

II. *An Account of an English Bird of the Genus Motacilla, supposed to be hitherto unnoticed by British Ornithologists; observed by the Rev. John Lightfoot, M. A. F. R. S. In a Letter to Sir Joseph Banks, Bart. P. R. S.*

Read November 18, 1784.

S I R,

Uxbridge, Nov. 20, 1783.

AS every discovery in natural history is esteemed worthy the notice of that Society which was instituted on purpose to improve natural knowledge, I have taken the liberty to send you a description and drawing of a bird which haunts the reeds of the river Coln, in the neighbourhood of Uxbridge, and which seems to have hitherto escaped the notice of writers on British Ornithology; and therefore some account and description of it will not, I trust, be unacceptable to the Society over which you so laudably preside.

The nest and eggs of the bird I am about to describe first attracted my attention, and led to the discovery of the bird itself. They were repeatedly brought by a fisherman on the Uxbridge river, in the parish of Denham, to her grace the Duchess Dowager of Portland, who first communicated them to me. They were supposed by the fisherman to belong to the *Sedge-bird* of PENNANT, or *Motacilla Salicaria* of LINNÆUS; but being well acquainted with the nest and eggs of this, I was very sure he was mistaken, though he actually produced this bird as the true proprietor of the subjects in question. The structure and position of the nest having a singular appearance, and both  
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that and the eggs belonging to a bird unknown to me, I became desirous of finding out the secret architect, and to that end made use of such means as I thought most likely to promote the discovery.

In a short time my expectations were gratified; for on the 26th day of July, 1783, intelligence was brought me, that such a nest as I wanted was found. I had given previous direction, that it should not be disturbed before I had seen it. Upon examination, I instantly perceived it to be of the same kind and structure with that under enquiry, containing two eggs, and two young ones just excluded from the shell. One of the old birds was sitting at this time upon the nest, which a person in company attempting to seize, it flew at him with so much resentment and acrimony, as to draw blood from the hand that dared to molest its instinctive operations. Both the parent birds continued hovering about their nest with much watchful care and anxiety, while I made several attempts to take them alive; but, finding all endeavours in vain, lest I should lose the opportunity of examining them with accuracy, I at length, with reluctance, caused them to be shot. From these specimens the following descriptions were made, which, with an accurate drawing of one of them, together with its nest and egg, are humbly submitted to your notice.

From the generic characters delivered by LINNÆUS, our bird must evidently be reduced to the family of his *Motacilla*, for it has a weak, slender, subulate bill, almost straight; the mandibles nearly equal; the nostrils oval and naked, or not covered with bristles; the tongue lacerated at the extremity; the legs slender; the toes divided to the origin, except that the exterior one is joined, at the under part of the last joint, to the middle toe; the claws of nearly equal length.

The male and female have the same coloured plumage, so that one description will serve for both. They differ a little in size, but their external appearance is the same. They are both larger than the *Pettychaps* described by WILLOUGHBY; smaller than the *White-throat*, and nearly of the same size with the *Willow-wren*; but to be more particular.

The cock-bird weighed, when just killed, exactly seven pennyweights and nine grains; the hen six pennyweights and nine grains, or one pennyweight less.

The males measured, from tip to tip of the extended wings, seven inches and a half; the female six and three-quarters.

From the end of the bill to the extremity of the tail, the cock measured five inches and a half; the hen only five inches.

The bill in both measured half an inch, which is longer in proportion than in most of this genus. The *upper* mandible is of a dark horn colour, slightly incurved near the extremity, with a minute indenture on either side near the point; the *lower* is pale red or flesh-coloured, with a shade of yellow; the inside of the mouth deep orange-coloured; the tip of the tongue cloven and ciliated; the nostrils oval, and destitute of a bristly covering; but at the base of the upper mandible, on either side, near the angle of the mouth, arise three short *vibrissæ* pointing downwards, black at their summits, white at their bases; a circumstance common to many others of this genus. The *iris* of the eye is olive-brown; the pupil black. The short feathers of the orbits or eye-lashes are of a dirty white colour. From the corner of each eye to the nostril is a broad stroke or band of tawny-white feathers, lying over each other, and running narrowest towards the bill; this affords an excellent mark to distinguish the species.

The feathers of the head, neck, back, coverts of the wings and rump, are of an olive-brown, with a slight tinge of green. The quill and tail feathers are all of a darker hue, or simply brown; their outward edges of a paler shade. The tail is two inches long, slightly cuneated, the middle feathers being a little longer than the rest, the others gradually shorter; all of one uniform dun-brown colour edged with paler brown, and a little wedge-shaped at their ends.

The chin is white; the throat, breast, belly, and parts about the vent, are white with a slight shade of buff or tawny; but all these feathers (as in several others of this genus) when blown asunder, or closely examined, are found to have their base or lower half black, except the shafts, which are white throughout.

The ridge and under coverts of the exterior angle of the wing are of a yellowish-tawny colour, as are also the feathers of the thighs; but those of the knees are a shade darker, or a pale yellowish brown.

