YUNX TORQUILLA.

Wryneck.

Yunx torquilla Linnæi et auctorum.

Wryneck, Cuckoo's mate, Snake-bird! How shall I commence its history? For its every action and whole economy are as singular as the markings of its plumage are chaste and beautiful. Mate of the Cuckoo it has been called, because it arrives in the spring, foretelling, like that bird, that summer is near at hand. Its peculiar cry is known to every cottager, and welcome is its monotonous and repeated call of *pee, pee, pee.* Africa, which it has lately left, is its winter residence; but as the sun advances towards the north, it follows in his path, well knowing that it will find a congenial home in Great Britain. What, if I depict it in one of its grotesque attitudes, when it writhes its head, snake-like, from side to side, with its neck contracted to the size of a quill; or in the period of courtship, when, with erected crest, drooping wings, and outspread tail, it is bowing and coquetting before the object of its attention? If I had portrayed it thus, it would scarcely have been recognized. The accompanying illustration presents the Wryneck mated and sobered down for the important duty of reproduction; the hollow branch will afford the eggs and young birds protection from all intruders, and enable it to rear its numerous progeny to an age when they may wing their way to the distant lands from which the parents had lately arrived.

Not only is the Wryneck a summer visitant to Great Britain; for in all, or nearly all, of the countries of the Old World lying under the same parallel of latitude is it to be found, even as far east as India, China, and Japan, from all of which countries, as well as from Western Asia, I possess specimens; it will be obvious, therefore, that few birds are more widely distributed. In the British Islands, where the Wryneck arrives at the latter end of March or the beginning of April, it is very generally, though not universally, dispersed over all the southern and midland counties, gradually becoming scarce and scarcer still until we reach the border-line of England and Scotland, which may be considered the extent of its range in that direction. I believe it to be more common in the eastern part of England than in the western. Mr. Rodd, in his "List of British Birds, as a Guide to the Ornithology of Cornwall," states that it is "rare in all parts of the county; occasionally observed in the neighbourhood of Penzance in the autumn, near the coast, probably preparing for migration." In Ireland it is unknown. Having remained with us during the summer, and reared its progeny, it departs southward again in August and September, passing through Spain to its winter abode in Morocco. I know that the Wryneck is occasionally found in the neighbourhood of Rome and at Marseilles in winter; but doubtless the same great migratory movement takes place on the continent of Europe as in England; indeed, I know that such is the case. Always solitary and recluse in its habits, its presence would rarely be detected by any but the most keen observer, were it not for its peculiar and loud cry, which, once heard, can never be forgotten. I know of no bird whose colours are less attractive at a distance, or whose flight, when it rises from the ground, from the rail of a fence, or from the bole of a tree, is more like that of a Sparrow; and hence, when flying, it seldom attracts notice; but when closely watched, especially during the pairing-time, as before stated, it will be seen that it performs a number of singular and extraordinary evolutions. Like the Woodpecker, the Wryneck has a tongue equal in length to that of its entire body; and truly complete must be the muscular arrangement connected with an organ which the bird has the power of protruding and retracting at will to such an extent that the deepest interstices of the bark of trees, as well as the terrestrial ant-hill, are probed with ease. Insects and their larvæ, ants and their eggs, constitute, I believe, the principal food of the Wryneck; and beautifully, indeed, is its whole structure adapted for obtaining this kind of diet.

"The anatomical construction of the tongue," says Mr. Yarrell, "and the consequent mode of taking its food, will amply repay the closest examination. By an elongation of the two posterior branches of the bones of the tongue, and the exercise of the muscles attached to them, this bird is able to extend the tongue a very considerable distance beyond the point of the beak; the end of the tongue is horny and hard; a large and long gland is situated at the under edge of the lower jaw on each side, which secretes a glutinous mucus, and transfers it to the inside of the mouth by a slender duct. With this glutinous mucus the end of the tongue is always covered for the especial purpose of conveying food into the mouth by contact. So unerring is the aim with which the tongue is darted out, and so certain the effect of the adhesive moisture, that the bird never fails in obtaining its object at every attempt. So rapid also is the action of the tongue in thus conveying food into the mouth, that the eye is unable distinctly to follow it; and Colonel Montagu, who had an opportunity of seeing this bird feed while confined in a cage, says that an ant's egg, which is of a light colour, and more conspicuous than the tongue, had somewhat the appearance of moving towards the mouth by attraction, as a needle flies to a magnet."