SCOLOPAX RUSTICOLA, Linn.

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Woodcock.

Scolopax rusticola, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 60.

——— *major*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Spec. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 31.

——— *pinetorum*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 613, pl. 32. fig. 3.

——— *sylvestris*, Brehm, ibid., p. 614.

Rusticola vulgaris, Vieill. Nouv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat., tom. iii. p. 348.

——— *sylvestris*, Macgill. Man. of Nat. Hist. Orn., vol. ii. p. 105.

THE principal summer home of the Woodcock is the northern portion of the Old World; and so widely is it spread over those parts of the globe that it is to be met with from eastern Siberia to the western extremity of Europe. There the main body of the Woodcocks lay their eggs and rear their young; and thence, when nature prompts them so to do, they migrate in a southern direction, those of Kamtschatka probably resorting to Japan, those frequenting Mongolia to China, and those which have bred in western Siberia and Thibet proceeding to the mountainous districts of Burmah, India, Afghanistan, and Persia. It must therefore be the Woodcocks that summer in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia which spread over the British Islands, continental Europe, Palestine, and North Africa. The bird also breeds yearly in the Madeiras, and, according to Mr. Frederick Godman, in the Azores. It has also once occurred in Newfoundland.

Now, although I have spoken of the Woodcock as an inhabitant of the north, there is not, I believe, a county in the central portion of England, or any part of Scotland or Ireland, in which it does not yearly breed in considerable abundance; these, however, are but few when compared with the great numbers which resort for this purpose to the countries above alluded to.

It is well known that the impulse which periodically stimulates a species to change its position is equally strong, whether the bird be in confinement or at large; a Turtledove in a cage, or a Cuckoo brought up by hand, each will destroy itself by dashing its head against the roof of its prison at the period when its fellows depart for other climes; and, I believe, the Woodcocks which are bred in England and Scotland are prompted to leave their native woods, as the Snipes do the fells, and to proceed southward when the proper season arrives, like those whose breeding-quarters lie further north. All our native-bred birds, however, may not leave the British islands; and I think it probable that the flights which appear yearly in Cornwall and the Scilly Islands may be a portion of them. These flights, which are said to arrive from the east, might go out to sea from our south coast and, if they encounter adverse winds, double back upon Cornwall and Scilly. If this be not the case, I cannot account for their occurrence at the early period at which they are said to arrive. Mr. Rodd states that they make their first appearance in the neighbourhood of the Land's End about the second week of October, and the first flights usually take place with a south-east wind; and Mr. Augustus Smith has furnished me with a precisely similar account of the arrival of the bird on the Scilly Islands.

I need not recapitulate the hundreds of recorded instances of the bird's breeding in England, Scotland, and Ireland; but in confirmation of the fact I may state that I have myself several times received young birds from localities in the counties of Middlesex, Surrey, and Kent, as near to London as Caen Wood, at Highgate, on the north, and Streatham Common on the south. The Marquis Camden tells me that at least a dozen nests have been found during a single season in his woods in Sussex.

The late Mr. St. John states, in his 'Tour in Sutherlandshire,' that "the Woodcock breeds every season in the north of Scotland, not only in the large fir-plantations, but also in the smaller patches of birch &c. which fringe the shores of many of the most northern lakes. That those bred in the country migrate, I have no doubt, as they all invariably disappear for two or three months between summer and the first frosts of winter. As I have seen their nests at all times from March to August, it is natural to suppose that the Woodcock breeds more than once in the season."

Mr. Atholl MacGregor writes me word that Mr. White, the head keeper on Lord Mansfield's estate in Scotland, says "that all the under keepers can testify to Woodcocks breeding in every wood, and that one of them states that between thirty and forty remained in the covers under his charge during the months of April and May 1864, and that the greater number of them bred. Mr. White adds that in a short walk on the 23rd of July he flushed three couples, and that his own impression is that they breed two or three times in the summer, he having seen broods in the same stage of plumage both in May and August. When the month of August or September is dry, many of the birds leave; but he thinks they do not go out of the country."

The late Mr. Thompson, after recording, in his 'Natural History of Ireland,' numerous instances of the birds breeding in that country, remarks, "In the years 1847, 1848, and 1849, Woodcocks bred abundantly in Tollymore Park, not less than thirty nests having been seen each year; and they have now become so common-place as to be comparatively but little noticed."

