LINOTA CANNABINA.

Linnet.

Fringilla cannabina, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 87.

—— linota, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 916.

Ligurinus cannabina, Koch, Syst. Baier. Zool., tom. i. p. 231.

Linaria cannabina, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 554.

Cannabina pinetorum, et arbustorum, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 276, 277.

—— linota, G. R. Gray, List of Gen. of Birds, 1840, p. 45.

Linota cannabina, Bonap. Geog. and Comp. List of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 54.

The Linnet is one of our strictly indigenous birds, as much so as the Thrush, the Blackbird, or the Magpie, but is less frequently noticed; for although it may often be seen on the wing, few who observe it know what it really is, or distinguish it from a Sparrow or a Greenfinch. When fully adult the males are extremely beautiful, their crown and chest being washed in early spring with a delicate rosy hue, which heightens as the season advances; hence at midsummer they are finer than at the nuptial period, the grey tips of the feathers, which overlap their roseate portions, having fallen of, leaving the underlying scarlet more exposed, besides which the colour itself appears to increase in depth until the autumnal moult, when the bird assumes the nearly uniform warmer clothing of winter.

The distribution of this common species over the three kingdoms is so very general that even the Orkneys and the Hebrides are not without its presence. Although its nature leads it to prefer barren tracts of country, furzy commons and wastes bordering woods, it readily accommodates itself to the most highly cultivated districts, often frequenting gardens, lawns, and shrubberies, especially those to which open fields are contiguous. In April and May it constructs a round cup-shaped nest among the shrubs of pleasure-grounds and the furze and gorse of our common lands; in the latter case it is subject to much persecution by the village boys who wantonly take its eggs, and in the former it is shot by the gardener on account of its habit of pilfering his radish-seeds while in pod.

When the breeding-season is over and the young have their pinions perfected, the Linnets become gregarious, and assemble in flocks. During the winter months they leave the gardens and furzy commons, where they have spent the summer, and betake themselves to the open parts of the country, visiting pasture-lands, clover leys, stubble-fields, and even farm-lands; and should the winter prove rigorous, they seek the warmer countries, and perhaps leave our islands altogether for a time.

The Linnet, like the Goldfinch, the Siskin, and the Redpole, contributes greatly to the support of many poor people, being the principal "stock in trade" of the numerous bird-catchers and bird-dealers of the metropolis. The number of persons engaged in its capture and sale are indeed far greater than is usually supposed; and a statistical account of them, could it be correctly ascertained, would be both interesting and surprising. It is not its pleasing colour alone that renders the Linnet such a favourite cage-bird; being a seed-, and not an insect-eater, it is easily kept, readily succumbs to captivity, soon becomes tame and familiar, and during the months of spring constantly cheers its possessor with its pleasing innocent song. Its natural food is the seeds of many of our common weeds, the wild rape, and the dandelion; but it would seem that it occasionally does much damage among the fields of wheat and other grain. The gravest charge I have heard brought against it was made by Mr. Smither of Churt, a close observer of nature and no mean authority in matters of the kind. Writing to me in July 1863, he says:—"No one would believe the damage done to wheat this season by the Linnets, unless they saw it; in many places the ground is covered with chaff, and the ears entirely emptied. I have seen spots of standing wheat the ears of which were covered with Linnets; and a farmer I was with this morning estimates the loss by these birds at the rate of two sacks in an acre and a half of wheat: he was greatly pleased therefore at my shooting some of them. Whether they overbalance the damage they commit by the quantity of weed-seeds they consume, I cannot say. 'Punch' writes very strongly in favour of small birds; but I think he does not quite understand the nature of them."

Besides being very common in the British Islands, the Linnet is also found all over Europe from Lapland to the Mediterranean, in North Africa, and in Madeira; I have myself seen it in abundance in the Maltese group of islands; and that it goes as far east as Asia Minor and Persia is certain, as I have thence received specimens. I am not aware of its having been found in India; neither does it form part of the avifauna of America.

"Towards the end of autumn," says Macgillivray, "the Linnets collect into flocks, which unite as the winter