TURTUR AURITUS, *Ray.*

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Turtledove.

Turtur auritus, Ray. Syn. Meth. Av. et Pisc., p. 184, tab. 26.

Columba turtur, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 284.

Peristera turtur, Boie, Isis, 1828, p. 327.

Turtur vulgaris, Eyt. Hist. Rarer Brit. Birds, p. 32.

THE Turtledove, at once the smallest and most elegantly formed of the British *Columbidæ*, is not a permanent resident with us, but strictly a migrant, and one which evinces a partiality for certain parts of our island to the exclusion of others; thus it is more abundant in the southern and central portions of England than it is in those further north. Wherever it appears in spring it is hailed with pleasure as an indication that summer is coming; for it is not until the strong gales of March have exhausted their fury, the showers of April passed away, and May somewhat advanced, that its pleasing "turr" is heard in our woods and shrubberies, or that its slight flat nest among the branches, and its two immaculate eggs, can be detected. From Africa direct, with but little delay on the road, has the Turtle followed in the rear of our other summer visitants. Of late years it appears to have increased in number among us, and to have extended its range in a northerly direction; for within my own recollection it was extremely scarce in the border counties of England and Scotland, but now, like the Missel-Thrush and the Starling, it is observed there much more frequently than heretofore. Its stay with us not extending to the seed- and root-time of autumn, little mischief can be attributed to this docile and pretty bird, and therefore a price need not be put upon its head (as in the case of the Wood-Pigeon), its principal food consisting of the seeds of the vetch and wild plants, the tender shoots of herbs, and small-shelled snails.

"The Turtledove has the discredit," says the Rev. C. A. Johns, "of resorting to fields of green wheat, for the sake of feeding on the milky grain. I am doubtful if this charge can be sustained. Often enough, when walking through a cornfield, one may see two or three Turtledoves rise suddenly from the thick corn, with a rustle and low cry of alarm, rapidly dart away in the direction of the nearest grove, disappearing in the shade, all but the white segment of a circle formed by the tips of their tail-feathers; but, on examining the spot from which they rose, I have been unable to detect any ears of corn rifled of their contents—though the ground was thickly matted with weeds, which might have furnished them with food. I have been informed by a young friend, who has often shot them while rising from such situations, that he has invariably found their crops distended with the green seed-vessels of a weed common in corn-fields—the corn-spurry (*Spergula arvensis*). This being the case, the Turtledove is more a friend than an enemy to the farmer, even if it sometimes regales on ripe grain or interferes with the occupation of the gleaner."

How much would the delights of summer be detracted from were we not visited by nearly forty spring migrants! Without the Swallow and its kindred, the sultry heat would be unbearable, from the inordinate increase of tormenting insects. The croak of the frog and the crake of the Landrail assist at this time in breaking the monotonous stillness of night; and the cooings of the Dove relieve the mind by calling up soothing and pleasing thoughts not easily described.

When the Turtle comes to us, in spring, it generally arrives in pairs; in the autumn, on the other hand, the various broods assemble in our corn-fields and arable lands in considerable flocks, and in the month of September migrate in a southerly direction, through Portugal and Spain, to Morocco, where, in all probability, these, as well as many other birds that visit us in summer, pass the winter; while those which have summered in the eastern parts of the European continent proceed to Algeria, *viâ* the Maltese group of islands, where, for a few days in spring and again in autumn, the Turtle is especially numerous, and large numbers are captured at the former season in nets, precisely after the manner employed by the bird-catchers in this country. "As an illustration of the great power of flight of these birds," says Mr. Wright, "it may be mentioned that thousands of them are annually to be seen passing over Malta without alighting. When they reappear in September they are on their way from Europe, and are not generally so plentiful as in spring. At this time they consist chiefly of birds of the year, which want the collar of the adult, and are altogether of a duller hue."

