MACRORAMPHUS GRISEUS.

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Red-breasted or Brown Snipe.

Scolopax grisea, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 658 (1788).

——— *noveboracensis*, Gmel. ibid., tom. i. p. 658.

——— *Paykullii*, Nilss. Orn. Suec., tom. ii. p. 106.

Totanus noveboracensis, Sab. in Frankl. Journ. App., p. 687.

Macrorhamphus griseus, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 31 (1816).

Scolopax leucophaea, Vieillot, Nouv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat., tom. iii. p. 358 (nec Latham).

MR. HARTING has favoured me with the following communication respecting the Red-breasted or Brown Snipe:—"At least fifteen instances have been recorded of the occurrence of this bird in Great Britain (for particulars see my 'Handbook of British Birds,' p. 144). Of these, ten specimens were killed in autumn, when scarcely any trace could be seen of the beautiful rufous colouring which marks the breeding-plumage." Some of these occurrences are indicated by Mr. Harting in the following order:—One, Devonshire, 1801, Mont. Orn. Dict.; one, Devonshire, Moore, Mag. Nat. Hist. 1837, p. 320; one, near Carlisle, 25th Sept. 1835; one, Yarmouth, autumn, 1836, Stevenson's 'Birds of Norfolk,' vol. ii. p. 348; one, Yarmouth, Oct. 1841, in the collection of Mr. J. H. Gurney; one, Hornsey, Norfolk, Oct. 9th, 1845; one, Point of Ayr, Isle of Man, 1847, Zoologist, 1856, p. 5251; one, on the Thames near Battersea, Harting, 'Birds of Middlesex,' in the collection of F. Bond, Esq.; one, Scilly, Oct. 1857, Rodd, Zoologist, 1857; one, Kingsbridge, Devon, 1857; one, sands near Banff, Sept. 1858; one, on the Brent, Middlesex, Oct. 1862, in Mr. Harting's collection; one, Dumbarnie Links, Sept. 1867, Gray's 'Birds of Western Scotland,' p. 314; and one on the Clyde, R. Gray, Ibis, 1870, p. 292. Thus it will be seen that individuals of the *Macrorhamphus griseus* have been seen and shot in various parts of our islands from the days of Montagu to the present period; and doubtless, as time rolls on, similar visits will be repeated. Still all such individuals must be regarded as mere casual visitors which have probably been blown out of their course during their autumnal migrations in their native country, America.

From the commencement of the present work it has been a question with me how far we are justified in calling such American wanderers British Birds; and I should not have included them had I not been aware that I should be censured for not doing so by many of my subscribers, who consider that any of those that have appeared in such popular works as those of Selby, Yarrell, &c. should have a place in the present publication; and it is a deference to their opinion which must plead my excuse for figuring many birds from foreign countries which have merely paid solitary visits to our shores.

Perhaps in the whole range of ornithology there is not a more singular form than the present bird. Structurally it is closely allied to the true Snipes, while in its colouring and in the seasonal changes of plumage to which it is subject it is as nearly related to the Sandpiper. As might naturally be expected, its habits and economy are intermediate, resembling those of both groups, as the following notes, principally taken from transatlantic authors who have the bird constantly before them, will show.

First, however, let me speak of the range of this species. The Red-breasted Snipe may be said to inhabit the whole of North America, summering and breeding as far as the Arctic circle, and returning south at the opposite season to Texas, Mexico, and even to the Pacific coasts of Guatemala, as shown by Mr. Salvin, who states in his notes that he saw specimens in that country in 1863 (*vide* Ibis, 1865):—"Another common wader frequenting the sandbanks was the Brown Snipe, *Macrorhamphus griseus*. I used always to see it feeding in the open, where there was no cover whatever, its habits strongly contrasting in this respect with those of the Common Snipe, to which it is closely allied. This bird and the European Woodcock, *Scolopax rusticola*, seem to represent two extremes as regards choice of feeding-ground, the true Snipes occupying an intermediate place."

