

HEN-HARRIER.

Circus cyaneus, Meyer.

Le Busard St. Martin.

It is to be regretted that this delicately plumaged Hawk, which a few years ago was common in our island, is now so scarce as rarely to admit of its being observed in a state of nature. Like many of its congeners, much mischief has been laid to its charge; and without even for a moment attempting to balance the good which it effects by destroying hundreds of snakes, lizards, and mice in the course of a single year, with the injury it does by preying on a limited number of leverets and other young game, which are only open to its attacks for the period of a few weeks, its ruthless destruction is diligently persevered in by the gamekeeper and sportsman without the least consideration; in fact, so rapidly have many of our native *Falconidæ* decreased within these few years, that there is but little doubt many species once numerous will ere long be entirely extirpated.

This fine Harrier enjoys an extensive range of habitat independently of Europe, over the whole of which, wherever situations favourable to its residence occur, it is found in greater or less abundance: it also inhabits similar situations over the greater part of Africa and India. A species nearly allied, if not absolutely identical, exists in the northern portions of the American continent.

The flight of the Hen-Harrier while in quest of its prey is strikingly peculiar, and is altogether different from that of the birds of every other group of the *Falconidæ*; it is light and buoyant, but performed at no great elevation from the ground, which it quarters with the utmost regularity, traversing a certain extent of country and returning nearly to the same place at a given time for many days together. Thus skimming along with noiseless wings, it strongly reminds us of one of the Owls, and it pounces down upon its prey with unerring precision; this, as we have before stated, consists principally of mice, leverets, lizards, snakes, frogs, and unfledged birds, never daring to contend with large birds, or quadrupeds of even moderate size.

In this country the localities to which the Hen-Harrier is almost exclusively limited, are wide heathy moorlands, extensive wastes, and furze-covered commons, to which may be added low marshes, flat lands, bordering lakes, and morasses. In these wild and solitary situations it incubates and rears its young, its nest being placed on the ground, among the tufted herbage most prevalent on the spot; the eggs resembling those of the Owl, but larger, only being of a dull dirty white without any spots.

The difference between the male and female is so remarkable, as at no distant date to have led to the supposition that each sex was a distinct species; an error, the correction of which is due to our talented ornithologist Colonel Montagu. This is now so clearly understood as not to need any especial remark; we would, however, observe that this extraordinary feature is exhibited in most of the species of the genus *Circus*, a genus almost universally dispersed over the globe.

The young birds of both sexes for the first two years are precisely alike in their colouring, which differs but little from that of the adult female, and it is this circumstance which militated against the idea of the Hen-Harrier and the Ringtail being identically the same.

It is only after the second year that the male begins to assume the delicate silvery grey which in the state of maturity pervades the whole of the upper surface.

We give the details of the colouring as follow:

The adult male has the head, neck, chest, and whole of the upper surface, with the exception of the rump and the two outer tail-feathers on each side,—which are white, the latter having a fine transverse band of greyish brown,—of a fine blueish silvery grey; quills black; under surface white, with a few faint blotches of brown disposed in the centre of a great part of the feathers; legs, upper part of the cere, and irides brown.

The female has the whole of the upper surface chocolate brown, the feathers of the head, and back of the neck bordered with reddish sandy yellow; the ear-coverts deep brown; the marginal feathers of the face short and stiff, of a sandy yellow with deep brown shafts; whole of the under surface reddish yellow, with longitudinal dashes of brown; the tail barred alternately with bands of light and deep umbre brown; legs and upper part of the cere yellow; irides hazel.

The Plate represents a male and female of the natural size.