

## MERULA VULGARIS, *Ray*.

### Blackbird.

*Merula vulgaris*, Ray.

*Turdus merula*, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 80.

*Merula merula*, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 552.

——— *nigra*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Spec. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 20.

——— *pinetorum*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl. p. 373.

——— *truncorum*, Brehm, ib., p. 373.

——— *alliceps*, Brehm, ib., p. 373.

——— *Carniolica*, Brehm, ib., p. 374.

*Sylvia merula*, Savi, Orn. Tosc., tom. i. p. 205.

It has always appeared to me that an unnecessary degree of hesitation has been shown respecting the propriety of generically separating the Blackbird from the Thrush; for surely one moment's reflection is sufficient to convince every ornithologist that the bird is of a different form. To say that there are species directly intermediate in structure is merely begging the question; for while I admit that such is the case, these are, in my opinion, quite distinct from both. As regards form, I consider that of the Blackbird to be one of the most perfect in existence, all its parts being, perhaps, more evenly balanced than in any other bird: its bill is in just proportion to the size of its head; its wings, which are neither long nor short, to that of its body; while its tail, legs, and feet are all in unison therewith. Even when compared with the Thrush, the Blackbird is more symmetrical. It might naturally be supposed that a bird so perfectly formed would be equally at its ease on the ground, among the branches of the trees, and in the air; and so it really is.

The specific name of *vulgaris* assigned to this species by our celebrated countryman, Ray, implies that it is well known over the whole of the British Islands; but although common it is not less a favourite with all, from our good Queen, who, while I am penning these lines, in June 1866, must have enjoyed its plaintive but tuneful song in the beautiful woods at Cliveden, to the cottager who, not content with hearing it in his own or his neighbour's garden, imprisons the sable bird in a white-willow cage for his own especial delectation. This act is less excusable in the cottager than in the Londoner, whose tastes for nature are greater than his means; for although he might prefer to hear this favourite in the sylvan woods, he is generally precluded from doing so.

The Blackbird in a state of nature is seen under so many aspects that I scarcely know which of them to touch upon first. Let it be in winter then, when perchance the face of the country will be carpeted with unsullied snow, and the ebony blackness of his plumage will offer a greater contrast than at any other season. Now the bird has a steady shivering flight as he passes along the ditch or the hedge-side where he has been grubbing for the *Helix nemoralis*, the larvæ of some coleopterous insect, or the fallen berries of the whitethorn; perchance the bird may be under the laurel of the shrubbery, or among the fallen leaves of the coppice, or he may seek the rick-yard of the farmer at this inclement season. During the period of cold the Blackbird appears nipped, and his disposition tame and confiding. If the following months have brought back the sun in ever so slight a degree, the bird becomes spirited and bold; he now passes with measured jumps over the green lawn, droops his wings, jerks his ample tail, and displays unmistakable manifestations that the season is fast advancing when he will be mated and the task of incubation duly performed. The time, in fact, is near at hand when, from his resting-place on a fir or beech, he will pipe forth his melancholy strain—a strain so peculiar and so full of resonant notes that it cannot be mistaken for that of any other bird.

At Midsummer every great wood and grove is tenanted by many Blackbirds uttering their uniform ditties, and answering each other during the greater part of the day; but their conversations are never heard so early in the morning or so late in the evening as those of the more joyous Thrush. It is to these two birds and the Wren, at this particular season, that Shakespeare's lines refer—

“The Ouzel Cock so black of hue  
With orange tawny bill,  
The Thrushle with his note so true,  
And Wren with little quill.”—*Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act iii. sc. 1.

One, two, or more broods having been reared between spring and autumn, the Blackbird resorts to the interior of woods, hedgerows, and sometimes fields of turnips. As the autumn days approach, its shrill, bickering, noisy chatter may be heard in the brakes in the evening; for it seldom retires to rest