GLAREOLA LACTEA, Temm.

Cinereous Pratincole.

Glareola lactea, Temm. Man. d'Orn., 2nd. edit. tom. ii. p. 503.—Id. Pl. Col. 399.—Blyth, Cat. of Birds in Mus. Asiat. Soc. Calcutta, p. 259.—G. R. Gray, Gen. of Birds, vol. iii. p. 538, Glareola, sp. 6.—Jerd. Birds of India, vol. ii. part ii. p. 632.—Gray, List of Spec. of Birds in Coll. Brit. Mus., part. iii.

orientalis, Jerd. in Madras Journ. of Lit. and Sci., vol. xii. p. 215. Galachrysia lactea, Bonap. Compt. Rend. de l'Acad. Sci., tom. xliii. séance du 2 aout 1856. Cinereous Pratincole, Lath., Gen. Hist., vol. ix. p. 365. Cream-coloured Pratincole, Griff. Anim. Kingd., vol. viii: p. 543, pl. 49.

Utteran of the Scindians.

This is one of the smallest species of a very isolated group of birds peculiar to the Old World, the by no means numerous members of which are very widely distributed. Europe is tenanted by two, India by three, Australia by two, and Africa by about the same number. In their habits and economy they are all very Swallow-like, as they also are in some parts of their structure. They hawk for insects in the air, but, unlike the Swallows, run nimbly over the ground; on the ground, too, they deposit their four speckled eggs, a circumstance which closely allies them to the Grallatores; and it is doubtless for this reason that the majority of naturalists place them in that order.

The Glareola lactea, besides being one of the smallest species of the genus, is also one of the most aerial of them; for it spends much of its time in the air, hunting for its insect food over streams and marshy places, for which its structure is well adapted, its wings being ample, its neck short, its feet diminutive. It appears to be distributed over, and stationary in, all parts of India; that country must therefore be regarded as its headquarters. Mr. Jerdon and other writers give some details respecting its breeding, but do not say if the young are capable of running immediately after they are excluded from the egg, or if they are helpless, like the young of Insessorial birds; a knowledge of this particular is very desirable, as it would tend to show the true position of the species in our systems.

This bird is figured in the drawings of the late Hon. F. J. Shore, from a specimen killed by him at Luckurghat, with the following note:-

"This bird, which is called Kunyiu by the boatmen at this place, is not seen during the rains; its manners and appearance are that of a Swallow, but its legs are like those of a Sandpiper. I saw some hundreds skimming over the Ganges, but only shot one. In February 1829 I observed numbers on the river between Futtighur and Allahabad."

The following is Mr. Jerdon's account, which I take the liberty of transcribing:—

"The small Swallow-Plover occurs throughout the greater part of the country, and is very abundant in some localities, especially near large rivers. Now and then large parties are seen hawking over the plains and fields; but it prefers hunting up and down the banks of rivers, over sandy churrs, and by large tanks. In localities where they abound, vast parties may be seen every evening after sunset taking a long flight in a certain direction, and capturing insects as they fly. They live entirely on insects, which they capture in the air, in many cases Coleoptera. Several which I examined had partaken only of a species of Cicindela.

"I found them breeding at Thyetmyo, in Upper Burmah, with the young just flown, in May; and Mr. Brooks, Civil Engineer, of Mirzapore, informs me that he found their nests in a large sandy churr near that place. The parents endeavoured to entice him away from their nests, just like a Plover. The eggs are pale stone-colour, with numerous small reddish-brown and a few dull purplish spots."

Upper surface pale brownish grey; upper tail-coverts white; tail white, crossed with dark brown for about one inch on the central feathers, diminishing to a quarter of an inch on the outer ones, and tipped with white; primaries brown, the first four with white shafts, and the inner web of the last four or five white, with brown tips; spurious wing dark brown; chin, throat, and breast pale brownish grey; chest rich buff; abdomen and under tail-coverts white; axillaries and under wing-coverts brown; bill black; gape red; feathered orbits white; irides dark brown; legs dusky green.

The young are very similar to the adults, except that the lower part of the neck is streaked and spotted with dark brown.

The Plate represents an adult of the natural size, and a young bird of the year, considerably reduced.