STURNUS HUMII, Gould.

Hume's Starling.

Sturnus unicolor auct. from N.W. India (nec De La Marmora).

——nitens, Hume, Ibis, 1871, p. 410.—Hume & Henders. Lahore to Yark. p. 250, pl. xxiv.—Brooks, Pr. A. S. B. 1871, p. 210.

——, sp., Blanf. East Persia, p. 267.

I have already explained my reasons for figuring the true Sturnus unicolor in the present work, and I now give an illustration of the bird which has for so long done duty for that species with Indian writers. Mr. Hume has so succinctly stated the differences of the Cashmere Starling that I do not think I can do better than quote his remarks when he described it as S. nitens (l. e.):—"It appears to be the species that has hitherto been identified with S. unicolor of Southern Europe; but it differs most markedly in its brighter tints and smaller size from the only European example with which I have had an opportunity of comparing it. It is this species which is not uncommon in the Peshawer valley, and which breeds in May in the holes of trees in the compounds of the cantonments. It is equally common, I believe, in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Compared with the European bird, the bills are less compressed towards the tips, and looked at from above seem more spatulate towards the end. The birds are slighter and smaller, the wings ranging from 4·6 to 4·9 inches, against 5·2 in the only European specimen I have to compare it with, and the total length being 7·25 to 8·0, against 9·0 inches in the Sardinian Starling. The colours are brighter (recalling the coloration of Juida), and the plumage more glossy, while the breast-hackles are narrower and shorter.

"Learning that Gould had figured a new eastern Starling under the name of S. purpurascens, I concluded that this must be my S. nitens; but having at last had an opportunity of consulting his twenty-second Part of the 'Birds of Asia,' I see that both in plumage and dimensions they differ toto cælo. S. nitens is absolutely speckless, and is much smaller." Mr. Hume then quotes the description given by me in the present work, and he adds a diagnosis of his proposed new species as follows:—

"Plumage.—Face, head, throat, a deep blue-purple, the ear-coverts alone having in some lights greenish reflections. Neck all round, upper back and breast a bright ruddy purple. Lower portion of back and upper tail-coverts with a coppery and green gloss. Abdomen black, with a green metallic gloss. Wing-coverts dark green, with, in some lights, a slight golden tinge. Wings with the primaries and their greater coverts and the earlier secondaries towards their bases very narrowly but very distinctly edged with white. Quills greyish brown, outer webs of primaries inside the white edging black, with a narrow band of the same colour at the tip; secondaries and tertiaries similar, but only about the outer half of the outer web black, and the greater portion of this, in fact all but the tips, overlaid with metallic green, the black band at the tips more conspicuous than in the primaries. Under tail-coverts black, with a faint purple and green gloss. The whole bird absolutely spotless.

"I think no one can well doubt that S. nitens and S. purpurascens are distinct. From S. vulgaris as well as the Indian race of this latter no one, again, can well question the distinctness of my new Starling. As to S. unicolor, the only specimen I possess, besides being much larger, having a more compressed bill, much longer breast-hackles, larger feet, and stronger claws, altogether lacks the brilliant contrasts of colour so conspicuous in S. nitens. My specimen might have been faded; but there is no indication of these contrasts in La Marmora's original description, or in Degland and Gerbe. I really think this is a good species; and I have seen at least fifty specimens of it, all identical.

Mr. Blanford, in his lately published work on the zoology of Eastern Persia, mentions having found this species on two occasions, at Shiraz in June and in the Jaji Rud valley in the Elburz Mountains in August; and Major St. John says it is confined to wooded and garden districts, while the ordinary species is common all over Persia, frequenting the high bare plateaux during summer in large numbers. Mr. Blanford is not convinced of the specific distinctness of the present bird; but he points out that in any case the name nitens cannot be maintained, as this title has already been given by Brehm to the Common Starling. I therefore dedicate the species to Mr. Hume, who has done so much to enrich our knowledge of Indian birds.

As far as can be determined at present, the range of the present bird seems to be from Cashmere and Afghanistan, where it is common, to Persia, where it is rarer, being replaced in Armenia by my Sturnus purpurascens.