With all this testimony as to the bird's breeding in various parts of the British Islands, does it not become necessary that we should bestow upon it all the protection in our power? and should not the Legislature lend its aid towards this end? Are we not all alike interested in the preservation of so fine a bird? Would it not be more rational to do so than to pay so much attention to the introduction of foreign species, with a view to their acclimatization, with far less likelihood of any good result? Nay, are we not "killing the goose that lays the golden egg" when every scamp who can borrow a gun is permitted to shoot these birds in their evening flights, or "roadings," during the months of March and April? I sincerely trust that, if this bird be not hereafter reckoned among the species designated game, it may be deemed advisable to pass a law inflicting a heavy penalty for every Woodcock killed between the 1st of February and the 12th of August. Were ordinary protection afforded to the bird, I see no reason why it should not become vastly more numerous than it is at present. Every sportsman is aware that during the last fortnight in January the Woodcocks are found in pairs—mated in fact for the coming task of reproduction—that its skin is then scurfy, its flesh strong, very inferior in flavour, and comparatively unfit for the table.

I now come to a part of the history of the Woodcock, which has been a stumbling-block to all sportsmen and ornithologists—whether there be any outward difference in the plumage by which the sexes may with certainty be determined, and why so much variation occurs in their size, weight, and measurements. To these points I have paid much attention during a long life, and with a view to their elucidation have carefully examined hundreds of examples killed by others, as well as those that have fallen to my own gun, which have not been few. Many of these I have dissected, measured, and weighed the moment after they were killed; and I must admit that at the end of a day's shooting I am still unable to say with certainty, from their size or plumage, which are males and which females: this partly arises from the circumstance of there being two distinct races frequently intermingled in the same coverts. Such races occur among many of our birds, but have no specific value. During their vernal migration these races generally keep separate from each other, and some flights will be composed of a small red race, while others will be exclusively large dark-grey birds. In the case of the common Snipe, I have ascertained that the male is undoubtedly the larger bird; and if there be any difference between the sexes of the Woodcock, I believe it will be the same as in that bird; at the same time I must remark that dissection has proved that many of the large and long-billed birds are females. Some sportsmen assert that they can distinguish the sexes by an examination of the outer primary, and affirm that those birds which have the external margin of that feather plain or devoid of tooth-like markings are males, and those in which they exist are females. But they are absent in both sexes of very old birds; for I have wings of females in my collection in which the outer margin of the first primary is totally devoid of the toothed character. When the young Woodcock assumes his first primaries, which he does at the age of two or three weeks, the outer feather is strongly marked; as he grows older this feature gradually disappears; and I have frequently seen specimens with the outer primary toothed for half its length, and the other part plain.

Some English counties are less adapted to the habits of the Woodcock than others; and their continuance in those best suited to them depends greatly upon the non-disturbance of the coverts in which they have settled themselves, from the date of their arrival in November to the end of the shooting-season. Inclement and frosty weather will induce the birds to remove from one locality to another, and even to quit a district; but they will again return at the first favourable opportunity. In the charming park at Chillingham in Northumberland, Woodcocks are sufficiently numerous in the early part of the season to satisfy its noble and excellent owner; I believe, however, the bags are never very extraordinary; still thirty or forty Cocks may sometimes be laid upon the grass at the end of a November day's shooting; at least, so I was told by the Earl of Tankerville during a pleasant visit I paid to his border Castle. The number of Cocks at Hawkstone varies considerably, twenty or thirty being generally the result of a day's sport when the covers are shot. To this beautiful seat I have for the last thirty years been most kindly favoured with an invitation, to shoot over some of the best beats; and I would here express my obligations to Lord Hill for his unvaried kindness. As an evidence that Norfolk, so abundantly supplied with game, is not wanting in coverts favourable to the Woodcock, I shall quote a line from the 'Zoologist,' in which it is stated, that in Lord Hastings's woods at Melton Constable, near Holt, in the first week of December 1852, 30 and 33 were respectively killed on two successive days, and 93 on the third, in the Great Wood in the adjoining parish of Swanton Novers, and at least 110 might have been killed if other game had been disregarded. I believe it will be conceded that from this county, through the eastern and southern portions of England, the Woodcock becomes less numerous, and it is not until we reach the western counties of Devonshire and Cornwall that we again meet with it in any great abundance. In these humid and comparatively warm districts the Woodcocks find a congenial winter home; for there the springs are always

flowing, the fields green, and the fallows rarely frozen, however severe the winter may be elsewhere. Still such large bags are seldom obtained as are made in other parts of England, Wales, and Ireland—the reason being that the woods are not so extensive, and the coverts, where large, so dense that no man with a gun can penetrate them. If the Cocks are got to rise, they pitch again without breaking cover; not so, however, in some parts of Cornwall, for there many charming little rushy bottoms exist, across which a Cock may be killed at the widest part. It is here that the bird suffers, and it is in such little winding gullies between the hills that I have found some of the pleasantest Cock-shooting I have ever had. Now, although the bags made in Cornwall contain fewer birds at the end of the day than in some other counties, the deficiency is not due to the birds being less numerous, but to their favourite woods and gullies being often more inaccessible to the beaters; so difficult to traverse, indeed, are they, that I question if any but a Cornish man would survive a second day's toil, if he were not irrecoverably lost among the high tussocky grasses during the first. Such severe work for men I have never witnessed; and dogs appear to be useless; hence in a county so frequently intersected with localities of this description as Cornwall is, a great number of Cocks live in a comparatively small area. At Tregothnan the covers are seldom shot until January; and as they remain in a state of quietude during the other eleven months of the year, the shooting is then most enjoyable. On some of his twenty beats Lord Falmouth frequently shows his friends more than a hundred rises in a day. The Cocks killed, however, seldom amount to more than thirty; when to these are added three or four times as many wild-bred Pheasants, a fair sprinkling of Snipes and ground-game, with now and then a Teal and a Mallard, sufficient sport is afforded to gratify the appetite of every man who may consider himself a sportsman.

