

## SYLVIA CINEREA.

### Whitethroat.

*Motacilla sylvia*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 330?

*Sylvia cinerea*, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 514.

*Sylvia fruticeti*, Vieill.

*Curruca sylvia*, Flem. Brit. Anim., p. 71.

—— *cinerea*, Bechst. Naturg. Deutschl., tom. iii. p. 534.

WHEN the opening primrose, the violet, and the blue-bell bedeck the sunny banks of the coppice, when the brimstone butterfly has emerged from his prison and skims the sides of the sheltered lane, the Whitethroat favours us with its presence, and gives additional life to the scene by its sprightly actions and animated song, and is so common that there is not a plough-boy who has not known it from his earliest childhood, or a school-boy who has not provoked its anger by searching for its nest.

At this season of spring I do not know a more interesting little bird than the Whitethroat. Its mirthful, hurried song, which it is impossible to describe, its scoldings and defiant actions when the precincts of its nest are invaded, the animated way in which it tops the hedge-row and mounts in the air, with erected crest and elevated tail, must be familiar to every one who has strolled down a green lane, or passed over a common in spring or summer. The Whitethroat is less of a woodland bird than the Blackcap or Nightingale, evincing a preference for bramble-brakes, thickets of blackthorn, and clumps of furze. In such situations it may be met with in England, Ireland, and Scotland; it becomes, however, more scarce the further we proceed north. Still St. John speaks of its inhabiting Morayshire, and it is also found occasionally in Ross-shire, but not in Sutherland and Caithness. It is very generally dispersed over all parts of the European continent, proceeds as far north as Sweden and Norway, where I observed it on the small islands in the Christiania Fjord, and in the cold season it is equally abundant over the greater portion of North Africa. Eastwardly it is found at Smyrna, Mr. Tristram says it is extremely abundant in Palestine, and it is a question whether the Indian bird known under the name of *Sylvia affinis* be not identical with it.

The sexes are very much alike in size and colour; but a considerable difference occurs in the tints of their plumage at opposite seasons of the year: thus in spring the head and back of the neck is grey, and the white of the under surface suffused with delicate vinous, while after the autumn moult the crown and back of the neck is more brown, and the tints of the under surface are not so pure. The young of the year are altogether less delicately coloured than the adults, and much more like the state in which the latter appear in autumn.

The task of incubation is usually commenced about the middle of April—a little earlier or a little later according to the character of the season. The frail nest may then be found in brambles or ordinary shrubs, and generally near the ground. The eggs, hereafter described, are hatched in twelve or fourteen days, and the young are capable of flying by the middle of June. The male, who has been mute during the rearing of his first brood, becomes loquacious and busy while a second laying and hatching is performed; this duty over, and the sun being now on the decline, the Whitethroat departs from our island, and betakes itself to warmer latitudes. Its food, while with us, is of a mixed character, consisting of flies, aphides, and other insects and their larvæ; fruits of the garden and the berries of the hedgerow are also acceptable.

In size the Whitethroat is less than the Blackcap and Garden Warbler, but, having a longer tail, is of a more graceful form than either of them.

As an article of food for the Italians and Maltese, to whom few small birds come amiss, it is doubtless equal to any of those known by the name of "beccaficos," a term which appears to be applied indiscriminately to any of the sylvine birds.

"When not disturbed," says Macgillivray, "it often rises over the hedge or bush to a height varying from a few feet to several yards, flutters in the air with fitful and fantastic motion, singing all the while, and then drops to the perch it has left. In all its movements, if excited, it keeps the feathers of the head erected, and when singing, swells out its throat conspicuously."

Mr. Hepburn informed Macgillivray that "in 1838 it was first seen in the Lothians on the 7th of May, when many were sporting about in the same hedge in a well-sheltered glen, their lively notes and animated gestures showing that they were not fatigued by their long journey to our northern clime, and the silvery whiteness of their throat and abdomen contrasting beautifully with the delicate green of the young foliage as they darted along. Every now and then one would start off for a distant part of the hedge, singing all the while, and accompanying its song by curious jerks and gesticulations of the body. In a few days they