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London W1T 3JH, UK

Annals and Magazine of Natural History: Series 2

Publication details, including instructions for
authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tnah08>

II.—Ornithological notes

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Published online: 17 Dec 2009.

To cite this article: John Blackwall F.L.S. (1849) II.—Ornithological notes ,
Annals and Magazine of Natural History: Series 2, 4:19, 18-25, DOI:

[10.1080/03745486009494793](https://doi.org/10.1080/03745486009494793)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03745486009494793>

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but the skin does not retain a trace of them. The dorsal fin had an orange tinge, and the lateral line extended along the lower third of the body. The distance of the vent from the end of the operculum was 46 inches."

We agree at once with Mr. Yarrell in pronouncing this to be the same species as the Cullercoats fish, and it is confirmatory of our opinion that the crest was really a continuation of the dorsal fin. This Scotch specimen, like the English ones, was caught in the spring, and makes the eighth British example of this fish, which is therefore not so extremely rare as has been supposed.

We observe that in the last Number of the 'Annals' Professor J. Reid of St. Andrews has given a highly interesting description of what he believes to be the first British example of the Deal fish, and we take the present opportunity of stating that in the Newcastle Museum there is a specimen which was taken at Newbiggen on the Northumberland coast, June 18th, 1844. This specimen is 5 ft. 5 in. long, and has 1 ft. maximum depth. The body was of a silvery gray, the dorsal fin and tail red.

EXPLANATION OF PLATES I. AND II.

PLATE I.

- Fig. 1.* Anterior portion of *Gymnetrus Banksii*, the jaws being slightly protruded; the dotted lines on the crest and ventral processes represent these parts as they are believed to have been originally, the continuous lines represent them as they were seen by us.
- Fig. 2.* Outline of section of body at part of greatest thickness, showing the relative depth and thickness.
- Fig. 3.* Outline of section of ditto, showing ditto ditto at 3 or 4 in. from tail.
- Fig. 4.* Two of the radiated scale-like bodies from the silvery matter of the skin.
- Fig. 5.* Different forms of blood-globules, some shown on edge.

PLATE II.

- Fig. 1.* Side view of *G. Banksii* in outline.
- Fig. 2.* Side view of ditto, abdomen laid open, showing the viscera *in situ*: *a*, œsophagus; *c c*, cæcal prolongation of stomach; *e*, pancreatic cæca covering duodenum; *f*, intestine; *g*, anus; *i*, liver; *l*, ovaria; *m*, ureter.
- Fig. 3.* Plan of viscera removed from body: *a*, œsophagus; *b*, stomach; *c c*, stomachic cæcum; *d*, pylorus; *e*, pancreatic cæca surrounding duodenum; *f*, intestine; *g*, anus; *h*, spleen; *i*, liver; *j*, gall-bladder; *k*, ductus communis choledochus; *l*, ovaria; *m*, ureter; *n*, vesical dilatation of ditto; *o*, kidney; *p*, supra-renal bodies.

II.—*Ornithological Notes*. By JOHN BLACKWALL, F.L.S.

[Continued from vol. xix. p. 379.]

THE GREAT GRAY SHRIKE, *Lanius excubitor*.

REMARKABLE for the boldness and fierceness of its disposition, this species of shrike is sometimes troublesome to birdcatchers

by its daring attempts to carry off their call-birds. Early in the spring, a young man, who was intent upon obtaining for sale a supply of that minute but docile linnet the lesser redpole, *Linota linaria*, which is a summer visitor in Lancashire, where it breeds, proceeded to Gorton, near Manchester, and having arranged the cage containing his call-bird, and placed his twigs well-smeared with birdlime in the manner best adapted to attain his object, he patiently awaited the result. After having successfully followed his insidious occupation for a considerable time, a gray shrike flew to the cage, most likely for the purpose of devouring the decoy-bird, and perching upon the twig attached to its summit became entangled in the viscid material which covered it. The agitated bird made vigorous efforts to disengage itself from the unpleasant situation in which it was placed, but without avail; its struggles only tended to involve it more completely in the tenacious toils with which it was encumbered. At length it was secured and placed in a dark cage with the redpoles which had been previously captured; but the surprise and mortification of the birdcatcher may be imagined, when, on his arrival at home, he found that the shrike had killed all its companions in captivity. A friend of mine, who was actively engaged in collecting specimens of rare British birds, happened to hear of the circumstance, and succeeded in purchasing the shrike, which, when preserved and mounted, occupied a place in his cabinet.

