PELIDNA CINCLUS.

Dunlin.

Tringa Schinzii, Brehm?

—— *alpina*, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 64.

—— *cinclus*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 251.

—— *variabilis*, Meyer, Taschenb. Deutschl. Vög., tom. ii. p. 397.

Numenius variabilis, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 141.

Pelidna variabilis, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 98.

—— *cinclus*, Bonap. Geog. and Comp. List of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 50.

DURING the months of autumn and winter the sea-shores of most parts of our island are constantly enlivened by flocks of Dunlins, which at one moment are winging their way out to sea, and at the next sweeping round towards the beach, showing their grey-brown backs as they go away, and their silvery-white breasts as they approach; at another time the oozy mud-flats are covered by these little birds of elegant form, sprightly actions, and a disposition at once tame and unsuspecting. Flocks of the like kind are also to be seen in all similar situations on our larger tidal rivers; and every one who has been fortunate enough to tread in summer the blooming heather, and inhale the invigorating air of our northern hills (the Cheviots and the Grampians), must have seen a little restless black-breasted bird flying towards him, or endeavouring to entice him from one part of the moor to another. This is the same bird in a different state of plumage. What wonderful transformations are the Sandpipers and Plovers subject to! How differently are they clothed at opposite seasons of the year! and how well does the dress of each season accord with the colouring of the objects by which the bird is surrounded! How charmingly do their rich summer dresses harmonize with the hues of the flowering heaths and other gaily-coloured plants of their alpine home, when all nature seems to exult in what she has accomplished even in those lonely wastes, the stillness of which is only broken by the plaintive pipe of the Golden Plover and its "page," as the subject of the present paper has been called! and at this period it has also received the trivial names of Purre, and Redbacked Sandpiper, while at the opposite one it is known as the Dunlin, Ox-bird, and Stint. A glance at the accompanying Plates, on which the bird is figured in its summer and in its winter dress, will at once enable the reader to see how greatly it differs, and how different is the kind of situation it frequents at those opposite periods of the year. In the former they will not fail to observe the scattered flock hurrying off from one of their natural enemies, the Merlin: the two birds in the foreground are scarcely awake to their danger; and one is in the act of stretching its wing, in case its pinions need be called into play. It will be unnecessary to state that the second Plate represents the bird in its summer dress; for the little richly-coloured and interesting young of a few days old, and the elegant plant known by the name of *Pinguicula*, both indicate the season it is intended to illustrate.

Speaking of the vast numbers of Dunlins occasionally seen at one time, the late Mr. Thompson, of Ireland, says, "On the 27th of January, 1847, I saw a flock of not less than 2500, and about 300 yards from them another of 1500. The larger body rising into the air, and going through their brilliant evolutions, attracted the attention of every one on the adjacent highway, most of the people standing still in admiration of them. Descending from on wing, they all swept down in the same direction, and covered an extent of land in such a manner as to remind me of grain thrown from the hands of the sower, until it reaches the ground and is scattered over its surface. Every bird of the multitude, on alighting moved at the same moderate pace, between walking and running, about equidistant from each other; and their heads being all similarly elevated, they had a most formal and singular appearance. All, too, were, as usual when congregating at any season, uttering their notes, which sounded most pleasingly musical. The voices of a host of Dunlins occasionally gives as good an illustration of multitudinous sound as I can well imagine. On the 24th of December, 1840, after the tide had ebbed for a considerable way, I saw more Dunlins close to the road before Fort William than I had ever previously observed in so small a space. There could not have been less than 5000. As many as 3000 were in a dense flock, busily feeding and keeping up a thrilling concert—like grey linnets previous to roosting; the others were somewhat more scattered. The great body first appeared glancing in the sun, then it broke up into a dozen flocks, which rose and fell in the air like molten silver. One of the finest effects is when the background is so dark that the birds are only to be seen in silvery whiteness, flashing their under plumage upon us. The uncertainty as to where they may next appear—like that of lightning from an extensive mass of thunder-cloud—adds much to the effect. Only for a space 'brief as the lightning in the collied night' can they be observed under such circumstances."

