EUDROMIAS MORINELLUS.

Dotterel.

Charadrius morinellus Linnæi et auctorum.

——— *Sibiricus*, Gmelin, Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 690.

——— *Tataricus* et *Asiaticus*, Pallas, Reis., vol. ii. pp. 714 et 715.

Eudromias morinellus, Boie, Gray, Blyth, &c.

Morinellus Sibiricus, Bonaparte.

IN the British Islands, and doubtless in all parts of the European continent, the Dotterel is strictly a migrant, arriving in the spring as regularly as the Swallow, and as regularly wending its way back southwards in August and September to winter, without doubt, in Northern Africa. It is during its spring passage, between the 15th of April and the 15th of May, that the Dotterel may be looked for in England, where it always evinces a decided preference for high open downs, extensive fallow fields, and the summits of mountains. The Mendip Hills in Somersetshire, the Chilton ridges in Berkshire, the chalk hills of Bedford, Hertford, and Cambridgeshires, and the Yorkshire wolds are among the many places that are annually visited by these birds. In such localities they may be seen in small parties of three or four in number, or in "trips" of ten or twenty: they are now gradually passing to their breeding-grounds on the hill-sides of Cumberland, the Grampians, and other elevated situations still further north. On the continent of Europe, the low country of Holland does not offer them a congenial home, and hence they are seldom seen there; they do, however, as in England, regularly pass over Italy, France, and all parts of Germany. The law, I believe, is that they proceed from south to north, and *vice versa*; and thus those that pass over France are *en route* to their summer home in Norway and Lapland, while those further east, in Turkey and the Crimea, are on their flight for the steppes of Russia and Western Siberia. In the autumn they as regularly return, some to winter in North-eastern Africa, others in Asia Minor, Arabia, &c. The furthest point east, from which I have received specimens, is the Crimea. According to the late Mr. Thompson, the Dotterel is rare in Ireland, and in North America it is never seen. If I had devoted years to the study of this bird, I could not have acquired more information respecting it than was communicated to Mr. Yarrell by my old friend the late J. C. Heysham, Esq., of Carlisle; and I feel I should be wanting in respect to the memory of this lover of nature were I not to transcribe the entire passage from Mr. Yarrell's 'History of British Birds':—

"In the neighbourhood of Carlisle," says Mr. Heysham, "Dotterels seldom make their appearance before the middle of May, about which time they are seen in flocks which vary in number from five to fifteen, and almost invariably resort to heaths, barren pastures, fallow grounds, &c., in open and exposed situations, where they continue, if unmolested, from ten days to a fortnight, and then retire to the mountains in the vicinity of the lakes to breed. Their most favourite breeding-haunts are always near to or on the summits of the highest mountains, particularly those that are densely covered with the woolly Fringe-moss (*Trichostomum lanuginosum*, Hedw.), which, indeed, grows more or less profusely on nearly all the most elevated parts of this Alpine district. In these lonely places they constantly reside the whole of the breeding-season, a considerable part of the time enveloped in clouds, and almost daily drenched with rain or the wetting mists so extremely prevalent in these dreary regions; and there can be little doubt that it is owing to this peculiar feature in their economy that they have remained so long in obscurity during the period of incubation. The Dotterel is by no means a solitary bird at this time, as a few pairs usually associate together, and live, to all appearance, in the greatest harmony. They do not make any nest, but deposit their eggs, which seldom exceed three in number, in a small cavity on dry ground, covered with vegetation, and generally near a moderate-sized stone or fragment of rock. In early seasons old females will occasionally begin to lay their eggs about the 26th of May; but the greater part seldom commence before the first or second week in June. The males assist the females in the incubation of their eggs. How long incubation continues I have been unable to ascertain, but I am inclined to think that it rarely lasts longer than eighteen or twenty days. A week or two previous to their departure, they congregate in flocks, and continue together until they finally leave this country, which takes place sometimes during the latter part of August, at others not before the beginning of September. A few birds are no doubt seen after this period, but they are either late broods or birds that are returning from more northern latitudes. Having spent a considerable portion of several days on Robinson, in company with a very able assistant, searching for the eggs of the Dotterel, I had, of course, ample opportunities of observing their manners. On the 3rd of July we found three or four pairs near the most elevated part of this mountain; and on all our visits thither, whether early in the morning or late in the afternoon, the greater part were always seen near the same place, sitting on the ground.

