

NUMENIUS ARQUATA.

Curlew.

Scolopax arquata, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 59.

Numenius arquata, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 710.

——— *major*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 26.

——— *medius*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 609.

If birds, like human beings, have recollections of the past, perceptions of the present, and anticipations of the future, such an endowment must necessarily add much to their happiness. I believe, however, that this is not the case, and that their actions and economies are purely the result of instinct, and not of reason, and consequently that the Curlew, when it leaves its summer home among the heather and other flowering plants of the hills, carries no recollection of the past to the sea-shore or the great oozy flats of our estuaries. How strange it is, and how interesting to know, that a bird should frequent such totally different localities at opposite seasons of the year!—the wet, oozy, mud-flats of the arms of the sea, the equally dirty sides of tidal rivers, and the flat shores of the ocean being resorted to by the Curlew in winter; while in summer it is strictly an inland bird, dwelling on the moorland, among bogs, on the sides of hills, and even the crowns of mountains—flowering rushes and blooming heather being the places in which its four large eggs are deposited, and in which its downy young first see the light. On reading the foregoing lines, ornithologists may say that they are equally descriptive of the habits and economy of the Dunlin. Admitting that they may be, they are none the less interesting, since they serve to show that structure, and not size, influences habits and modes of life. If closely compared, it will be found that in anatomical details the little Dunlin differs but little from the great Curlew; and, in like manner, but slight difference occurs in their modes of life. The two birds have associations in common, both wintering together on the muddy flats, and impulsively taking to the hills when the season of reproduction is near at hand. Not only do they change their locale, but a total change of food is the consequence,—small mollusks, marine worms, crustacea, and insects forming the staple article of the Curlew during its sea-side sojourn; while worms, snails, and such terrestrial insects as are natural to the hills constitute its diet in summer. In some cases even during the season of reproduction, the Curlew performs nightly flights to the sea-side and to the neighbouring estuary; but that this is always done is impossible, from the great distance inland at which they sometimes breed.

Many of my readers will have gathered, from what has been written, that the Curlew is indigenous to the British Islands; but, for the information of those who are not so well acquainted with our native birds, I may state that it is universally distributed along the coasts of England and Scotland—from the Land's End, in Cornwall, to the Orkneys,—and that it is equally abundant in Ireland. In like manner it occasionally occurs in most parts of Europe, in Africa, and India; it has, in fact, a very wide range—so much so, that to say it extends over Europe and Asia, except their most northern parts, would probably not be exceeding the truth. In confirmation of this assertion I may state that Faber and Dr. Krüper mention it as having been killed, though very rarely, in Iceland; in Norway it penetrates beyond the Arctic circle, but in Sweden it does not reach so far by some three degrees; Swinhoe states that it is common in Amoy Creek, in China; and Mr. Gurney at Natal, in South Africa; Mr. Godman that it is occasionally found in the Azores; and Mr. Jerdon describes it as a bird of India.

Some of the recorded breeding-places of the Curlew may be mentioned:—Mr. Rodd gives the large moors about Roughtor, Brownwilly, &c., in Cornwall; formerly, if not now, on Dart- and Exmoor; several parts of Wales; the Derbyshire moors; the mountains of the English lake-districts; Scotland, both the highlands and the lowlands; the Orkneys and Hebrides, and many parts of Ireland.

“During the breeding-season,” says Sir William Jardine, in a note to his edition of Wilson's ‘American Ornithology,’ “the Curlew is entirely an inhabitant of the upland moors and sheep pastures, and, in the soft and dewy mornings of May and June, forms an object in their early solitude which adds to their wildness. At first dawn, when nothing can be seen but rounded hills of rich and green pasture, rising one beyond another with perhaps an extensive meadow between, looking more boundless by the mists and shadows of morn, a long string of sheep, marching off at a sleepy pace on their well-beaten track to some more favourite feeding-ground, the shrill tremulous call of the Curlew to his mate has something in it wild and melancholy, yet always pleasing. In such situations do they build, making almost no nest, and, during the commencement of their amours, run skulkingly among the long grass and rushes, the male rising and sailing round, or descending with the wings closed above his back, and uttering his peculiar quavering whistle. The approach of an intruder requires more demonstration of his powers, and he approaches near,