MACHETES PUGNAX.

Illustrated by H.C. Richter, del. et lith.

Walter, Imp.

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Ruff.

- Tringa pugnax*, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 62.
—— *littorea*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 251.
—— *rufescens*, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 332.
—— *equestris et grenovicensis*, Lath. Ind. Orn., tom. ii. pp. 730, 731.
—— *variegata*, Brünn, Orn. Bor., p. 54.
Totanus pugnax, Nilss.
Machetes pugnax, Cuv. Regn. Anim., tom. i. p. 490.
—— *planiceps*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 671.
—— *alticeps*, Brehm, ib., p. 670, tab. 34. fig. 4.
Pavoncella pugnax, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 29.
Philomachus pugnax, G. R. Gray, List of Gen. of Birds, 1841, p. 89.
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On taking up my pen to say a few words respecting the Ruff, I am fully aware of the high interest which attaches to the subject; for of all the Sandpipers this bird is the most extraordinary, and possesses characters unlike any other. In nearly all the species of the great family of *Tringinae* the females are the largest of the two sexes; but in the Ruff the females or Reeves are about half the size of the males. During spring, or the breeding-season, too, the male is adorned with the most profuse ornamentation, in the shape of neck-plumes and ear-tufts, that can be conceived; for not even among the *Gallinae* is this feature more strongly developed; at the same time a multitude of fleshy tubercles appear on the face, which, as well as the ruff and ear-tufts, disappear at the close of the breeding-season. To this must be added that, while most of the Sandpipers are excellent for the table, the Ruff and his little partner the Reeve are especially so. For all time since birds were eaten, and delicacies sought after for the delectation of the epicure, these birds have been highly esteemed, and have ever formed part of the great feasts given by kings and other potentates, and are still in high favour; for even at the moment I am penning these lines (May 1871) London teems with examples for the enjoyment of those who can afford their purchase. Those which now appear in our markets have been snared or otherwise obtained in Holland. Formerly, even so late as the commencement of the present century, there was no need for this Dutch supply; for sufficient for the demand could then be obtained in Norfolk and Lincolnshire. Now a solitary pair, or at most a score, are all that those counties are able to send us in a month. Ruffs and Reeves, in fact, like many other marsh-loving birds, find their place there no more, the draining and clearing of the fens having deprived such localities of the conditions fitted for their existence; the sites which afforded a natural home to the Bittern, the Spoonbill, the Ruff and Reeve, and many other birds are now covered with waving corn, and afford an abundance of cereal, instead of feathered, food for man. In many parts of Holland, however, and particularly in the northern portion of Friesland, the Ruff and other marsh-birds still are found in their usual abundance, the land therein not being capable of improvement. There are many other parts of the Continent in which similar physical conditions occur, and where the Ruff is also found: these are some portions of France, Belgium, the great swamps at the mouth of the Danube, Turkey, and Russia. To all such places the Ruff migrates in the month of April, and, taking his stand upon some small hillock, like a knight of old, challenges his neighbour to mortal combat, until the females arrive and select the strongest, the vanquished getting a mate or not as the case may be. These matters settled, the nesting soon commences, and the marsh is speedily studded over with nests, or rather with depressions in the ground, where the female hatches her four beautiful eggs and rears her young, which, like most youthful Sandpipers, are at first covered with a variegated down, and are but feeble creatures. After some little time, however, they attain strength, and, plumage taking the place of their first downy covering, they are able to exercise their pinions, and fly from the place of their birth to the shores of the sea and other suitable localities, not only in every part of Europe and Africa, but in India and China. I do not mean that the Ruffs found in the two last-mentioned countries are birds that have been bred in Holland, but that probably similar colonies also occur in Russia and Siberia; so numerous is this remarkable bird. Besides the extraordinary development of the frill in the Ruff, there is another circumstance connected with it which renders it still more astonishing—namely, that it is all but impossible to find two males in which it is similarly coloured; but whatever may be the colouring first assumed, it is retained through each subsequent change. Thus, if the prevailing colour at the first assumption be red, it will be of that hue at the recurrence of each successive breeding-season; if black, black it will

be in like manner, and so on. Page after page has been written respecting the Ruff; all, however, conveys but a feeble idea of the interest which attaches to this singular bird.