Though irregular in its visits to this country, and though seldom seen except in the colder months, yet the gray shrike has been observed, in more than one instance, to prolong its stay among the mountains of North Wales till late in May, and it is not improbable that it may sometimes breed in the principality. Like the cuckoo and birds of prey in general, this species and the red-backed shrike, *Lanius collurio*, are occasionally pursued and persecuted by small birds, which, from the excited feelings they manifest, evidently have some cause for regarding them as enemies.

Possessing greater compass of voice than is commonly supposed, the red-backed shrike is capable of giving utterance to a few low soft notes which constitute a short song; but let it not be thought that they represent the calls or lays of other birds, artfully acquired for the purpose of luring them to destruction, as some persons have insinuated, for they are delivered by the shrike in a subdued tone and without the least attempt at concealment, the station usually occupied by it on such occasions being the loftiest twig of a tall hedge or bush; and I have never succeeded, by the most careful and prolonged observation, in wit-

nessing the fascinating effects ascribed to the music of this imaginary siren.

The red-backed shrike may frequently be seen to take insects when on wing, like the *Muscicapula*.

The Whinchat, *Saxicola rubetra*.

In Denbighshire this pretty migratory bird arrives about the end of April, when the song of the male, which is sometimes delivered on the wing, may be heard repeated at short intervals. After the female has hatched her eggs, both sexes commence the call from which the species receives in Lancashire, where it is abundant, the provincial name of *útick*; the accent falls on the note supposed to resemble the first syllable of the word, and the second note of the call is sometimes repeated; thus,—útick tick.

I have seen the whinchat pursue the red-backed shrike with cries and gesticulations expressive of extreme animosity.

The Sedge Warbler, *Sylvia phragmitis*.

The late cold spring of 1847 exercised a very marked influence upon the vocal powers of our migratory warblers; the notes of the sedge warbler, which were not heard in the neighbourhood of Llanrwst till the 14th of May, were so defective in tone that this species found it quite impracticable to execute its song, being enabled by the most strenuous efforts to perform a few passages only, and those in a very imperfect manner; even the high powerful strain of the black-cap, *Sylvia atricapilla*, and the deep rich melody of the garden-warbler, *Sylvia hortensis*, were reduced to a few short, abrupt, feeble sounds without any apparent connexion or modulation; our resident singing birds also were sensibly affected by the severity of the season, all attempts to deliver their lays with their accustomed vigour and facility being totally unavailing. As the temperature increased with the advancing year, a corresponding improvement was perceptible in the wild music of the fields and woods, until the full flow of song announced the pleasing intelligence that the summer was at last confirmed. Now as it is evident, from the facts already stated, that a relation must exist between the singing of birds and the temperature of the atmosphere, I shall briefly advert to some of the circumstances which appear to constitute that relation.

An idea seems to have been entertained by the Honourable Daines Barrington that the periodical cessation of the songs of birds may possibly be caused by some physical impediment, as indicated by the following paragraph extracted from the fifth letter addressed to that gentleman by Mr. White in his 'Natural History of Selborne':—"Your supposition that there may be

some natural obstruction in singing birds while they are mute, and that when this is removed the song recommences, is new and bold. I wish you could discover some good grounds for this suspicion."

More than twenty-six years have elapsed since my attention was first particularly directed to this interesting subject, and I am inclined to believe that if the candid and intelligent natural historian of Selborne had been made acquainted with the remarkable facts which then presented themselves to my observation, he would have ceased to view the suggestion of Mr. Barington merely in the light of a plausible hypothesis*.

It is a matter of general notoriety that very few of our feathered songsters, in a state of liberty, continue their delightful warbling beyond the end of July, or the beginning of August, the latter, as Mr. White has remarked, being "the most mute month the spring, summer and autumn through;" but whether this silence is constrained or voluntary can only be determined by a careful examination of the evidence bearing upon the case.

Ornithologists almost universally attribute the singing of birds to the excitement induced by the passion of love, regarding it as an act of volition, which, without any absolute necessity, ceases to be practised when the predisposing stimulus is no longer felt; but it cannot be denied that the songs of many species may frequently be heard after they have done breeding, and that the woodlark, redbreast, wren and dipper sing even during frosty weather in winter when the sun shines brightly. Besides, persons who have the management of birds in captivity are well-aware that they continue to exert their musical powers much longer than birds at large, and that those powers may be circumscribed, or called into full activity at pleasure by regulating their supply of food and the temperature of their domicile; female birds also, when in high condition, are known, occasionally, to assume a song somewhat resembling that of the male. These circumstances, together with the early age at which young birds begin to practise their songs, and the facility with which some species may be taught in confinement to substitute an artificial tune for their natural notes, have led me to suppose that a partial coincidence in the periods during which birds of song exercise their reproductive and musical functions may have been mistaken by ornithologists for a relation of cause and effect.

