SYRRHAPTES PARADOXUS.

Pallas's Sandgrouse.

Tetrao paradoxa, Pall. Itin., tom. ii. p. 712, tab. F.; Id. Zool. Ross.-Asiat., tom. ii. p. 74.

—— *paradoxus*, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 643.

Syrrhaptes paradoxus, Ill. Prod. Syst. Mamm. et Av., p. 243.

—— *Pallasii*, Temm. Hist. Nat. des Pige. et Gall., tom. iii. pp. 282 et 716.

Heteroclitus Tataricus, Vieill.

Syrrhaptes heteroclitus, Vieill. Gal. des Ois., tom. ii. p. 64, pl. 222.

THAT an Asiatic bird, of whose history we have hitherto known but little, and which, until very recently, was the sole representative of its genus, should have suddenly made its appearance in many parts of the European continent, and in almost every district of the British Islands, is so remarkable that the occurrence may almost be regarded as a phenomenon. This unwonted exodus of a species from its native country is one of the most strange events that has happened within the memory of naturalists; and no similar instance, so far as I am aware, is on record.

With the law of migration we are now tolerably well acquainted; for we have determined with accuracy the coming and going of many of the birds which roam over our planet, and we know that this movement is an impulse regulated by the sun, the great luminary which influences creation in all her varied forms. Migration, then, is one of nature's laws, and indisputably apparent to our senses. But we can no more account for the irruption of this interesting bird into Western Europe than we can for the appearance of the American Weed (*Anacharis Canadensis*), now so widely spread over the rivers and water-courses of our island. Other instances of Asiatic birds visiting this country have, it is true, occurred; but these visits have been few and far between, and generally consisted of solitary wanderers. Pallas's Sandgrouse, on the other hand, has arrived in numbers at a time, and for several years in succession. Since its first appearance in 1859, it has been steadily arriving, either in pairs, little companies of from eight to ten in number, or in packs of from fifty to a hundred. In a letter from Mr. Rodd of Penzance, dated June 15, 1863, he states that he had just received a Sandgrouse which had been shot in the neighbourhood; and on the 27th of the same month, he informs me that a specimen was picked up dead on the Scilly Islands. In the 'John o' Groat's Journal' for the 11th of July is a notice of one having been shot in Caithness, out of a flock of eight. I mention the occurrence of the bird at these extreme points of the country to show that the immigration was by no means a contracted one. I might fill pages with a record of its occurrence in the intermediate districts; Mr. Stevenson, in a paper published by him in the 'Zoologist,' mentions that no less than sixty-three examples have been killed in the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk, between the 23rd of May and the 9th of June 1863; and many others have been killed on each side of those counties, from Romney Marsh on the south to Scarborough and Hartlepool on the north-east. It has also been seen in Wales, in the north-west of Ireland, and on the Walney Island, off the Lancashire coast. On the Continent it has occurred in all the northern parts, from Holland to Norway; but nowhere in greater abundance than in that house-of-call for strange birds, the Island of Heligoland, where M. Gätke, with his wonted perseverance, obtained many specimens. He states, in a letter in the 'Field' of July 25, 1863:—

"This very beautiful and interesting stranger was observed and shot here first on the 21st May, the weather being very fine, with a moderate easterly breeze. All successive days up to the earlier part of June this bird was seen here in flocks varying from about three, five, fifteen, to fifty, and in one or two instances even to a hundred. Out of these, near thirty have been shot—the earlier birds being, with two exceptions, all very fine male specimens, the latter, nearly all female birds—every one of them in the most perfect plumage.

"After the lapse of a fortnight, viz. on the 22nd June, again six Sandgrouse made their appearance, out of which five were shot: these, without exception, were all females, whose plumage had no longer the same fresh and tidy appearance as in the earlier instances; so that all through this abnormal and mysterious excursion, they still adhered to the rules observed by birds in their migrations, that is, the males formed the van, the finest old specimens coming first, after which the females make their appearance, the rear being invariably brought up by weak, badly developed, or injured individuals, of a shabby appearance."

