ERYTHROPUS VESPERTINUS.

Orange-legged Hobby.

Falco vespertinus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 129.

— rufipes, Beseke, Vög. Kurlands, p. 13, tab. 3, 4.

Cerchneis vespertinus, Boie, Isis, 1828, p. 314.

Erythropus vespertinus, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 76.

Pannychistes rufipes, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 57.

Tinnunculus (Erythropus) rufipes, Kaup, Class. der Säug. und Vög., p. 108.

— () vespertinus, Kaup, Mus. Senckenb., 1845, p. 257.

— vespertinus, Gray, Gen. of Birds, vol. i. p. 21, Tinnunculus, sp. 13.

This remarkably pretty species, whose natural home is in countries far warmer than our own, has been killed in England so many times that no question can arise as to the propriety of assigning it a place among the "Birds of Great Britain." Here, as well as in all the parts of Europe in which it has yet been discovered, it is strictly a migrant, and, moreover, is rendered remarkable by its peculiar habits: in the first place, it is gregarious, many often breeding in company; in the next, it is so fearless of man that, if one or more of a number be killed, the remainder remain apparently regardless of danger; thirdly, it is said to sometimes breed under the roofs of houses, and even to construct its nest in their interiors; and, lastly, it is crepuscular, feeding on insects captured in the twilight, and but seldom on birds; much diversity, moreover, occurs in the colouring of the sexes and immature examples. It is somewhat doubtful whether there be not two or three species of this particular form included under the specific term vespertinus, inasmuch as the dark-coloured males from China and South Africa have the under part of the wing white, and not plumbeous as seen in European specimens; but, in their size and markings, nothing is observable which would enable the ornithologist to determine the plurality or unity of these birds in a specific sense.

The first recorded notice of the occurrence of this Falcon in our islands will be found in the fourth volume of Loudon's 'Magazine of Natural History,' where the late Mr. Yarrell states that three individuals (an adult male, a young male, and an adult female) were obtained in May 1830, at Horning, in Norfolk, and that a fourth specimen was shot at Holkham Park. Besides these he mentions, in his 'History of British Birds,' that a fifth example was shot in the same county in 1832, three more in Yorkshire, one in Durham, one near Devonport, and that a female was struck down by a Raven in Littlecote Park, near Hungerford. Since the publication of Mr. Yarrell's work, several other specimens have been procured; thus W. Oxenden Hammond, Esq., of St. Alban's Court, Wingham, Kent, records, in the 'Zoologist' for 1862, the killing of an adult female at Sandling Park, near Hythe, in the early part of the same year, and Mr. Stevenson, of Norwich, in the 'Zoologist' for 1863, that he had recently purchased a young male which had been killed at Somerleyton Station, near Lowestoft, on the 12th of July, 1862. In a letter received from the last-mentioned gentleman, dated June 20, 1868, he informs me that an adult female had been killed on Yarmouth Broad a fortnight before; and, more recently, Mr. H. Smither, of Churt, states that another adult female had been shot near Farnham. The above comprises all the British examples with which I am acquainted; but there may be others which are unknown to me. There is no verified instance of its having been found in Scotland, and but one of its occurrence in Ireland. It is a constant visitant to Silesia, Hungary, Poland, Austria, the Tyrol, Switzerland, and the districts on the northern side of the Apennines, whence it passes to Provence and Tuscany. In France, as in this country, it is of rare occurrence, and is unknown in Holland. Mr. Jerdon states that, "although generally spread throughout India, it is nowhere very common; I killed it on the Neilgherries, in the Carnatic, and in Central India; it is not very unfrequent in Lower Bengal and the neighbourhood of Calcutta during the rainy season only. It is found all along the Himalayan range; and I procured examples at Darjeeling."

As Mr. Jerdon justly remarks, not much is known of its habits; but that little I will here give in the language of those who have written a few brief notes respecting it. Pallas states that the birds he saw hunt towards evening, killing spiders, water-insects, and, occasionally, swallows, and breed in deserted crows' nests; the stomachs of those examined by Mr. Jerdon contained the remains of insects only. Fellowes says it is very common in Asia Minor, and that it builds its nest under the roofs, and sometimes even in the interior of houses. The Rev. H. B. Tristram, in his 'Notes on Birds observed in Southern Palestine,' states that this pretty little Hobby is a summer migrant, but returns earlier than the common species. The absence of suitable woods is probably the reason of its being a rare bird and confined to the central districts;