"In its polygamous nature," says Mr. Selby, "this species differs from the rest of its congeners, such peculiarities producing the difference of habits that so remarkably distinguish it during the season of reproduction. Shortly after the arrival of the males in this country, which takes place during the month of April, and as soon as the feathers of the throat and the auricular tufts become almost fully developed, they begin to *hill*, as it is termed,—that is, to assemble in companies on some dry hillock or rising spot of ground amidst the marshes, each individual selecting a particular stand or *walk* at a small distance from his neighbour, any attempt to encroach upon which is instantly resented, and the possession of it most obstinately defended. Here each bird keeps moving in his respective circle, awaiting the approach of any one of the other sex, whose appearance immediately throws the whole assemblage into excitement, and acts as a signal for a general fight, her favours being the prize of victory. Each morning, soon after daybreak, when the males return to their hill from the surrounding marshes, over which they disperse and feed during the night, the same kind of warfare takes place; and the theatre of these battles and amours soon becomes bare of grass, from the constant traversing of the combatants. This scene continues during the month of May and great part of June, until their mutual fervour begins to abate, indicated in the male bird by the shedding of the ruff and auricular plumes and the commencement of a general moult. The papillæ or fleshy tubercles that cover the face and the region of the eyes during the height of the season disappear; and in a short time they become clothed in a plumage so unlike that of the early summer as to be with difficulty recognized. With this difference of plumage a change is also wrought in their disposition; for they no longer exhibit the extreme pugnacity that distinguished them during the time of *hilling*. In fighting, the actions of the Ruff are not unlike those of the Common Cock: the head is lowered and held in a horizontal direction; and the feathers of the neck which form the shield are distended outwards, so as to cover and protect the tender parts of the body; the auricular feathers are erected, and the tail partly expanded. In this attitude the combatants stand opposed to each other, attempting to lay hold with their bills; and if this is effected, by a leap the wings are then brought into offensive action. As might be expected from the nature of their weapons, their contests are not often attended with fatal consequences. The females, generally called Reeves, possess no elongated feathers; and their plumage of summer varies but little from that of autumn and winter. They live in the marshes, and resort to the hills of the males at stated periods. The place selected for nidification is commonly of the most swampy nature, abounding in tufts of tall grass and other marsh-plants, and upon these the nest is formed, being only a slight depression lined with coarse grass and herbage. The eggs, four in number, are in colour and markings very like those of the Common Snipe, but rather larger. In the wild state, the food of the Ruff consists of worms, aquatic insects, and their larvæ; but in confinement they soon eat bread and milk, boiled wheat, and other farinaceous diet with avidity, upon which they soon become very fat."

Macgillivray states that on the east coast of Scotland Ruffs usually appear about the middle of September, and depart in about a fortnight. The bird is not known to breed in any part of Scotland or its islands; and it is therefore more than probable that the small flocks which are not unfrequently met with on the shores of the Frith of Forth, the east coast of Aberdeenshire, &c. have winged their way from Scandinavia, on some parts of which the bird is more common during the summer. According to Thompson, the Ruff "visits Ireland on its autumnal migration southward not unfrequently, but very rarely appears on its vernal movement northward."

In Iceland it is so rare that only a single instance has been recorded of its occurrence there; and that was as far back as 1820.

Loche states that it visits Algeria during its migrations; and we may infer that it spreads itself in all suitable situations in Africa.

Dr. Jerdon says that "the Ruff and Reeve are found in large numbers in India during the cold season, sometimes assembling in vast flocks. They are frequently found in grass-land and damp meadows at some distance from water, at other times on the edges of tanks. They feed greedily on rice, and are most excellent eating."

Mr. Swinhoe states that it visits the interior of China in winter, from Kamtschatka and Siberia, where it is common.

Like Mr. Selby, I must refer my readers, for a full and interesting account of the Ruff, the modes of taking them, &c., to the Supplement to Montagu's 'Ornithological Dictionary,' art. "Ruff," and also to the Rev. Richard Lubbock's 'Observations on the Fauna of Norfolk.'

The front figures represent a Ruff and a Reeve, of the natural size.

MACHAETES PUGNAX.

Ruff and Reeve in the plumage of the first autumn

Gould, John. 1873. "Ruff, *Machetes pugnax* [Pl. 61-62]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324018>.

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