"This bird," says Wilson, "has a considerable resemblance to the Common Snipe, not only in its general form, size, and colour, but likewise in the excellence of its flesh, which is in high estimation. It differs, however, greatly from the Common Snipe in its manners and in many other peculiarities, a few of which, as far as I have myself observed, may be sketched as follows:—

The Red-breasted Snipe arrives on the sea-coast of New Jersey early in April; is seldom or never seen inland; early in May it proceeds to the north to breed, and returns by the latter part of July or beginning of August. During its stay here it flies in flocks, sometimes very high, and has then a loud and shrill whistle, making many evolutions over the marshes—forming, dividing, and reuniting. They sometimes

settle in such numbers, and so close together, that eighty-five have been shot at one discharge of a musket. They spring from the marshes with a loud twirling whistle, generally rising high and making several circuitous manœuvres in the air before they descend. They frequent the sand-bars and mud-flats at low water in search of food; and being less suspicious of a boat than of a person on shore are easily approached by this medium and shot down in great numbers. They usually keep by themselves, being very numerous, are in excellent order for the table in September, and on the approach of winter retire to the south. I have frequently amused myself with the various actions of these birds. They fly very rapidly, sometimes wheeling, coursing, and doubling along the surface of the marshes, then shooting high in air, there separating and forming in various bodies, uttering a kind of quivering whistle. Among many which I opened in May were several females that had very little rufous below their back, were also much lighter, and less marbled with ferruginous. The eggs contained in their ovaries were some of them as large as garden-peas."

The above passage is extracted from Sir William Jardine's edition of Wilson's 'American Ornithology,' vol. ii. p. 337, where will be found the following note by the learned Editor:—

"This bird will stand in the rank of a subgenus. It was first indicated by Leach in the 'Catalogue to the British Museum,' under the title of *Macrorhamphus griseus*. It is one of those beautifully connecting forms which it is impossible to place without giving a situation to themselves, and intimately connects the Snipes with *Totanus* and *Limosa*. The bill is truly that of *Scolopax*, while the plumage and changes ally it to the other genera; from these blending characters it has been termed *Limosa scolopacea* by Say, who gave the characters of the form without applying the name."

Audubon, in his 'Ornithological Biography' (vol. iv. p. 287), says:—"The flight of this bird is rapid, strong, and remarkably well sustained. When rising in large numbers, which they usually do simultaneously, they crowd together, are apt to launch upwards in the air for a while, and, after performing several evolutions in contrary directions, glide towards the ground, and wend their way close to it until, finding a suitable place, they alight in a very compact body, and stand for a moment. Sometimes, as if alarmed, they recommence their meandering flight, and after a while return to the same spot, alighting in the same manner. Then is the time when the gunner may carry havoc amongst them; but in two or three minutes they separate and search for food, when you must either put them up to have a good shot, or wait the arrival of another flock at the same place, which often happens; for these birds seldom suffer any of their species to pass without sending them a note of invitation. It is not at all uncommon to shoot twenty or thirty of them at once. I have been present when 127 were killed by discharging three barrels, and have heard of many dozens having been procured at a shot. When wounded and brought to the water, they try in vain to dive, and on reaching the nearest part of the shore they usually run a few steps and squat among the grass, when it becomes difficult to find them. Those which have escaped unhurt often remain looking after their dead companions, sometimes waiting until shot at a second time. When they are fat, they afford good eating; but their flesh is at no time so savoury as that of the common American Snipe."

In Swainson and Richardson's 'Fauna Boreali-Americana,' p. 398, it is stated:—"This bird is well known in the fen-countries, and has an extensive breeding-range from the borders of Lake Superior to the Arctic Sea. In the breeding-season, the whole under-plumage is buff-coloured, approaching to ferruginous, in which state it has not hitherto been described. Individuals killed on the Saskatchewan plains had their crops filled with leeches and fragments of coleoptera. The *Scolopax noveboracensis* forms a link between the Snipes and Godwits, having the bill of the former and the feet of the latter."

The principal figure in the accompanying Plate represents this bird in full summer dress, the reduced figure one in a state of change.

Gould, John. 1873. "Red-breasted or Brown Snipe, *Macrorhamphus griseus* [Pl. 76]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, –. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324031>.

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