From observations and experiments made with the greatest care on several species of British singing birds, I have no hesitation in asserting that the song peculiar to each is the result of

* See the Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester, second series, vol. iv. pp. 312, note †, 465, 466, and vol. v. p. 261.

an instinctive impulse, liable to be brought into operation by the agency of various stimuli, combined with a suitable state of the vocal organs*; and this latter condition deserves especial attention, for most of our songsters manifestly become mute in autumn from inability to continue their melodious strains; their persevering but ineffectual efforts to prolong them, and the difficulty they experience in recommencing them in spring, proving to demonstration that their pleasing lays depend upon the energy of those muscles which contribute to form the voice; an energy which is influenced chiefly by food, temperature, health, and the exercise of the reproductive function.

The moulting of birds speedily follows the exhaustion consequent on the propagation of their species, and an attendant relaxation of the vocal organs, which renders them incapable of obeying the dictates of the will, is, I conceive, the true cause of the periodical silence of singing birds. To this state of things succeeds a gradual reduction in the temperature of the atmosphere and in the supply of animal food, so that, with a few exceptions already noticed, and those dependent in all probability upon some constitutional peculiarity, the enfeebled organs of voice do not recover their tone till the ensuing spring, when innumerable animated beings, excited to activity by the genial warmth of the season, afford abundance of stimulating nutriment to the feathered songsters, which, with the concurrent restoration of their physical energies, enliven every copse with their sweet and unsophisticated music. Such I apprehend is the real nature of the connexion which subsists between atmospheric temperature and the singing of birds.

Many birds are endowed with an extraordinary capacity for imitating sounds, and under the careful tuition of skilful instructors readily learn to pipe long and difficult tunes, to articulate words, and even to repeat short sentences with surprising precision. Among our native species, the jay, magpie, starling and bullfinch afford familiar instances of the truth of this assertion; but I am impressed with the belief that the spontaneous employment of this faculty by individuals which have never been removed from their natural haunts is much more limited than is commonly supposed. If the term "mimic" be strictly applicable to any British bird in the wild state, the sedge warbler may be thought pre-eminently to merit that appellation, and, indeed, its song is usually described in ornithological works as being composed, in a great measure, of passages borrowed from the lays of other songsters; yet I feel thoroughly satisfied that this reiterated

* For particulars consult an essay on the notes of birds published in the *Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester*, second series, vol. iv. p. 289.

accusation of plagiarism is erroneous, for those fancied imitations are merely resemblances, and are common to the songs of the entire species, which certainly would not be the case if they were factitious. In short, from the general character of the localities habitually frequented by the sedge warbler, it can seldom have an opportunity of hearing some of the birds whose notes it is supposed to mimic, while those of the black-headed bunting, *Emberiza schæniclus*, which is frequently associated with it, are never introduced into its song, that I am aware of, though from their style and tone they appear to be perfectly well adapted to its vocal powers and particularly easy of acquisition, being few in number and often repeated.

When resident in Lancashire I enjoyed excellent opportunities of minutely investigating the habits of the jay, the magpie and the starling, species whose talent for mimicry is susceptible of a high degree of cultivation, the last possessing this faculty in a more perfect state of development perhaps than any other British bird ; but, with the exception of individuals educated in captivity, I never detected the slightest display of their imitative powers ; and this remark applies with equal force to the bullfinch, which has very few natural notes, can scarcely be said to sing at all, and, while it retains its liberty, is not known to mimic any sound whatever ; yet whose great docility, retentive memory and flexibility of voice render the acquirement of artificial tunes an easy task.

That persons of lively imagination should mistake the singular tones comprised in the song of the starling for imitations of various inarticulate sounds ; the imperfect notes of the blackbird for endeavours to rival the crowing of the domestic cock ; or one of the spring-calls of the great titmouse for a successful effort to counterfeit the noise made in sharpening a saw, may cease to be regarded with surprise, when the attempts of some ornithologists to convey to the minds of their readers ideas of the songs of birds by the arbitrary arrangement of vowels and consonants are taken into consideration.

