GALLINAGO MAJOR.

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Great Snipe.

Scolopax major, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 661.

——— *media*, Frisch, Vög., tab. 228.

Gallinago major, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 51, pl. 8.

——— *Montagui*, Bonap. Geogr. and Comp. List of the Birds of Eur. and N. Am., p. 52.

Scolopax palustris, Pall.

——— *paludosa*, Retz.

——— *gallinacea*, Dumont.

Telmatias major, Blas. List of the Birds of Eur., Engl. edit. p. 19.

Scolopax leucurus, Swains. and Rich. Faun. Bor.-Am., vol. ii. p. 501.

HOWEVER numerous this species may be on the European continent, England is not the country in which it regularly breeds, or to which it pays its visits with any degree of certainty. Our islands are out of its line of migration; and hence those which occasionally occur must be regarded as individuals which have deviated from their regular course, and therefore come under the denomination of accidental visitors. Still the Great Snipe is far from being a scarce bird, and an autumn seldom passes without specimens being shot by sportsmen and others. I have several times purchased the bird in our great poultry-market in Leadenhall Street, and I advise any of my readers not to let the chance slip, if a similar opportunity should offer itself to them; for, in an epicurean sense, a greater treat than a roasted, fat Double Snipe of the year can scarcely be enjoyed; and when I tell them that its weight is eight and sometimes nine ounces, they will readily imagine that such a Snipe is a *bonne bouche* of no ordinary kind. Nearly all the examples that have come under my notice have been birds of the year, and in this youthful state they differ very considerably in plumage from the adult, killed in spring. The four outer tail-feathers in the young are crossed with strong zigzag bars of brown, whereas in the adult they are snow-white, with square blotches of black on the external margin near the base; hence the broad white tips of the outer tail-feathers show very conspicuously in the old birds, as also do the several semicircular bands across the wings, formed by the white tipplings of the secondaries and wing-coverts. The breeding-individuals further differ from autumn-killed young birds, by the stronger markings of black on every part of the under surface of the body.

Montagu's specimens now in the British Museum, and to which the name of *Montagui* was given by Prince Charles Bonaparte, are young birds of this species. The *Scolopax leucurus* of Swainson, said to have been received from Hudson's Bay (a statement which I think is very questionable), is the present bird in its adult livery.

In its habits and disposition the Great Snipe differs very much from the common species, *Gallinago scolopacinus*; it is not so recluse and shy; and it is not gregarious, never being seen in such large flocks. When it rises, it flies heavily, and soon pitches again; in a word, it lacks the sprightliness and spirit of the Common Snipe; for it has not the quick turning and dashing flight of that species, which rises high in the air and makes a survey of the heavens before it descends to the ground again. I have stated that the Great Snipe must be regarded as an accidental visitor to our islands. The low swampy grounds of Brabant, Friesland, and Hanover, and the wet moorlands of Norway and Sweden, are probably the nurseries whence it comes. Independently of these places, it is found during summer in all parts of Northern Russia and Western Siberia, which it leaves in autumn for Asia Minor, while those that have been bred further west proceed to Africa, some great flights stopping by the way, in the Pontine Marshes around Rome and similar situations.

I am indebted to Mr. Percy Godman for the skin of a young bird only a few days old, which, when compared with the young of the Common Snipe at the same age, presents some remarkable differences. First, the hair-like feathers which cover the body are longer, the general tint is lighter, and the markings of the head and back are much less complicated and not so pretty; in a word, the young Double Snipe approaches as much to the general appearance and markings of the Woodcock of the same age as to the Common Snipe. Mr. Godman also gave me some information, which he has since published, relative to an artifice adopted by the female of this species to prevent the discovery of her nest:—

“On walking across the open part of the marsh at the back of the village of Bodö, in Norway, on the 26th of May, we flushed the first Great Snipe. This bird had evidently only just arrived, and did not fly more than a few yards before it settled again. Whenever else we observed this species, it was amongst the brushwood on the borders of the marsh. A few days after, on pushing our way

over some swampy ground covered with birchwood and dwarf willow on the edge of the marsh, our attention was attracted by an unknown note of a bird on the ground, somewhat resembling the smack of the tongue, repeated several times in succession. On remaining still for a few seconds, we saw several Great Snipes walking about and feeding within a few yards of us: we watched them for some time, but they did not appear to take the smallest notice of us.