In Wales the Cock-shooting approaches somewhat that of Cornwall; but the ground is more stony, and the walking consequently more difficult. Here the little cocker spaniels are more generally used; for the dog beats the man in rounding the boulder stones on the hillsides, and easily threads the thorny thickets through which the beater cannot get. In Scotland heathy valleys, fir- and larch-plantations take the place of the sedgy, boggy bottoms of Cornwall and the thorny hillsides of Wales; there and in the Western Islands Woodcocks afford less sport than in the counties further south. Here in the north it is the Grouse and black game which demand the attention of the sportsman, who scarcely cares to raise his gun at the Woodcock. Ireland, on the other hand, is a country especially adapted for the bird to winter in; and to give an account of the sport enjoyed there would fill many folio pages; but as I have said a few words on Cock-shooting in England and Scotland, I cannot omit stating that the Muckross party in January 1863, consisting of Captain Herbert, Lord Elcho, Mr. Balfour, General Grey, and Colonel Long, killed 908, the average number of guns during ten of these days being four; on the ninth, 110 were counted from the bag at the end of the day.

The following table gives the weight and the length of wing, from the shoulder or carpal joint to the tip of the first primary, of twelve male and twelve female mature Woodcocks from various parts of the country, taken without any particular selection, and is given to show the comparative weight and size of the sexes:—

MALE.					FEMALE.				
	Length from carpal joint to end of first primary.	Extent of outspread wings.	Weight.	Locality.		Length from carpal joint to end of first primary.	Extent of outspread wings.	Weight.	Locality.
1	inches. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$	inches. 23	ounces. 12 $\frac{1}{4}$	Tregothnan, Jan.	1	inches. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$		ounces. 10 $\frac{1}{2}$	Jardine Hall, Nov. Tregothnan.
2	7 $\frac{1}{8}$	.	12	Tregothnan, Jan.	2	7 $\frac{1}{4}$	.	10 $\frac{1}{2}$	
3	7 $\frac{1}{8}$	23	12 $\frac{3}{4}$	Somerleyton, Dec.	3	6 $\frac{3}{4}$	Small race.	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	
		Length from tip of bill to end of tail 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.							
4	7 $\frac{1}{2}$	.	12 $\frac{3}{4}$	Somerleyton, Dec.	4	7 $\frac{3}{4}$	.	11 $\frac{1}{2}$	Tregothnan.
5	7 $\frac{1}{2}$	.	13 $\frac{1}{2}$	Somerleyton, Dec.	5	7 $\frac{3}{4}$	23 inches.	12 $\frac{1}{2}$	Tregothnan.
6	7 $\frac{1}{2}$	.	12 $\frac{1}{4}$	Tregothnan, Jan.	6	6 $\frac{1}{2}$	.	11 $\frac{1}{2}$	Somerleyton.
7	7 $\frac{1}{4}$	.	12	Jardine Hall, Nov.	7	7 $\frac{3}{4}$	.	10 $\frac{3}{4}$	Tregothnan, Jan.
8	7 $\frac{1}{4}$	.	12	Jardine Hall.	8	7 $\frac{3}{4}$	.	11 $\frac{1}{2}$	
9	7 $\frac{1}{4}$	.	11 $\frac{3}{4}$	Tregothnan, Jan.	9	7 $\frac{3}{4}$	.	10 $\frac{1}{4}$	
10	7 $\frac{1}{4}$	.	11 $\frac{3}{4}$	Tregothnan, Jan.	10	7 $\frac{3}{4}$	.	11	Tregothnan, Jan.
11	7	Very fat bird, small race.	10 $\frac{3}{4}$	Unknown.	11	7 $\frac{1}{4}$	.	11 $\frac{1}{4}$	
		Small race.	9	Unknown.	12	7 $\frac{3}{8}$	23 inches.	13 $\frac{1}{2}$	Tregothnan, Jan.; a very long bill, length 3 inches; plumage very light.
12	6 $\frac{7}{8}$								
	89		142 $\frac{3}{4}$			87 $\frac{1}{4}$		135	

