

MACHETES PUGNAX.

Ruff.

- Tringa pugnax*, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 62.
—— *littorea*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 251.
—— *rufescens*, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iv. p. 332.
—— *equestris et grenovicensis*, Lath. Ind. Orn., tom. ii. pp. 730, 731.
—— *variegata*, Brünn, Orn. Bor., p. 54.
Totanus pugnax, Nilss.
Machetes pugnax, Cuv. Règn. Anim., tom. i. p. 490.
—— *planiceps*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 671.
—— *alticeps*, Brehm, ib., p. 670, tab. 34 fig. 4.
Pavoncella pugnax, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 29.
Philomachus pugnax, G. R. Gray, List of Gen. of Birds, 1841, p. 89.
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On taking up my pen to say a few words respecting the Ruff, I am fully aware of the high interest which attaches to the subject; for of all the Sandpipers this bird is the most extraordinary, and possesses characters unlike any other. In nearly all the species of the great family of *Tringinae* the females are the largest of the two sexes; but in the Ruff the females or Reeves are about half the size of the males. During spring, or the breeding-season, too, the male is adorned with the most profuse ornamentation, in the shape of neck-plumes and ear-tufts, that can be conceived; for not even among the *Gallinae* is this feature more strongly developed; at the same time a multitude of fleshy tubercles appear on the face, which, as well as the ruff and ear-tufts, disappear at the close of the breeding-season. To this must be added that, while most of the Sandpipers are excellent for the table, the Ruff and his little partner the Reeve are especially so. For all time since birds were eaten, and delicacies sought after for the delectation of the epicure, these birds have been highly esteemed, and have ever formed part of the great feasts given by kings and other potentates, and are still in high favour; for even at the moment I am penning these lines (May 1871) London teems with examples for the enjoyment of those who can afford their purchase. Those which now appear in our markets have been snared or otherwise obtained in Holland. Formerly, even so late as the commencement of the present century, there was no need for this Dutch supply; for sufficient for the demand could then be obtained in Norfolk and Lincolnshire. Now a solitary pair, or at most a score, are all that those counties are able to send us in a month. Ruffs and Reeves, in fact, like many other marsh-loving birds, find their place there no more, the draining and clearing of the fens having deprived such localities of the conditions fitted for their existence; the sites which afforded a natural home to the Bittern, the Spoonbill, the Ruff and Reeve, and many other birds are now covered with waving corn, and afford an abundance of cereal, instead of feathered, food for man. In many parts of Holland, however, and particularly in the northern portion of Friesland, the Ruff and other marsh-birds still are found in their usual abundance, the land therein not being capable of improvement. There are many other parts of the Continent in which similar physical conditions occur, and where the Ruff is also found: these are some portions of France, Belgium, the great swamps at the mouth of the Danube, Turkey, and Russia. To all such places the Ruff migrates in the month of April, and, taking his stand upon some small hillock, like a knight of old, challenges his neighbour to mortal combat, until the females arrive and select the strongest, the vanquished getting a mate or not as the case may be. These matters settled, the nesting soon commences, and the marsh is speedily studded over with nests, or rather with depressions in the ground, where the female hatches her four beautiful eggs and rears her young, which, like most youthful Sandpipers, are at first covered with a variegated down, and are but feeble creatures. After some little time, however, they attain strength, and, plumage taking the place of their first downy covering, they are able to exercise their pinions, and fly from the place of their birth to the shores of the sea and other suitable localities, not only in every part of Europe and Africa, but in India and China. I do not mean that the Ruffs found in the two last-mentioned countries are birds that have been bred in Holland, but that probably similar colonies also occur in Russia and Siberia; so numerous is this remarkable bird. Besides the extraordinary development of the frill in the Ruff, there is another circumstance connected with it which renders it still more astonishing—namely, that it is all but impossible to find two males in which it is similarly coloured; but whatever may be the colouring first assumed, it is retained through each subsequent change. Thus, if the prevailing colour at the first assumption be red, it will be of that hue at the recurrence of each successive breeding-season; if black, black it will