GLAREOLA PRATINCOLA.

Common Pratincole.

Hirundo pratincola, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 345.

Glareola austriaca, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. pp. 695, 696.

——— *torquata*, Meyer, Taschenb. Deutschl. Vög., tom. ii. p. 404.

——— *pratincola*, Leach, Trans. Linn. Soc., vol. xiii. p. 131, pl. 12.

THE *Glareola pratincola* is the type of one of those isolated forms which have sadly puzzled systematic ornithologists as to the place they should occupy in their arrangements of birds. By many of the earlier writers it was classed with the Swallows; some of the more recent ones have noticed its Tern-like actions; while by most modern systematists it is arranged with the *Grallatores* and in close alliance with the Plovers.

The celebrated Linnæus, following Aldrovandus and Willughby, included it in the genus *Hirundo*, in the 12th and last edition of his 'Systema Naturæ' (of 1766); but at that time Linné had not seen a Pratincole, a fact of which I have become aware from a letter I possess in his own handwriting, dated 1774 (eight years later), addressed to the Reverend John White, a brother of the well-known Gilbert White, of Selborne, in which, after rendering eternal thanks for, and commenting upon the interesting objects he had just received from him, he says:—"Pratincolam antea non vidi; ad Grallas spectat, et proprii generis:" *i. e.* "Pratincola I had not seen before; it is evidently allied to the Grallæ, and forms a distinct genus." This must have been the source of information to which Latham refers in his General History, vol. ix. p. 361, where he says:—"The late Mr. White informed me that, finding Linnæus had placed this bird with the Swallows, he sent one to him, which had been shot on the shore of Gibraltar, in May 1770; on the sight of which the great naturalist concurred in opinion that it belonged to the Waders, and not to the Passerine Order." I must fairly admit that at one time I was inclined to the Hirundine theory, and regarded the bird as a terrestrial Swallow rather than, as it appears to be, an aerial Plover; and this notion prevailed with me until a very recent period, when (after soliciting various friends visiting North Africa, Spain, and India to send me young Pratincoles one or two days old, an examination of which I knew would confirm or refute my ideas on the subject) I was so fortunate as to obtain, through the kindness of Lord Lilford, two chicks of the required age in spirits, accompanied by a note informing me that the young birds run over the ground immediately after exclusion from the egg, and are not blind, naked, and helpless, like newly hatched Swallows,—facts which leave no doubt on my mind that the Pratincole should not be associated with those birds.

As Linnæus remarked, the bird does belong to a distinct genus, of which since his time several other members have been discovered, the whole now amounting to nine or ten in number, all inhabitants of the Old World, over nearly the whole of which one or other of them are distributed. In Europe there are two—*Glareola pratincola* and *G. melanoptera*; in Africa, besides these, there are at least three others; in India four or five, and in Australia two, one of which is perhaps not found elsewhere.

In England the Pratincole has been killed many times and at various seasons of the year; it has also been taken at least once in Ireland; but, as yet, Scotland has either proved to be too far north, or the birds which would have passed over England to that country have met with the usual ill fortune of accidental visitors. It is stated, however, that Bullock obtained an example in the Isle of Unst, one of the Shetland group, which, at the dispersion of his collection in 1819, was sold for eight guineas, and transferred to the British Museum.

According to Temminck, the Pratincole frequents the borders of lakes, rivers, and inland seas, particularly such as form extensive marshes covered with aquatic herbage. In Hungary, it abounds on the marshy confines of the lakes Neusidel and Balaton, where he saw it in flocks of hundreds together. It is likewise met with in some parts of Germany, France, and Spain, and also in Switzerland, Italy, Piedmont, and Savoy; but in these latter countries it must be regarded as a bird of passage or occasional visitant. Temminck also states that it breeds in Sardinia, and is very abundant in Dalmatia, on the borders of the lake Bocagnaro during its spring migration. It has been observed in Persia and in considerable flocks in the neighbourhood of the Caucasus; and I possess examples from Western India. It is also said to resort to Tartary, but not to go further north than latitude 53°; and it will be seen from the following notes that it frequents Palestine &c. Mr. Osbert Salvin found the Pratincole frequenting the salt lakes and freshwater marshes of the tableland of the interior of the Eastern Atlas, and says:—"Its fearless manner and familiar habits cause it to rank high among the interesting birds of the country. When in proximity to their breeding-places, the whole flock comes wheeling and screaming round, while some dart passionately down to within a few feet of the intruder's head, retiring again to make another descent. When the first transports of excitement

