MOTACILLA YARRELLI, *Gould.*

Pied Wagtail.

Motacilla Yarrelli, Gould, Birds of Europe, vol. ii. List of plates, p. ii, note.

I APPREHEND that no one with a spark of love for our indigenous birds can fail to admire the Pied Wagtail as it trips over the lawn, or runs before him during his rambles by the river-side. Whether engaged in pursuit of insects, or in performing its dipping flight from one place to another, its presence gives life to the landscape, and adds much to the attractions of the scene. It is a bird which America may well envy us, and which Australia would gladly give much in exchange to possess; for in neither of those countries does it or any member of its genus occur. It is not a little singular that a bird so common and so universally dispersed over the British Islands should have remained without a specific appellation until 1837, when I proposed for it that of *Yarrelli*, and that all English ornithologists should have failed to perceive that it is distinct from the *Motacilla alba* of Linnæus. Neither is it less remarkable that a mere strait of only some thirty miles across should form a boundary over which the two species rarely pass. To say that neither of them ever visits the other's territory would be to state what is untrue; for such an occurrence does occasionally take place; but these are merely exceptions to the rule, and, moreover, are so rare that a person might live at Dover from childhood to old age without seeing a *M. alba*, or at Calais without once meeting with *M. Yarrelli*. The only part of the world out of our own islands whence I have received the Pied Wagtail is Heligoland; and I now question if I had not myself been deceived when I stated, in my paper on the species of the genus *Motacilla*, published in the 'Magazine of Natural History' for 1837, that I had seen it from Norway and Sweden. Why the habitats of some birds should be restricted, and others extensive, is beyond our comprehension. One would naturally suppose that if any Wagtail migrated in summer to Norway, Sweden, and Iceland, it would be the one common in Britain; instead of which it is the more southern *M. alba* that extends its summer journey to these almost Arctic countries. Over Britain the *M. Yarrelli* is so abundantly dispersed, that it matters not whether we visit the Land's End, in Cornwall, Cape Wrath, in Scotland, or the Orkney Islands; everywhere this pretty pied bird will be met with; in the vale and the higher lands, wherever man with his flocks are found and husbandry is carried on, the certain accompaniment is the Pied Wagtail. The shepherd knows the bird as well as his sheep, for they are almost inseparable; the herd-boy finds it the daily companion of his charge; and the maid when she goes to the mead, sees it jump up and dash about for insects around the cow she is milking; and the farm-labourer has it ever before him, both in winter and summer the stack-yard and the midden being among its favourite places of resort.

The Dishwasher, as the Pied Wagtail is familiarly called in some parts of the country, is one of the most peaceful of our little birds; for it interferes with none; and if the coarse, hopping sparrow attempts to tilt with it, it readily trips before him with the most light-footed agility, or darts away with amazing quickness. On the water's edge it readily evades this or any other insessorial bird, by running breast high into the stream, and leaping on a floating leaf, a stone, or any water-plant or projecting object that may present itself therein; along the roof of a house it passes with equal nimbleness, so that here again the pugnacious Fringilline is once more nonplused. Its wings being long and ample, its flight is vigorous, but peculiar; and it dips away over the river, or from one part of the mead to another, with the utmost rapidity, and, on settling, throws up its tail and keeps it in constant motion; its legs and toes are so delicately formed as to render its progress over the ground as facile as possible; in like manner its cylindrical bill is as admirably adapted for taking minute insects as its full black eye is for discovering during the period of summer the gnats, aphides, and other tiny kinds which are then to be found among the various grasses, while at other seasons it as readily secures the small mollusks and the host of soft insects upon which it then subsists.

In addition to its other attractions, the Pied Wagtail sings, during the early part of spring, a short but sprightly and pretty song, which may occasionally be also heard in June, when the female is sitting on her second laying of eggs. The situation of the nest is very variable; its most frequent sites are the hole in a wall, on a beam in an outhouse, the head of a pollard willow, under the eaves of a hay-rick, &c. Wherever it may be, it is one of those most frequently selected for the place of deposit of the egg of the parasitic Cuckoo; but how this is effected is still a mystery, though Mr. Alfred Newton informs me that the old Cuckoo has been seen to carry its egg in its bill, and drop it into the nest. However this may be, a more sedulous fosterparent than the Pied Wagtail could not be found; for it defends its charge with a courage and pertinacity truly

J. Gould & H.C. Richter, del. et lith. Walter, imp.