

SNOW BUNTING.

Plectrophanes nivalis, *Meyer*.

Le Bruant de neige.

THE SNOW Bunting may be strictly pronounced a migratory species throughout the temperate countries of Europe, visiting them at the commencement of winter, and enlivening the bleak hills and barren shores which at this season of the year are deserted by those birds whose instinct has directed them to seek more southerly and consequently milder regions. The summer residences of this neat and chastely plumaged bird are well ascertained to be the northern hemispheres of the continents of Europe and America, over which portions of the globe it is generally and even universally diffused. The most wild and dreary spots of the northern parts of the latter continent are, according to the accounts of persevering travellers who have visited those regions, animated with the presence of the Snow Bunting. Dr. Richardson informs us, that Southampton Island, situated in the 62nd parallel, (where this species was observed by Captain Lyon,) is the most southern locality which has been discovered as its breeding-place. As soon as the task of incubation is accomplished, they commence their migrations towards warmer regions, although, by the authority of the above-mentioned traveller, they do not hasten southwards with that immediate alacrity which distinguishes the passage of many other small birds; they linger rather in the vicinity of forts by the sea-side and other exposed places, subsisting on the seeds of grasses, and performing their journey by short stages until the approach of colder weather quickens their progress; indeed the visits of the Snow Bunting to our own island seem to depend very much on the severity of the winter in their northern retreats. The Shetland and Orkney Islands are their first resting-places, whence they proceed to the Highlands of Scotland, then the Cheviot-hills, and finally distribute themselves over the southern barren districts of the British Isles. Mr. Selby informs us, that "they arrive at the latter end of October, and generally in very large flocks, which seem chiefly to consist of the young of the year with a few adults intermixed, and afterwards, if the season should be severe, small flocks are seen, principally consisting of adult male birds in their winter dress." On the Continent they annually visit the North of Germany, France and Holland, in the latter of which countries M. Temminck states them to be very abundant, particularly by the sea-side, a situation to which they evince a partiality in our own Island, especially if a flat and sandy shore prevails. From all these places, on the approach of spring, they again flock to the northern latitudes, whence they originally came.

The Snow Bunting is subjected to a considerable variety of plumage, of which either sex, age, or season is the cause. The decided and contrasted plumage represented in the lower figure is not attained until maturity, and is then only observable in the summer season, at which time the male and female offer less distinction than is given in the accompanying Plate, the upper figure of which represents an immature bird in the plumage characteristic of the greater portion of those individuals who visit England. In this state it has been called the Tawny Bunting, and regarded by many authors as a distinct species. As the lengthened hind claw would lead us to conclude, the habits of this bird induce it to frequent rocks and arid districts, where they run with great celerity and are never known to perch on trees; and from the beak being destitute of the palatine knob, it has been separated with great propriety from the other Buntings.

The situations chosen for the nests of this species are niches in the rocks of mountainous places, and sometimes upon flat shores among large stones. The nest is formed of dried grass neatly lined with hair or feathers. The eggs are six or seven in number, of a pale flesh colour, speckled with minute dots, and blotched at the larger end with reddish brown. Their food consists of the seeds of alpine plants, and the larvæ of various insects.

The adult male in summer has the head, neck, under parts, outer tail-feathers and centre of the wings pure white; the remainder of the plumage, the feet, and bill black; irides dark brown. The female at this season differs only in having the back of the head, side of the chest, and a portion of the neck and breast tinged with rufous, and the other parts of the plumage of a less pure black. The male of the first year, the female, and adult birds in winter offer but little difference in the colour of the plumage. The upper figure in the Plate represents a bird in this stage, and the colouring may be thus characterized. The top of the head, sides of the breast, margin of the scapulars, back, and tail-feathers reddish brown; the throat, breast, four outer tail-feathers, under parts, and centre of the wings white; each of the back feathers has the centre brown; the quills and middle tail-feathers are also of the same colour beak reddish brown; irides dark brown; legs black.