Although it would scarcely be of interest to enumerate the localities in which the Dunlin is found in the British Islands (so general is its distribution therein), it will be desirable to give the extent of its range over other countries, which I am able to do with some degree of accuracy. Besides being met with at one or other season of the year in all parts of Europe, it occurs in Iceland, and in so many places in Africa as to induce the belief that it is distributed over the whole of that vast continent. We know that it is equally numerous in Asia: I have in my own collection specimens from Japan, the Malay peninsula, and India. The bird of this form which is found in North America is considered by some naturalists to be identical with our own; and even Prof. Baird, in his recently published list of the birds of that country, enumerates it as variety *Americana*. I must, however, remark that American examples are always larger than European, and that those from Japan differ in a similar manner; but the variation in size is not, in my opinion, sufficient to constitute a species. It is probable that the Dunlin does not breed in any southern country, and that the northern hemisphere is generally resorted to for the purpose of reproduction, its southern limit being the latitude of the central parts of England, and its northern far within the Arctic circle, whence proceed the greater part of the vast flocks so universally spread over our shores and those of other countries in winter. From no southern country, so far as I recollect, are examples ever sent in the summer livery, *i. e.* with black breasts and richly variegated backs.

The sexes are alike; or if there be any difference, the female is less highly coloured in summer than the male; she is also a trifle larger in size, has a longer bill, and stands somewhat higher upon her legs.

During the spring of the present year, Mr. Gatecombe, of Plymouth, very kindly sent me twelve Dunlins for examination; and in every instance the females were the largest and heaviest—the average weight being $1\frac{3}{4}$ oz., and the female 2 oz. These twelve birds afforded me an opportunity of taking admeasurements of the various parts of their structure, and of making a minute comparison of the sexes: the results, which I carefully noted down at the time, fully confirm what I have above stated; but it is unnecessary to give the details, the bird being so well known.

The nesting-place is merely a depression in the ground, with the addition occasionally of a few materials so slight as to be unworthy of the name of a nest. The eggs, which are pointed in form, and rich in marking, are four in number. The chicks or fledglings run about nimbly the day they are excluded from the shell, and are surpassingly pretty, as will be seen on reference to the accompanying plate.

The flesh as an article of diet is very inferior to that of the Snipe; still many thousands are annually sent to the markets of the Metropolis and other large towns of this and other countries.

"About the second week in July," says St. John, "the shore and sands are enlivened by vast flocks, or rather clouds, of Dunlins, Ring-Dotterels, and other birds of the same kind, which now coming down from their scattered breeding-places collect in immense companies. When the tide ebbs, all these birds are employed in searching for the minute shell-fish and animalcula upon which they feed; and vast indeed must be the supply required. About the lochs and swamps the young Snipes and Redshanks begin to fly, and, with wild ducks, afford plenty of shooting." (Tour in Sutherlandshire, vol. i. p. 247.)

Macgillivray states that "the Dunlins breed in great numbers on the heaths of many parts of Scotland and its larger islands, where they may be found scattered in the haunts selected by the Golden Plovers, with which they are so frequently seen in company that they have popularly obtained the name of Plovers' Pages. Sometimes about the middle of April, but always before that of May, they are seen dispersed over the moors in pairs, like the birds just named, which at this season they greatly resemble in manners. From this period until August, none are to be found along the shores of the sea, instead of searching which they now seek for insects and worms in the shallow pools, soft ground, and by the edges of lakes and marshes. The male frequently flies up to a person intruding upon his haunts, and sometimes endeavours to entice him away by feigning lameness.

"The nest, which is composed of some bits of withered grass or sedge, and small twigs of heath, is placed in a slight hollow, generally on a bare spot, and usually in a dry place like that selected by the Golden Plover. The eggs—always four in number—are ovato-pyriform, an inch and four- or five-twelfths in length, eleven-twelfths or a little more in breadth, and have a light greyish-green, or sometimes greenish-yellow or brownish ground, irregularly marked all over with spots and patches of sombre brown and light purplish grey, more numerous toward the larger end, where they are confluent. The female sits very assiduously, often allowing a person to come quite close to her before removing, which she does in a fluttering and cowering manner."

In this country we very frequently find Dunlins of a small size but not different in colour or markings from those ordinarily met with. These, which are doubtless the *Tringa schinzii* of Brehm, must, in my opinion, be regarded merely as a variety, and not as distinct.

The first Plate represents the Dunlin in its winter dress; the second the bird and young as it appears in summer. The plant is the *Pinguicula vulgaris*, kindly sent to me by the Rev. H. Harpur Crewe.

PELIDNA CINCIUS.
(Winter plumage)

Gould, John. 1873. "Dunlin, *Pelidna cinclus* [Pl. 69-70]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324025>.

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