

## CREX PRATENSIS.

### Land-Rail, or Corn-Crake.

*Rallus Crex*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 261.

*Porphyrio rufescens*, Briss. Orn., tom. v. p. 533.

*Gallinula Crex*, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 766.

*Crex pratensis*, Bechst. Naturg. Deutsch., tom. iv. p. 470.

*Ortygometra Crex*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 213, pl. 26.

THERE are doubtless many persons, with a taste for the natural objects around them, who are not aware that our avifauna is composed of birds which are stationary, as the Robin and the Wren, chance visitors, like the Hoopoe and the Oriole, spring migrants, like the Swallow and the Cuckoo, and autumn migrants, like the Fieldfare and the Redwing. The autumnal visitors which come from colder climates, such as Norway and Sweden, retire northward again about the time when our spring visitors arrive from Africa: these latter comprise, beside the Swallow and smaller sylvan species, the *Saxicolinæ*, the Cuckoo, the Quail, the Night-Jar, Wryneck, Land-Rail, &c.,—the aggregate being about fifty species. Thus, when we lose our winter visitants, their place is supplied by the arrival, during the month of April, of fifty kinds of birds which had wintered elsewhere. No one of these spring visitors is more conspicuous than the Land-Rail, which, arriving about the second week in April, gradually spreads over the whole of the British Islands, and by the 1st of May is as common in Sutherlandshire as it is in our most southern counties; in Ireland the movement is precisely similar, and it is even more numerous there than in England. Britain is by no means the most northern country which the Land-Rail annually visits; for in summer it is found, but in smaller numbers, in Iceland and Greenland. Independently of the localities above mentioned, the Land-Rail is found all over Europe, from north to south; and in one or other part of the year, from Madeira in the Atlantic, throughout Northern Africa, Asia Minor, and as far eastward as Affghanistan.

Soon after its arrival in spring, this restless migrant settles itself in some low grassy mead, field of clover or corn, or bed of osiers, and the male commences the harsh, kraking, monotonous call so well known to every one resident in the country. As soon as the female has responded to the invitation, the mated pair commence their nest; the due number of eggs having been laid in daily succession, the task of incubation is commenced; and by the time the grass is ready for the scythe, the mead bespangled with the buttercup, and the charlock well in flower, the hatching-time has arrived, and the coal-black young are following their parents stealthily through the grass. These active little creatures must grow with unusual rapidity; for the barley is scarcely ripe before they can fly, and the 1st of September is usually too late for the sportsman to benefit by more than a remnant of the thousands that must have been bred in our islands. The great mass of both old and young are now near the south coast, waiting for the first favourable opportunity to cross the water, and gradually pass southward to their winter quarters. It is true that Land-Rails are often killed in September, and even in October. A field of standing clover will even hold them longer; and some few must stay with us the whole winter, for specimens are frequently seen in the London markets at Christmas, and I once picked up a dead Land-Rail, at Hawkstone, in January, which had apparently been killed by some bird of prey. But, as I have stated, the greater number depart in September—a circumstance very much to be regretted by those who are fond of sport, or who possess an epicurean taste; for there are few birds better adapted to gratify it, and still fewer that are its equal. How stealthily does the Land-Rail thread the grass, the corn, or the standing clover! With what command does it utter its harsh call so as to deceive those who may be anxiously wishing to sight it! at one moment the noise seems to be at your feet; at the next it appears to be many yards distant, and so perhaps it is; yet the boy, sitting in yonder ditch, with the aid of a comb and a piece of wood, calls the bird within a yard of him, and with uplifted stick strikes the moving grass and secures it. In the neighbourhood of London, where all is grass and dairy farms, Mr. Bond tells me, many are destroyed in this way.

With regard to the flight of the Land-Rail, every sportsman will testify that it is the most laboured, the slowest, and the straightest of all birds'; yet, to our astonishment, we know that this species crosses the wide seas, and performs a migration of greater extent than any other of our spring birds, with the exception, perhaps, of the Wheatear. We cannot but wonder how it can fly so great a distance without exhaustion, when to cross only a moderately-sized field seems to tire it when flushed by the dogs in the sporting-season; for it invariably drops within a hundred yards, and very rarely is it forced to rise again. On my outward voyage to America a Land-Rail visited the ship when we were more than two