When first discovered, they permitted us to approach within a short distance, without showing any symptoms of alarm; and frequently afterwards, when within a few paces, watching their movements, some would move slowly about and pick up an insect, others would remain motionless, now and then stretching out their wings, and a few would occasionally toy with each other, at the same time uttering a few low notes which had some resemblance to those of the common Linnet. In short, they appeared to be so very indifferent with regard to our presence that at last my assistant could not avoid exclaiming, 'What stupid birds these are!' The female that had young nevertheless evinced considerable anxiety for their safety whenever we came near the place where they were concealed, and, as long as we remained in the vicinity, constantly flew to and fro above us, uttering her note of alarm. The moulting appears to commence somewhat early with old birds; a male, killed on the 25th of July, was completely covered with pen-feathers, while the belly, from incubation, was still almost bare. The stomachs I dissected were all filled with the elytra and remains of small Coleopterous insects, which, in all probability, constitute their principal food during the breeding-season."

Much as Mr. Heysham has written, and Mr. Yarrell recorded, respecting the Dotterel, neither of them makes mention of the great disparity in the size of the sexes, or of the difference in their colouring, which is the more remarkable as both these points are mentioned by Latham. From the unmistakable evidence of actual dissection, I have ascertained that the largest and most richly coloured birds are females, and that their average weight is from 5 to 5½ ounces, while the comparatively dull-coloured birds, rarely exceeding 4 ounces in weight, are males. I have often thought that the state of plumage in which they arrive in the spring is merely a seasonal dress, and that their winter garb is not characterized by that rich colouring. It would appear, too, that the young of both sexes, during their first autumn, are destitute of these colours, have the head of a nearly uniform brown, and the lunate marks of the head and chest but slightly indicated.

A history of the Dotterel would be sadly incomplete without a passing sentence on the value of the bird as an article of food and of commerce. During its vernal migration, the Dotterel has from time immemorial been captured and shot for the purposes of the table; and great numbers are annually forwarded to London, where, at this season, it may be seen gracing the shops of the respectable poulterers, such as Mr. Bailey, of Mount Street, Grosvenor Square, and Mr. Fisher, of Duke Street, Piccadilly. The Dotterel in the month of May, when the London season is at its height, and game prohibited, is quite a godsend to the epicure, competing with the fattened Quail and Ortolan, both of which, in my opinion, it far surpasses in succulency and flavour; indeed, I think it may be regarded as the very finest of the British birds for the table, the Snipe, Woodcock, and Grouse not excepted. The autumnal migration of these birds does not afford the same opportunities for procuring them as that of spring; for they return more irregularly, neither do they keep so exclusively to the downs, but disperse more generally over the country; few autumn-killed birds are therefore seen in our markets; besides which, Grouse and Partridges being now abundant, they are less in demand. Like the migratory Quail of the continent of Europe, the young Dotterels of the year far surpass the adults in flavour. I may add that no present is more acceptable to the epicure and the invalid than two or three couples of Dotterels: such a gift has been and still is deemed worthy of royalty, and whoever may have an opportunity of partaking of this delicious viand will not be disappointed.

Though perhaps not so swift as that of the Golden Plover, the flight of the Dotterel is extremely rapid; when disturbed, they take long flights for a mile or more, and then, suddenly wheeling round, often return to the spot whence they had risen. The usual mode of shooting them is to walk quickly round the trip, and gradually to diminish the circle until within range, when they become confused and are readily killed. They move over the ground with great rapidity, grace and elegance characterizing all their movements. They so love to dust themselves in the fallows or on the hill-sides, that a friend of mine, the late Mr. Hewitt, of Reading, informed me he had frequently seen them cover themselves entirely, with the exception of the head, by scratching the dust over them.

The eggs, which are generally three in number, are deposited in a depression of the ground; they are of a yellowish olive, blotched and spotted with dark-brownish black, and are one inch seven and a half lines in length by one inch two and a half lines in breadth.

The female has the crown of the head dark brown, striated with buff, a broad streak of white passing over each eye and uniting at the occiput; throat white, striated on the cheeks and lower part with fine lines of brown; neck and breast olive, bounded below by a narrow fascia of black, succeeded by a broader one of white; below this the abdomen and flanks are rufous, with a large patch of black in the centre of the latter; vent and under tail-coverts white; wings and upper surface olive-brown, each feather margined with sandy buff; primaries dark brown, the outer one with a broad white shaft, and the remainder slightly fringed with white; upper tail-coverts pale olive; base of the tail the same, passing into very dark brown near the extremity, and the lateral feathers largely tipped with white; irides dark hazel.

The Plate represents a male and female of the size of life.

Gould, John. 1873. "Dotterel, *Eudromias morinellus* [Pl. 43]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324000>.

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