

PRATINCOLA RUBETRA.

Whinchat.

Motacilla rubetra, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 332.
Sylvia rubetra, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 525.
Rubetra major sive rubicola, Briss. Orn., tom. iii. p. 432, tab. 24. fig. 1.
Saxicola rubetra, Meyer, Taschenb. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 252 b.
Œnanthe rubetra, Vieill.
Fruticicola rubetra, Macgill. Hist. Brit. Birds, vol. ii. p. 273.
Pratincola rubetra, Koch, Bonap. Conspl. Gen. Av., tom. i. p. 304, *Pratincola*, sp. 1.
Praticola rubetra, Parz. Cat. des Ois. d'Eur., No. 162.

THE Whinchat is one of the prettiest of the British summer visitants, and its presence is accompanied by many pleasing associations. It is by no means the earliest of our migrants, for it seldom arrives before the middle of April or the beginning of May; the great flights do not, in fact, appear before vegetation has put on a luxuriant garb, when the fields have become spangled with buttercups, and the May is in blossom, when the Swift spins over the mead, and the Landrail sends forth its craking note. At this exuberant season, when all nature is stimulated by the daily nearer approach of the sun, the Whinchat is to be seen in its greatest perfection; for now it is most gaily attired, and gives utterance to its cheerful song while perched on the outermost spray of the hedge-row, or on the bent-down grass in the meadow; at this time, too, it rises perpendicularly in the air, and sings as it descends to the ground, when the constant movement of its tail and its sprightly manners indicate the group to which it belongs. The Whinchats, Redstarts, and Wheatears were formerly included in one genus; but they are really three distinct forms, to each of which a separate generic appellation is now assigned. In other countries there are many species of Wheatear besides our own, many Redstarts, and not less numerous *Pratincoleæ*, all of which, combined with some other forms I need not enumerate here, constitute a well-defined family of birds (the *Saxicolinæ*) which is peculiar to the Old World, and almost exclusively to that portion of it lying north of the equator.

The Whinchat winters in Northern Africa and Persia, and is as universally spread in summer over all parts of the European continent, from the shores of the Mediterranean and Black Sea to Lapland and Northern Russia, as it is in the British Islands. Unlike the sedentary Stonechat, it is distributed far and wide over the whole of the three kingdoms, but is much more numerous in some parts than in others; for instance, it is less abundant in Cornwall than in the midland counties, and there are districts in Scotland where it is still more unfrequently seen. Wherever it may be, it feeds upon insects, which it captures, while in their winged state, with an alertness only excelled by the true Flycatchers; it is particularly diligent in its search for small Coleoptera and their larvæ.

Although arriving late in the season, the Whinchat is said to be double-brooded; and I think this more than probable, since I have observed that it remains here long after many of our sylvan birds have departed for their winter quarters. At this time it has left the grassy mead and the furze-clad common, and betaken itself to the fallow fields, where, like the clodhopping Wheatear, it springs over the surface with an air of sprightliness peculiar to the birds of this group. These autumnal birds are so differently attired from those we see in spring, that it has always appeared doubtful to me whether the Whinchat is not subject to a marked seasonal change. In all I have seen at this season, the rich orange-buff of the breast is entirely absent, while the white of the throat, sides of the neck, and the breast is dotted with minute well-defined specks of dark brown, and the feathers of the back are narrowly encircled with greyish white. It is just possible this may be characteristic of the second moult of yearling examples; but it is a very different dress from that which the young assume immediately after leaving the nest, an example of which was kindly placed at my disposal by Mr. Bond, and I have it now before me. This individual, which had the wings sufficiently developed to enable it to fly, has the crown of the head, the ear-coverts, and the upper surface generally striated with buff and dark brown, the throat and abdomen nearly pure buff-white; while the breast-feathers have no appearance of spots in their centres, and are edged with dark brown. If the Whinchat does not undergo a seasonal change in the full sense of the words, I think it probable the males do not acquire their finest livery until the second year. We have ample evidence that this is the case with the Black Redstart; and why should it not be so with the Whinchat? The fully adult female, although possessing the general features of the male, has all her colours less pure and less strongly contrasted.

"The Whinchat is not," says Mr. Hewitson, "so exclusively an inhabitant of furze-covered hedgeless districts as its name would imply; for in one of the rich grassy vales of Westmoreland, where I went to school, it was abundant, and the name of Grass-chat given to it was suited to the nature of the country round.