It will be seen that the wings of the 12 males, measured as above stated, amount to 89 inches, and their weight to 142 $\frac{3}{4}$ ounces, while the wings of the females are 87 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches, and their weight 135 ounces; consequently that the excess of the length of the wing in the 12 males is 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and of their weight 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ ounces. I believe the males have generally the shorter bill, the longer wing, and the finer tail, while the rump of this sex is more red and the barrings of the under surface of the body more distinct; much difference also

occurs in the colouring of the legs of the Woodcocks, some being olive- or leaden-white, while others are pale-yellow. In these and other investigations, I have to acknowledge much valuable assistance from my young friend, Mr. Evelyn Boscawen, who took great interest in the subject during our shootings at Tregothnan. To enumerate the numbers I have placed in the scale is unnecessary; but I may state that the weight of seventy out of eighty birds in fair condition will range between 11 and 14 ounces; of the other ten some will be lighter, and others heavier. Light birds vary from 9 to $9\frac{1}{2}$ and 10 ounces. It is a very large cock that weighs 15 ounces, and an extraordinary one that turns the scale with a 16-ounce weight at the opposite end of the balance. I am told that the occurrence of much heavier birds has been recorded; and W. Christy Horsfall, Esq., of Leeds, informed Mr. Buckland that he has a large light-coloured female which he got at Halifax, in Yorkshire, in 1861, and which weighed, two days after it was killed, a little over 20 ounces; I can only say that a bird of this weight I have never seen.

The Woodcock is strictly nocturnal, frequenting marshes, the oozy beds of rivers, and open fields during the night, and retiring to dry hillsides and copses in the daytime. In such situations, if left unmolested, it sleeps under the shelter of a holly, or at the edge of the sunny side of a glade; and so lethargic is it that it may almost be trodden upon before it will rise, and when it does take wing soon pitches again; it will not, however, allow its heels to be trodden upon a second time, still less a third, and if followed up will rise and double back to the spot from which it was first flushed. I believe Mr. Selby has observed that the first flights are females, and that the sexes are not associated in autumn. Not so, however, in the spring; for in January the birds are paired, and when one is flushed another is almost certain to be found within a few yards.

The nest is very slight, a small depression in the ground filled with a few dead leaves and stems of grasses. Its situation varies with the nature of the country in which the bird breeds: in Scotland it is placed among the heather; in the commons near London in furze-brakes; in the woods of Kent and Sussex near the stem of a tree, on the sides of banks, often among the primroses and bluebells, with the strain of the nightingale above to solace the female during the task of incubation. The eggs are generally four in number, and of large size in comparison with that of the bird; they do not vary much, but have none of the pear-shaped form common to the other members of the family Scolopacidae, and are sometimes remarkable for their roundness of form; they are of a cream or yellowish white, blotched with pale reddish brown, particularly at the larger end. The young during the first week of their existence are beautiful little creatures, being adorned, as will be seen on reference to the accompanying plate, with a number of well-defined markings of buff and chestnut; this gaily coloured downy dress soon gives place to feathers, which closely resemble those of the adult. The chicks remain in the neighbourhood of the nest for a little time; but the parents unquestionably remove them to the marsh in the evening, there feed and nurture them until the rising of the sun, and then carry them back to their accustomed place in the woods. This act need not be questioned, neither does it require confirmation; for the young have been seen dangling from the claws of the old birds during their passage from the wood to the feeding-ground at least a hundred times, and by as many different persons. The food of the Woodcock consists of worms and grubs, of which, particularly the former, it eats enormous quantities; Mr. Selby states that a flowerpot full will scarcely suffice a bird in confinement for a single night. For procuring this kind of food in a state of nature its long bill is admirably adapted; with it the bird is in the habit of probing the ground up to its nostrils; and the borings thus made may be frequently seen in wet and sloppy places.

We know that the Great Snipe will occasionally cover itself with moss &c. for the purpose of concealment, as represented in my plate of the species; and it would seem that the Woodcock also resorts to this practice for the like purpose; for Captain Murray Aynsley informs me that when beating the covers at Alnwick, in Northumberland, about the end of November, he saw a Cock pitch within eight yards of him on the opposite side of a fence where the ground was bare of everything except a few leaves; on alighting, the bird first looked round, then flattened himself on the ground and commenced covering himself with the leaves, taking them in his bill and throwing them over his back until it was more than half covered; on hearing the beaters approach, the bird applied himself still more closely to the ground, laying the bill straight out on the surface, and allowed the beaters to pass within three or four feet; but on a dog showing himself over an adjoining bank, he lifted and rose immediately: this bird had doubtless been flushed before.

The Plate represents a female and young of the natural size, and a reduced figure of a male in the distance; the principal plant is the Wild Hyacinth, *Endymion nautans*.

Gould, John. 1873. "Woodcock, *Scolopax rusticola* [Pl. 77]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324032>.

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