Mr. Alfred Newton informs me that the bird is actually breeding on the Danish Islands, and that six or seven sets of eggs have already been found there. This circumstance tends greatly to increase the interest attached to this new comer; for it is evident that its sudden occurrence in Western Europe has been no

passing visit, but that the bird intended to take up its residence here and become one of our avifauna. What reception did this stranger from a distant land receive? No sooner did it arrive worn out with fatigue, than numerous guns were levelled for its destruction; the little flights were hunted to and fro until nearly the whole were killed, and the remnant driven we know not whither. What efforts have the Acclimatization Society made to avert this? At what cross purposes are we playing, when we are endeavouring to introduce creatures from the antipodes without the most remote chance of success, while we neglect and defeat the spontaneous offer of so interesting a bird as the Sandgrouse! Let those wealthy proprietors who have sanctioned this new Society, and given it their support, render as much protection to our new friend as will at least give it the chance of establishing itself among us. That our seasons would not be too rigorous for it is certain; for Mr. Swinhoe states that the bird winters on the plains between Peking and Tientsin, and that hundreds are captured after a fall of snow, the markets of Tientsin, where it is called Shá-chee, or Sand-fowl, being fairly glutted with them. Huc, in his 'Travels in Tartary,' when speaking of this bird, says:—"This singular creature is called by the Chinese *Loung-Kio*, that is, Dragon's Foot. They generally arrive in great flocks from the north, especially when much snow has fallen, flying with astonishing rapidity, so that the movement of their wings produces a noise like a shower of hail."

The question will very naturally arise, Is our island otherwise adapted to this bird? In some respects it is not; but there are certain barren tracts and sandy districts near the sea which would afford it a congenial home, where it might breed, and whence, like the Dove-cote Pigeon, it might make raids on the corn-fields, when a desire for a change of diet prompted it so to do, and by which means its flesh, as an article of diet, might be greatly improved; at present I fear it would not be much esteemed.

A species of such vast powers of flight, as we know this Sandgrouse to be possessed of, is no bird for the aviary, and we may well be surprised that any of the members of the valuable present of many living examples, by the Hon. James F. Stuart Wortley, to the Zoological Society should still be living. It is not a little amusing to hear the remarks of some of the visitors respecting these birds. Like the person who assured me he had seen a Humming-Bird in England, they think they have met with an old friend from India or Egypt. Let me assure all such persons, that neither Pallas's Sandgrouse nor the only other known species of the genus, the *Syrrhaptes Tibetanus*, is ever seen south of the great watershed which separates India and Persia from Tartary, and that the birds they have seen are the various species of the genus *Pterocles*, whose feet are differently formed, and whose wings are not so lengthened. The Indian and Egyptian birds, it is true, bear a general resemblance to each other; but they are quite distinct. The home, then, of the birds which have paid our shores a visit is in the Altaï and the Kirghis Steppes of Tartary, the country around Lake Baikal, and some parts of China. Here, on plains of grass and sandy deserts, at one season covered with snow and at another sun-burnt and parched up by drought, the Sandgrouse finds a congenial home; in these inhospitable and little-known regions it breeds, and, when necessity compels it so to do, wings its way, like the Bronze-winged Pigeon of the hot plains of Australia, over incredible distances to obtain water or food. Its diminutive bill, small head, and little feet, when compared with its lengthened wings and the very powerful pectoral muscles, clearly indicate that space is as nothing to it, and that a journey to Europe, when once willed, is easily accomplished.

The walk of the *Syrrhaptes* is as slow and feeble as its flight is rapid and powerful; it toddles over the ground with a laboured and uncertain step, like a Chinese lady in her boudoir.

The two sexes, as will be seen by the accompanying Plate, differ considerably in colour. The eggs are said to be four in number, but this is doubtful, since Mr. Newton informs me that three is the normal number laid by the members of the genus *Pterocles*, and that three was the number always found in the instances of their deposit on the Danish Islands above alluded to.

The Plate represents a male, a female, and three eggs, all of the size of nature.

Gould, John. 1873. "Pallas's Sandgrouse, *Syrhaptus paradoxus* [Pl. 11]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323970>.

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