A blackbird, after numerous unsuccessful endeavours to execute its song, which it was prevented from doing by some organic defect, abandoned the undertaking, and continued throughout the entire season to repeat, at intervals, two notes in quick succession, the only musical tones apparently to which it was capable of giving expression. The bird usually took its stand on a branch of a large Portugal laurel nearly opposite to my sitting-room window, and the frequent recurrence of these two notes soon suggested a familiar name to which they bore a resemblance sufficiently close to excite a momentary suspicion that it might be the result of imitation. That name I shall abstain from

writing, having no inclination to lay myself open to the sarcasm contained in the well-known distich,

"As the fool thinks
So the bell clinks."

The Gray Wagtail, *Motacilla boarula*.

This beautiful species, remarkable for elegance of form, nice distribution of colours and graceful agility of movement, though observed to remain in Denbighshire and Caernarvonshire throughout the year, is certainly much more numerous in the summer than in the winter. It usually constructs its nest on the banks of brooks and rivers and the margins of pools and lakes; but as it does not appear to increase perceptibly in those counties, notwithstanding the number of young birds brought up in them annually, it is evident that many individuals which withdraw from that part of Wales in autumn do not return to it; the influences which regulate the geographical distribution of birds are, however, involved in much obscurity.

The yellow wagtail, *Motacilla flava*, so common in Lancashire during the summer season, I have not yet seen in the valley of the Conway.

The Goatsucker, *Caprimulgus europæus*.

White, in his 'Natural History of Selborne,' letter xxii., addressed to Thomas Pennant, Esq., states that the goatsucker sometimes makes a small squeak, which it repeats four or five times; and that he has observed this to happen when the cock-bird has been pursuing the hen in a toying manner through the boughs of a tree. He asserts also, in his 'Observations in various branches of Natural History,' that when a person approaches the haunts of goatsuckers in an evening, they continue flying round the head of the obtruder, and by striking their wings together above their backs, in the manner that the pigeons called Smiters are known to do, make a smart snap; adding, that on such occasions they are probably jealous for their young, and that their noise and gesture are intended by way of menace.

My own observations mostly serve to confirm the accuracy of those made by Mr. White; nevertheless, I may remark that I have heard this species utter its squeaking note when it was alarmed for the safety of its progeny; and that I have seen the male strike its wings together above its back, and by that act, repeated several times in quick succession, produce a series of snapping sounds, when it was in eager pursuit of the female, at the commencement of the pairing season in the month of May.

The habit which the goatsucker has of frequently alighting on roads in the dusk of evening is alluded to by Mr. Yarrell in

his 'History of British Birds,' and the cause of this occurrence is conjectured to be the desire to rub itself in the dust, like the *Gallinæ*. That such may be the case I will not dispute, but I have never been able to detect the bird in the fact, though I have watched it on such occasions with the closest attention, and I have known it, in numerous instances, alight on a damp road or a compact gravel-walk, where there was no dust, and after having been repeatedly disturbed return to it again.

It is probable that the circumstance of nestling goatsuckers having been mistaken for young cuckoos by unskilful ornithologists may have contributed in a considerable degree to promote the erroneous opinion that the cuckoo sometimes takes charge of its own offspring; the two species, however, may readily be distinguished from each other, even when recently disengaged from the egg, by the structure of the beak and feet.

With reference to its ordinary call, usually consisting of two prolonged tremulous notes, the latter of which is the lower, the Welsh have named this species *troellur* or the spinner.

The Ring Dove, *Columba palumbus*.

In seasons when acorns are unusually abundant, the oak woods in the valley of the Conway are resorted to by large flocks of ring doves, comprising a very much greater number of individuals than have been bred in the neighbourhood, evidently attracted to the locality by the plentiful supply of food to be obtained in it. Whence they come, and by what means they acquire a knowledge of the fact that induces them to visit the district, I am at a loss to conjecture, as they do not assemble gradually, but arrive in large bodies almost simultaneously.

The autumn of 1844 was a remarkably favourable season for the production of acorns, and ring doves were proportionately numerous. In the winter, the birds procured them by turning over the fallen leaves under which they lay hid; and some idea may be formed of the immense consumption of nutriment of this kind by the doves, from the circumstance that on opening the craw of a specimen brought to me on the 26th of January 1845, it was found to contain forty-five acorns of various sizes.

The Common Sandpiper, *Totanus hypoleucos*.

Sandpipers of several species, more especially the common one, are prevented from increasing so rapidly as they otherwise would in the county of Caernarvonshire, where numerous streams and lakes constitute favourite resorts of those birds, by the shepherds' dogs, which habitually prowl about their haunts in quest of their nests, and devour indiscriminately both eggs and young.