WHEATEAR.

Saxicola Œnanthe.

Le Traquet moteux.

The Wheatear is one of the summer migratory birds which annually visit the British Islands, arriving in March, when it disperses itself over wild heaths, moors, fallow grounds, and rabbit warrens, making a nest of moss and vegetable fibres, lined with hair or wool, generally in a hole on the ground or among loose stones, but not unfrequently in the cleft of a rock or at some distance in a deserted rabbit burrow, and laying five or six eggs of a uniform pale blue. The extreme delicacy of the Wheatear has caused it to be much sought after as a luxury for the table, for which purpose incredible numbers are annually taken. Mr. Pennant, in his British Zoology, states that at Eastbourne, in Sussex, the number annually taken amounts to 1840 dozen. They are principally caught by shepherds, who from the nature of their occupation have every opportunity of studying the habits of this bird, so as to contrive the most successful mode of securing them, which is generally effected by nooses of horsehair.

In September, previous to their departure to the Continent, they make the downs of our southern counties a place for their general assemblage, where they wait for a favourable wind to carry them over the intervening channel.

In its habitat, the Wheatear is especially confined to open and bare grounds, seeking neither the covert of the furze nor the hedgerow, as is the case with the other British species of Saxicola,—a circumstance which, perhaps, in connexion with a trifling modification of form, has induced some authors, viz. Brisson, Stephens, &c., to separate it from S. rubetra, the Stonechat, and the Whinchat, S. rubicola, and advance it to the rank of a genus, to which they have given the name of Vittaflora, the propriety of which we leave to others to determine, as it is not so much our object to enter into the minutiæ of generic divisions, as to give a faithful portraiture and history of each species, with a view to their natural arrangement on comprehensive principles.

The Wheatear is a pleasing and elegant bird in its plumage; and its manners, though retired, are lively and active. Hopping and springing from clod to clod, and occasionally breaking out into short flights in pursuit of insects, it becomes conspicuous from the snow-white mark across the base of the tail.

Beside the softer insects which it captures on the wing, Coleoptera and their larvæ form its diet, to which worms, &c., are also added.

Although not generally classed among our song birds, nevertheless the Wheatear is not without its vocal powers, warbling a soft and sweet strain, not unfrequently while quivering on the wing a few yards from the earth: occasionally its notes rise to a bolder and more elevated pitch; and when kept in confinement, a matter of no great difficulty, it charms us with its simple song, continued through the depths of winter.

In the adult male, the bill is black; the irides dark hazel; from the base of the bill a white line extends over each eye, and beneath it a broad black band passes which includes the orbits and ear-coverts; upper part of the head and back cinereous gray; rump and tail-coverts white; the two middle tail-feathers black; the rest black two thirds of their length from the base; wings blackish brown; each feather edged with a lighter rust-coloured border; throat and neck beautiful buff, becoming lighter as it proceeds downwards; tarsi black.

In the female, the under parts are brown; the forehead inclining more to gray; the black parts in the male, including the mark across the eye, are here exchanged for deep brown; the edges of the wing-feathers are more or less ferruginous; the white at the base of the tail is less extensive, and the neck and chest are reddish, becoming lighter as it approaches the under surface.

The young of the year of both sexes somewhat resemble the adult female; but a tinge of red pervades the whole of the plumage, and especially the edges of the quill- and tail-feathers. Total length about six inches. We have figured a male and female in their spring plumage.

the state of the s