Genus LANIUS.

Gen. Char. Beak of moderate length, robust, compressed, straight at the base, curved at the tip; edges of the upper mandible emarginated, and exhibiting a conspicuous tooth. Nostrils basal, lateral, nearly round, partly covered by a membrane. Gape furnished with stiff bristles. Feet moderate. Toes free. Acro-tarsia broadly scutellate. Wings somewhat pointed and rather short; the first quill-feather very short; the third the longest; the rest gradually decreasing. Tail equal, or somewhat rounded.

RED-BACKED SHRIKE.

Lanius Collurio, Linn.

Le Pie-griéche écorcheur.

Among the Shrikes which periodically visit our island, the Red-backed is the best known and most universally spread. Its arrival usually occurs from the middle of April to the beginning of May, the exact period being regulated by the forwardness of the spring, inasmuch as its food consists almost solely of insects, the appearance of which depends upon the temperature of the season. Though found occasionally in the northern counties of England, it is by no means so abundant there as in the middle, and more especially the southern districts. In Scotland it is, we believe, altogether unknown, nor are we aware of its having been discovered in Ireland. It is partial to downs and open pastures, particularly such as are intersected or bordered by thick stunted hedges, where it may be commonly met with singly or in pairs, but never in flocks. Like the rest of the Shrikes, its manners and note are very peculiar, and serve at once to distinguish it from the small birds of other groups. Its chief food, as we have before observed, consists of insects, such as grasshoppers, beetles, and the larger kinds of flies, which it often takes on the wing. It may be generally noticed quietly perched in some commanding situation awaiting the approach of its prey, upon which it darts not unlike a Flycatcher, generally returning to the same perch. Besides insects, it is known to attack young and feeble birds, mice, lizards, slugs, &c., which, as is the case with most of its congeners, it impales on a sharp thorn or spike previously to tearing them to pieces.

Though small in size, the Red-backed Shrike is extremely fierce and courageous, defending itself with great obstinacy when wounded or assailed. On the Continent it is widely distributed, being spread throughout every province of Europe, from the south as far as Russia and Sweden; and we may add that it is also a native of the North of Africa.

The Red-backed Shrike builds its nest in sharp thorny bushes, often at a considerable distance from the ground, constructing it of dried grasses and wool, with a lining of hair. The eggs are five or six in number, of a pinkish white, with spots of wood-brown disposed in zones chiefly at the larger end.

The sexes offer very considerable difference in their colouring; that of the adult male is as follows:

Top of the head, occiput, upper part of the back, and rump, fine grey; a narrow band of black begins above the beak, passes round the eye, and spreads over the ear-coverts; middle of the back and shoulders fine chestnut; quills brown; two middle tail-feathers black; the rest white for more than half their basal length, the extremity being black tipped with white; throat white; under surface pale roseate; bill and tarsi black.

The female wants the beautiful grey hood and mantle, as also the black streak on the face; the whole of the upper plumage is dull reddish brown, with dusky transverse lines more or less obscure; a deeper tint of brown pervades the quills and tail-feathers; the under surface is white, barred on the sides of the neck, the chest, and flanks, with fine semilunar lines of brown.

The young males of the year closely resemble the adult female; in fact, the only difference consists in the feathers of the back being, in the former, more distinctly margined with transverse lines of brown.

Our Plate represents an adult male, and a young male of the year, of the natural size.