"About the 10th of June we began to search for their nests, but did not succeed in finding any until the 24th, nearly a month after the arrival of the birds. The first nest we found contained four eggs, and was placed on the edge of a small hillock, quite open, though there were birch-trees growing all round, and one on the hillock on which the nest was situated. It consisted of nothing more than a hole scraped in the moss, in which the eggs were deposited; there was neither grass nor leaves in it. The next day (June 25th) we found another nest, within 200 yards of the former, containing only two eggs. It was situated on a small hillock, in much the same sort of place as the former. We found another nest on the 27th. The bird fluttered off and ran away, dragging its wings on the ground, and making a sort of drumming noise. After taking four eggs from this nest, we went to look at that found on the 25th, containing two eggs, and were surprised at seeing nothing in its place but some apparently disturbed moss. Our first impression was that the eggs had been destroyed by the Magpies or Crows that were constantly hunting for such food, or perhaps taken and eaten by the many boys who wander about the marsh tending cattle; but on beginning to express our fears, the bird, doubtless frightened by our voices, flew up, leaving a hole in the moss through which we could see there were only two eggs as before. Not doubting that the bird would yet lay more, we again left it, and, on returning to the spot in a couple of days, observed the nest was again covered with moss. This time we remained for a minute before the bird flew off; and on stooping down to examine it more closely, we could distinctly see the bird's back through the moss. The bird had evidently, after it was comfortably seated in its nest, torn up with its long beak the moss that was within its reach, and drawn it over its back till it was completely covered: there was not the least appearance of any hole through which the bird could have crept into its nest. This circumstance of the nest being covered is the more curious, as, out of six found, it was the only one thus carefully concealed. There were as many as ten or fifteen pairs of these birds in the marsh, which usually kept pretty close together, and were generally to be found in one particular spot. Could this have been a congregation of male birds, the mates of which were breeding in the vicinity? We saw the bird occasionally on swamps in the mountains; but it would have been a hopeless task to have searched for its nest there, though we have little doubt it breeds in other localities in the neighbourhood." (Ibis, vol. iii. p. 87.)

The artifice above described is very singular, particularly as it tends to confirm an anecdote told to me by a gentleman upon whose veracity I can rely, to the effect that he had noticed a similar propensity in the Woodcock. We know that all the Grebes cover their eggs to hide them from observation, and there can be but little doubt that the Titlark crosses her nest with grasses for the same purpose; some birds place upright feathers at the entrance of their dome-shaped nests; and the Brambling often sits with two or three feathers curling over her back, as I myself observed on the Doverfeld in Norway.

Mr. Dann informed Mr. Yarrell that during the pairing-season the Great Snipe flies to a vast height, and, as it descends, makes a drumming noise by means of a slight and peculiar vibration of the wings. Mr. Selby and others have remarked that it utters no cry when flushed. Mr. Hoy informed Mr. Hewitson that "there is no doubt that by far the greater number of the Great Snipe retire to the swamps of the north to breed; still a considerable number are spread over the fens and morasses of Holland. The Great Snipe very much resembles the Jack Snipe in its habits, lying close, and, when disturbed, rarely flying far. The eggs are four in number, of a yellowish olive-brown, spotted with two tints of reddish brown, and are one inch and nine lines in length by one inch and two lines in breadth."

The young in the downy state, or when about two or three days old, have the colouring of the head and face similar to but more buffy than in the adult, the line down the centre of the head absent, the upper surface mottled with buff chestnut and black, the under surface buff on the breast and flanks and greyish in the middle of the abdomen, and some undefined black marks on the throat. At this age they differ from the young of *G. scolopacinus* in being very much lighter coloured, and in exhibiting none of the rich chestnut tints so conspicuous in that bird.

The Plate represents the male of the natural size, and the female nearly concealed by the moss and herbage which she has thrown over her back.

Gould, John. 1873. "Great Snipe, *Gallinago major* [Pl. 78]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324033>.

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