The legs are a light olive; the soles of the feet yellow, with a tinge of green, which soon fades after the bird is dead. The instep is covered with seven large imbricated scales, and five smaller on the toes, as in others of the genus. The toes stand three before, and one behind; the claws are nearly of equal length and curvature; but the hindmost is thickest and strongest.

From the foregoing remarks it is evident, that the bird mentioned is a species of *Motacilla*, which, as I can find no such described by any systematic writer, I shall venture to name, after the LINNÆAN manner,

*Motacilla (arundinacea) supra olivaceo-fusca, subtus albida, loris et orbitis fusco-albescentibus, angulo carpi subtus*

luteo-fulvo, cauda fuscuneata fusca, plantis luteo-virescentibus.

In regard to synonyms, the only author I can find who can be suspected of having noticed this bird is SEPP, who, in a late splendid work, in the Dutch language, intituled, *Nederlandsche Vogelen (fol. chart. max.)* p. 101. has described and figured a bird, under the name of *Turdus arundinaceus minimus*, called in Holland *Karrakietje*, which in many respects agrees with our bird; but as the colour of the wings in that figure is made a reddish brown, instead of an olive-brown, and the tawny-white *Lora* (a most essential character to distinguish the species) are not at all expressed; and the eggs are made to be of a pale-blush colour with dark spots, instead of a dirty-white with olive spots; I cannot pronounce for certain, that the bird there intended by that writer is the same which we have now described; though, if some allowance be made for ill-colouring and other omissions, it may possibly have been designed for the same species.

As we have already a bird, called in English the *Willow-wren*; ours, being nearly of the same size and shape, as well as the same genus, may, from its haunts, not improperly be denominated the *Reed-wren*.

It frequents the banks of the river Coln near Uxbridge, as far as from Harefield-Moor down to Iver, about the space of five miles, and very probably most other parts of the same river, though not as yet observed.

It is also certainly found in the neighbourhood of Dartford in Kent, from whence a nest and eggs were communicated by the ingenious Mr. LATHAM of that place, but without knowledge of the bird to which they belonged; so that there is little doubt but that it may be found in many parts of the kingdom.

Its food is insects, at least in part, for I observed it catching flies. It hops continually from spray to spray, or from one reed to another, putting itself into a stooping posture before it moves. I heard it make no other than a single note, not unlike the sound of the word *peep*, uttered in a low plaintive tone; but this might probably be only a note of distress, and it may have, perhaps, more pleasing and melodious ones at other times, with which I am unacquainted.

The nest of this bird is a most curious structure, unlike that of any other I am acquainted with, enough to point out the difference of the species, if every other character was wanting.

It may not be amiss here to observe, that there is such a manifest diversity in the materials, locality, and formation of nests, and such variety of colours in the eggs of many birds (in other respects hard to be distinguished), that it is pity this part of Ornithology has not been more attended to. I am well convinced, that as many species of *insects*, nearly allied to each other in colours and shape, and reputed to be only *varieties*, are frequently, from a due attention to their *larvæ* (which are often extremely different), discovered to be species *totally distinct*; so, amongst *birds* of similar genus and feather, their true differences may be often found by carefully observing their nests and eggs, when other characters are so minute, in the birds themselves, as to be distinguished with difficulty. By experience I have found this to be remarkably verified in some of the Lark kind.

But to return to the nest I was going to describe. It is composed externally of dry stalks of grass, lined, for the most part, with the flowery tufts of the common reed, or *Arundo vallatoria*, but sometimes with small dead grasses, and a few black horse-hairs to cover them. This nest is usually found suspended

suspended or fastened on, like a hammock, between three or four stalks of reeds, below the panicles of flowers, in such a manner that the stalks run through the sides of the nests at nearly equal distances; or, to speak more properly, the nest is tied on to the reeds with *dead grass*, and sometimes (as being more eligible when it can be had) even with *thread* and *pack-thread*, emulating the work of a sempstress, as was the case of the nest exhibited in the drawing. The bird, however, though generally, does not always confine her building to the support of reeds; sometimes she fixes it on to the branches of the *Water-dock*; and, in one instance only (that here delineated), it was found fastened to the trifurcated branch of a *Syringa* bush, or *Philadelphus*, growing in a garden hedge by the river side.

She lays commonly four eggs; the ground colour a dirty white, stained all over with dull olive-coloured spots, but chiefly at the greater end, where are generally seen two or three small irregular black scratches; but these are sometimes scarcely visible.

I must not omit, that both the nest and eggs which I have now described, whether designed for the same or not, are well expressed by SEPP, in the work above cited, under the article *Turdus Calamoxenus*, or *Rietvinck*, p. 97.; but as the bird there represented is evidently the *Motacilla Sylvia*, LIN. or common *White-throat* (which is known to make a very different nest), I am inclined to believe, that the author, by mistake, placed a bird and nest in the same plate which do not belong to each other.

I have reason to think, that the bird I have been characterizing is a bird of migration; for the inhabitants on the sides





of the Coln do not recollect ever to have seen it in the winter months; and its food being insects, it is probable, it must be obliged to shift its quarters for a warmer climate at the approach of a severe season; but this at present is only matter of conjecture, and not certainty.

I am, &c.

JOHN LIGHTFOOT.

