

PURPLE HERON.

Ardea purpurea, *Linn.*

Le Heron pourpré.

IN this elegant species we cannot fail to remark one of those beautiful gradations of form uniting proximate groups which the ornithologist meets with so continually in his survey of the feathered tribes, and which serves to show that the harmony obtaining throughout all great groups is interminable, except by the accidental annihilation of species. These observations apply with peculiar force to the bird before us, which seems to take an intermediate station between the Common Heron on the one hand and the Bittern on the other; to the former it assimilates in the length and slenderness of the neck, in the occipital plumes, and in the lengthened form of the bill, while by its large spreading toes, straight long nails and shorter legs, it is closely connected with the Bittern, to which it also bears a striking similarity in its habits and manners. Unlike the Common Heron, which prefers open countries and the exposed edges of large sheets of water, the Purple Heron haunts the dense coverts of reed-beds, morasses, and swampy lands, abounding in luxuriant vegetation, among which it is concealed from observation, and instead of building its nest on the topmost branches of the tallest trees, it incubates on the ground amongst that herbage which affords it an habitual asylum. As is also the case with the Bittern, the eggs are three in number, and of an uniform pale bluish green.

The range of this species is so great, that we may say in few words it inhabits the whole of Europe, Asia, and Africa. It is especially abundant in Holland, and in the low marshy districts of France; in the British Islands it must be considered as an accidental rather than a regular visitant, and we suspect that many of those killed in England had escaped from captivity, since numbers are annually brought alive from Holland to the London markets, where we have frequently seen a dozen at one time, together with Spoonbills, Common Herons and Bitterns, all in the most beautiful state of plumage, having been captured during the season of incubation; and often accompanied by hundreds of their eggs. We fear that this wholesale traffic has much diminished the numbers of these species, for the supply has been much less abundant during the last two or three years than it was formerly.

The food of the Purple Heron consists of fish, frogs, mice, and insects.

The sexes are alike in plumage after they have attained complete maturity; and may be thus described:

Crown of the head, occiput, occipital crest, a stripe down the back of the neck, another from the corner of the mouth to the back of the neck, and one passing down each side of the neck, black; throat white; sides and front of the neck rufous, the feathers on the lower half of the latter part lighter and with a broad stripe of blackish brown down the centre; the plumes at the bottom of the neck long, acuminate, and of a greyish white; lower part of the back of the neck, back, wings, flanks, and tail bluish grey, tinged with rufous; shoulders and under wing-coverts rich rufous; breast, all the under surface, and the long filamentous ends of the scapularies, deep reddish brown, intermingled with bluish grey; thighs pale rufous; bare space before the eyes and the bill fine gamboge yellow, with the exception of the ridge or culmen, which is brown; irides pale yellow; legs and feet greenish black.

The young are destitute of the occipital crest, and of the elongated feathers of the scapularies and at the base of the neck, until they are three years old; the forehead and crown of the occiput are grey with a reddish tint; the neck is much paler, and destitute of the black stripes; front of the neck white, with longitudinal black spots; under surface reddish white; upper mandible blackish brown; under mandible, bare space before the eyes, and irides pale yellow.

We have figured an adult male about two thirds of the natural size.