Mr. Yarrell mentions that he could find no notice of the Turtledove visiting any part of Scandinavia; but Magnus von Wright includes it in his 'Birds of Finland;' and the late Mr. Wheelwright remarks:—"Strange to say, a pair of Turtledoves were shot at Quickiock a few years since, on the ground in front of the priest's house." Still its occurrence in that part of the European continent must be regarded as exceptional; from its central regions, however, to the shores of the Mediterranean it is more or less abundant in summer,

and in summer only, as it is with us. Mr. Fellowes met with it in Asia Minor; Mr. Strickland in Persia; Lieut. Sperling has seen it in abundance in Syria, Rhodes, Candia, the Ionian Islands, and Greece; Mr. Salvin found it in the Eastern Atlas; Loche states that it frequents the whole of Algeria; and we learn from the Rev. H. B. Tristram's interesting "Notes on the Ornithology of Palestine" that, "of the three species of Turtledoves inhabiting that country, the present one is by far the most abundant, but only in spring and summer, returning about the end of March and overspreading every part of the country, highland and lowland alike." In his valuable little work, 'On the Natural History of the Bible,' he says:—"But the Turtledove to which, no doubt, the various Scriptural passages refer is our own (*Turtur auritus*). Its return in spring is one of the most marked epochs in the ornithological calendar. 'The Turtle and the Crane and the Swallow observe the time of their coming.' 'For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the Turtle is heard in our land.' Search the glades and valleys, even by sultry Jordan, at the end of March, and not a Turtledove is to be seen. Return in the second week in April, and clouds of Doves are feeding on the clovers of the plain. They stock every tree and thicket. At every step they flutter up from the herbage in front, they perch on every tree and bush, they overspread the whole face of the land. So universal, so simultaneous, and so conspicuous is their migration that the prophet might well place the Turtledove at the head of those birds which 'observe the time of their coming.' While other songsters are heard chiefly in the morning or only at intervals, the Turtle, immediately on its arrival, pours forth, from every garden, grove, and wooded hill, its melancholy yet soothing ditty unceasingly from early dawn till sunset. From its fidelity to its mate, and its habit of pairing for life, among other reasons, the Dove was selected as a symbol of purity and an appropriate offering by the ancient heathens, as well as the Jews. Its amateness is referred to in the Song of Solomon; and its gentle eye has supplied several comparisons:—"Behold, thou art fair; thou hast Dove's eyes within thy locks." 'His eyes are as the eyes of Doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk and fairly set,' alluding to the bright red skin round the dark eye of the Turtle.

"The Turtledove is more numerous in Palestine than in any other country where it is found; and, indeed, the Pigeon-tribe generally abound there to a degree unknown in other countries. This is accounted for by the botanical character of that region, where the herbage principally consists of leguminous plants of the clover and allied species, the leaves of which supply the food of most Pigeons. Owing, therefore, to the luxuriant growth of the clovers and lucernes, there is no limit to the number of Doves the Holy Land can maintain in spring and summer."

The Turtledove is a frequenter of woods, fir-plantations, and the thick and high hedges between cultivated lands. The nest is a thin, transparent, flat structure, composed of a few small crossed twigs, and is usually placed on a horizontal branch, at about eight or ten feet from the ground. The eggs, which are deposited about the middle of June, are white, somewhat pointed at one end, rather more than an inch in length, and nearly an inch in breadth. "The parent birds," says Mr. Yarrell, "sit by turns; the male occasionally feeds his mate during incubation; and both afterwards mutually labour for the support of their young. In this country they are considered as producing but one brood in the season; but in the south of France they are known to have a second pair of young. In the autumn they fly in small parties of ten or twelve, and leave this country about the end of August, and sometimes as late as the end of September, particularly in those seasons when our harvest is backward. . . . I have observed that these birds are more numerous in the thickly wooded parts of the middle of Kent than elsewhere:" this agrees with my own observation; for I have seen it breed there in great numbers, and have remarked that it has become still more numerous now the pilfering Jays, who constantly robbed them of their eggs, have been killed down.

There is no difference in the external appearance of the sexes; but the young are destitute of the neck-mark, and are altogether duller in their colouring—particularly in the less pure blue-grey of the head, and the chestnut and black markings of the back and scapularies. At this age, too, the naked orbital skin is bluish, instead of red, the nostrils are large and swollen, and, as well as the bill, of a uniform dark olive; front of the tarsi and toes reddish purple; hinder part of the tarsi destitute of scutella, and of a greyish white.

The Plate represents a male and a female, with the nest, all of the natural size. The plant is the *Clematis vitalba*.

Gould, John. 1873. "Turtle Dove, *Turtur auritus* [Pl. 4]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323965>.

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