

SAXICOLA ŒNANTHE.

Wheatear.

Motacilla œnanthe, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 93.

Sylvia œnanthe, Lath. Ind. Orn., vol. ii. p. 529.

Motacilla vitiflora, Pall. Zoogr. Ross.-Asiat., tom. i. p. 472.

Saxicola œnanthe, Bechst. Orn. Taschenb., tom. i. p. 217.

Vitiliflora œnanthe, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 21.

THE natural abodes of the present bird are open downs, warrens, commons, heaths, and moorlands; the more sterile and stony the better are they adapted to its wants. Neither is any situation too solitary for it; the most chaotic gorge, the rocky mountain tarn, the wildest moorland, where sheep cannot live and the Blue Hare can scarcely exist, are among the favourite places of its resort. If you ascend a glen in the Highlands from the sea-shore to its upper limits, the Wheatear is sure to be one of the few birds which greet you at every turn in the valley, and may be seen on every stony projection livelily flirting its tail and showing the conspicuous patch of white on its rump as it flits bobbingly from stone to stone or rock to rock.

The Wheatear is a truly migratory species; for it quits the hot plains of Africa in the early spring and distributes itself during the months of summer over all suitable parts of Europe, our own islands, and Iceland, some few even proceeding still further north, as will be seen in the sequel. My son, Dr. Franklin Gould, who noted it on its spring passage at San Remo, writes under date of February 23, 1868, "the Wheatear has appeared to-day for the first time." It comes to England early in March, and any day in the latter end of that month it may be seen on the downs around Brighton, Beachy Head, and other parts of Sussex; and soon afterwards the more central parts of England, the wolds of Yorkshire, the hills of Derbyshire, and every suitable locality from Cornwall to Cape Wrath are enlivened with its presence; some remain to breed and spend the summer here, while others proceed further north to more inhospitable and barren countries. One was observed by Captain James Ross, flying round his ship in Felix Harbour, 70° N., 91° 58' W., on the 2nd of May, 1830; and specimens were brought to me by the Arctic traveller Dr. Rae, to prove that the Wheatear really visits the northern parts of the American continent, in proceeding to which they had probably passed over the British Islands.

Summer having passed away, and the Wheatear reared its young and moulted into its winter garb, the whole gradually proceed southward preparatory to their flight across the ocean to Spain, and thence over the Mediterranean to Morocco and other parts of the African continent, where they winter among the desert plains of that hot country, and return again to us when the sun, in his daily progress towards the north, has prepared our islands for their reception.

During the autumnal migration of the Wheatear, when both old and young assemble on the Sussex downs prior to their departure, vast numbers are captured for the delectation of the wealthy epicure. From time immemorial, when Brighton was a mere fishing-village, and Hastings a mere hamlet, the Wheatear has been captured and sold for the purposes of the table. The bird, however, is now less plentiful than it was formerly, and the supply certainly does not keep pace with the demand; it is only a favoured few, therefore, who can now regale on autumnal Wheatears. On this head Yarrell says:—"The extensive downs between Eastbourne and Beachy Head are visited by the Wheatear from the end of July to the middle of September, by hundreds daily. Other portions of the downs along the southern coast have their share of these migrants; and as they are then fat and of good flavour, it is customary to dress them by dozens at the inns of the numerous watering-places on the Sussex coast. The birds are supplied in profusion by the shepherds, who form numerous traps for them in the turf of the downs over which their flocks and cattle graze. The trap is formed by cutting an oblong piece of turf from the surface, about eleven inches by eight, and six inches thick, taking it up in a solid mass, and laying it the contrary way both as to surface and direction over the hole, thus forming a hollow chamber beneath it. Besides this chamber two other openings are cut in the turf, about six inches wide, and of greater length, which lead into the chamber at opposite ends, that the bird may run in under the turf through either of them. A small straight stick, sharpened at both ends, not very unlike the old-fashioned brimstone-tipped match, but stouter, is fixed in an upright position a little on one side of the square chamber; this stick supports two open loops of twisted horse-hair placed vertically across the line of passage from either entrance to the opposite outlet; and the bird, attempting to run through, is almost certain to get his head into one of these loops and be caught by the neck; upon the least alarm, even the shadow of a passing cloud, the birds run beneath the clod and are taken.

"However inefficient this trap may appear to be, the success of the shepherds is great. It is recorded in