather tipped with greyish white, bounded posteriorly with a mark of dark brown; outer webs of the primaries alternately barred with yellowish brown and black; inner webs toothed with buffy white; tail-feathers mingled grey and brown in minute freckles, and crossed by four irregular bars of black; chin, throat, ear-coverts, front of the neck and breast pale fawn-colour, crossed by narrow lines of brown; from the angle of the eye a streak of brown, and anterior to and parallel with this a narrower one of black; under surface dull white, speckled with black; under tail-coverts pale fawn-colour, crossed with lines of dark brown; irides light-brownish hazel; upper mandible fleshy brown; under mandible, legs, and claws pale sickly olive.

While writing this account of the Wryneck, I have before me specimens from Japan, China, India, Asia Minor, Italy, and Great Britain, in all of which slight differences are observable; the Japanese and Chinese birds are smaller, redder, and more strongly marked than those from India, which, again, are more lightly coloured than those of Europe. The bird from Rome differs from all the others in having the whole of the under surface crossed with broad bars instead of a few arrowhead-shaped marks as in the English specimens. I cannot, however, consider these as anything more than mere local varieties or races of one and the same species, as the differences are not, in my opinion, of sufficient importance to warrant their being regarded as distinct.

The Plate represents a male and a female of the size of life, the figures being taken from specimens killed in April, just prior to the breeding-season, when the birds are in the finest state of plumage.

Gould, John. 1873. "Wryneck, *Yunx torquilla* [Pl. 76]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323961>.

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