

## Genus SITTA.

GEN. CHAR. *Bill* straight, cylindrical, slightly compressed; subulated, acuminate. *Tongue* short, horny, and armed at the point. *Nostrils* basal and rounded, partly hidden by reflected bristles. *Feet* with three toes before and one behind, the outer toe being joined at its base to the middle one; hind toe of the same length as, or longer than, the middle toe, with a long and hooked claw. *Tail* of twelve feathers. *Wings* rather short; the first quill very short, the third and fourth the longest.

## COMMON NUTHATCH.

*Sitta Europea*, Linn.

La Sittelle torchepot.

As far as our recollection serves us, the continent of Europe is the only division of the globe to which this species belongs; nevertheless, the members of the genus *Sitta*, although limited in number, are widely dispersed, but appear to be more particularly attached to the northern and higher latitudes, or to such portions of the tropical countries as from their elevation enjoy a cold or temperate climate. The present species with *Sitta rupestris* (which in the Plate and descriptive letter-press has by an oversight been named *rufescens*) are the only ones which inhabit Europe, while the mountain ranges of India afford us several others, as do also the northern regions of America; nor should we omit the islands of the Indian Archipelago and the continent of New Holland, which if they do not produce a Nuthatch precisely similar to our own in form, at all events possess a group so closely allied to the true Nuthatches as to assure us that their general economy is nearly identical.

The habits by which the species of the genus *Sitta* are characterized are not a little singular, and in many respects agree with those of the Woodpecker; they differ, however, in this remarkable circumstance, that the Nuthatch is not only capable of running up the trunk of a tree with great agility and quickness, but of descending also, head downwards, with equal facility, a manœuvre which the Woodpecker is incapable of performing. As the feathers of the tail are short and very soft, this instrument is of no use as an agent in climbing; and in this respect the Nuthatch differs, not only from the Woodpeckers, but also from the Creepers, to whom the tail is of main importance. The position with the head downwards appears to be to the Nuthatch that which is most easy and natural. It not only assumes this attitude when alighting on the trunk or limb of a tree, but hammers at the bark or splits a nut in a chink in the same position.

The sexes offer no distinguishable difference in the colouring of their plumage, which is also assumed by the young of the year. Insects, nuts, and various berries constitute their food. Their incubation is performed in the holes of decaying trees.

The present beautiful bird is spread throughout the greater part of Europe, and is common in many of the wooded districts. In our own island it is abundant in some localities, while in others it is seldom to be met with. Woods and plantations are its favourite haunts, especially where aged oak and other forest-trees overshadow the underwood. Active and alert, it is ever in motion, now flitting from tree to tree, now traversing the bark in quest of food, or hammering at some decayed part in order to dislodge the insects which have mined their way beneath. The strokes of its bill are smart and strong, and may be heard for a considerable distance; it is thus that it shivers the hard covering of the hazel-nut, which it first fixes in some chink or fissure, and works at it with the head downwards; apparently to increase the mechanical effect of the blow. In the spring the call-note of the Nuthatch is a clear shrill whistle; at other times the bird is silent. The nest consists of a few dried leaves, which constitute a bed in the hole of a tree for the reception of the eggs, which are from five to seven in number, and of a greyish white spotted with reddish brown. The female is assiduous in her task, and defends her nest with her bill and wings, hissing at the same time in token of anger and distress. In winter the Nuthatch often resorts to orchards and gardens in search of food, but does not migrate. The colouring is as follows:

The whole of the upper surface of a fine blueish grey; the quills and base of the tail-feathers, except the two middle ones, being black; the outer one on each side having a black spot near the tip; a black band passes from the bill through the eye; and down the sides of the neck, where it ends abruptly near the shoulders; throat whitish; the under surface rufous brown, becoming of a chestnut on the flanks; bill and tarsi black; irides hazel.

We have figured a pair of these birds of the natural size.