are over, they all alight one by one on the ground. Some stand quite still, watching with inquiring gaze; while others stretch themselves out, first expanding one wing, then the other, and, sitting down, extend both legs. In this position they remain some seconds, as if dead, when suddenly springing up they make another circuit overhead, and the whole flock passes quietly away. The Pratincole makes no nest, but deposits its three eggs in a slight depression of the bare sand. They are usually placed with their axes parallel. We several times visited places where numbers of these birds were breeding, yet we never succeeded in finding a young one, though many of the eggs were on the point of being hatched. This fact favours the idea that on leaving the egg the young are capable of running like those of other *Gallæ*. The Pratincoles often attracted my attention by their incessant cries and furious attacks, as if resenting my intrusion on their domain."

Col. Drummond-Hay informs me that he frequently observed the Pratincole skimming and hovering over the marshy plains about thirteen miles from Tangier, where it breeds; but never saw the bird in any other part of Eastern Morocco. To this gentleman I am also indebted for the following note, which he obligingly procured for me from M. François Favier, a French naturalist, resident in Tangier:—

"Here the Pratincole usually deposits its eggs during the month of May, in the small depressions made by the feet of animals, in meadows which are overflowed in winter. A second laying seems to take place in July, as recently hatched young birds are found in June and August."

The egg figured by Mr. Hewitson is of an olivaceous stone-colour, spotted with dark brown; but he says that the ground-colour is frequently much darker than in the one represented in his work.

Lieut. Sperling says:—"Whilst boar-shooting on the Plain of Sharon, I shot some Pratincoles. There were a great many of them hawking for insects over the fields, flying at a height of about twenty feet, and continually uttering a sound between a low scream and a whistle. The stomach of one I examined was very full of coleopterous and other insects. I rather think they catch as many on the ground as on the wing; for they frequently settle, and run with all the ease of a Plover. They roost on the ground, and fly late at night, their large eyes being well adapted for seeing in the dusk."

The Rev. H. B. Tristram states that "the Pratincole (*Glareola pratincola*) disappears from Palestine in winter, but returns in great numbers to all the marshy plains in spring, when we found them on their breeding-grounds, where they can be shot in any numbers, as they keep hovering over the intruders, undismayed by repeated discharges of the gun. As in Africa, they lay their eggs in a footprint in the barest spots, without the slightest nest; they are never found where there is a vestige of vegetation, and, from their great similarity to the pebbles and bits of clay around, are very difficult to discover, while the bird employs all the artifices of a Lapwing to decoy the spoiler from them."

In the note from Lord Lilford accompanying the chicks above mentioned, he says:—"The two young Pratincoles were taken in the great marshes on the Guadalquivir, in June 1869, and had only left the eggs a few hours. They were brought to me alive; and I can positively state that they run immediately after being hatched. Pratincoles are very abundant in spring and summer in the locality above mentioned. The flight and cry of these birds, their habit of hawking for insects on the wing, and the colour of their eyes forcibly reminded me of the Terns."

About the beginning of August the young birds fly about with the adults, which, being very much attached to their progeny, accompany them until the commencement of September, when they all move southward for the winter. Their flight is described as of extraordinary rapidity; and their evolutions are said to be exceedingly graceful, quick, and beautiful. "When a flight passes through the air within sight, they proceed very swiftly, and on lowering to alight they shoot like arrows by one another; finally they once more open their wings to their full length, raise them highly, and then settle, rather closely spread, over the ground."

The sexes do not appear to differ in their colouring, and but little in size.

The Plate represents the two sexes and the young, of the size of life.

I have figured four young birds, under the impression that, as with the Plovers, this was the normal number; but Lord Lilford is of opinion that three would have been more correct.

Gould, John. 1873. "Common Pratincole, Glareola pratincola [Pl. 46]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324003>.

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