

A

NATURAL HISTORY

OF

BRITISH BIRDS.

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THIRTY-FIVE ENGRAVINGS ON WOOD.  
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ALNWICK:

PRINTED AND SOLD WHOLESALE AND RETAIL

BY W. DAVISON.

THE BIRDS
OF THE

WEST INDIES

BY
J. G. COOPER



NEW YORK
AND
LONDON

BRITISH BIRDS.



THE GOLDEN EAGLE.

THE golden eagle, which is one of the largest of this noble family, is about three feet in length, and the extent of its wings is seven feet four inches. The whole body is of a dark brown, the back being finely clouded with a deeper shade of the same. The toes are armed with formidable claws. This fierce animal may be considered among birds what the lion is among quadrupeds: and in many respects they exhibit a strong similitude.



THE RING-TAILED EAGLE.

THE ring-tailed eagle includes two varieties, the brown and the black eagle; they are both of the same brown colour, distinguished only by a deeper shade, and are nearly of the same size: in both the upper part of the head and neck is mixed with rust colour, and the base of the larger feathers marked with white; the legs are feathered to the toes, which are yellow, and the claws black; the tail is distinguished by a white ring, which covers about two-thirds of its length; the remaining part is black. It is found in France, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, and in America as far north as Hudson's Bay.



THE SEA-EAGLE.

THE sea-eagle has generally been confounded with the golden eagle, from the great similarity in their colours; but the sea-eagle may be easily distinguished by the nakedness of its legs, and more so by its peculiar habits. It is generally supposed to derive its subsistence from the water; darting down with unerring aim on fish, as they sportively swim near the surface, from a very considerable height. It is said to see so distinctly in the dark, as to be able to pursue and catch its prey during the night. It is found in various parts of Europe and America. It is said to lay only two eggs during the whole year.



THE MERLIN.

THE merlin is the smallest of the hawk kind scarcely exceeding the size of the blackbird. Its bill is blue: the head is of a rust colour, streaked with black: the breast and belly are of a yellowish white, with streaks of rusty brown pointing downwards: the legs are yellow; and the claws black. This bird, though small, is not inferior in courage to any of the falcon tribe. It was used for taking larks, partridges, and quails, which it would frequently kill by one blow. The merlin does not breed here, but visits us in October. It flies low, and with great celerity and ease.



THE SPARROW-HAWK.

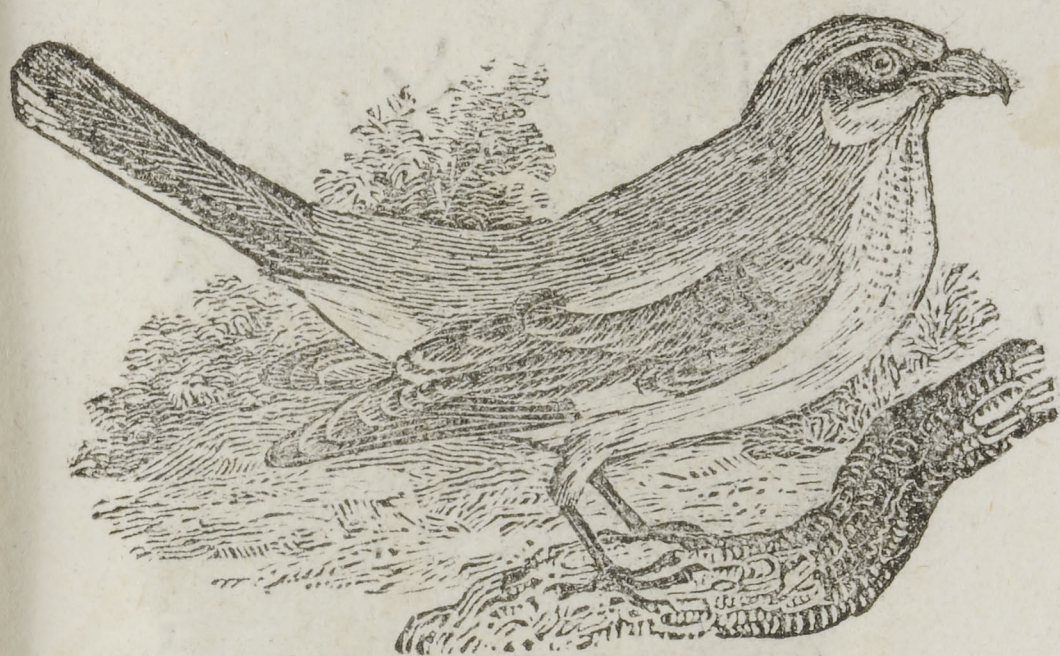
THIS bird is somewhat larger than the common pigeon: the bill is short and hooked, the tail rather long, and the legs slender and of a reddish colour. The plumage on the wings and upper parts of the body is brown, spotted with a yellowish dun; the lower parts in some are whitish; in others of a russet colour. The female builds her nest in hollow trees, high rocks, or lofty ruins, sometimes in the old nest of a crow, and generally lays four or five eggs, marked with reddish spots at the longer end. They are very numerous in various parts of the world, from Russia to the Cape of Good Hope. It can easily be trained to hunt partridges and quails. It makes great destruction among pigeons and small birds, which it will attack and carry off in the most daring manner.



THE KITE.

THE kite may be distinguished from all the rest of its tribe by its forky tail; as well as by its slow and equable, and almost incessant motion on the wing. Its length is twenty-seven inches, and the expansion of the wings about five feet. It subsists principally on accidental carnage, and is an insidious thief, rather than a bold robber. It prowls about in quest of prey; and, when it meets with a stray chicken or an unsuspecting bird, pounces upon it at once.

The female lays two or three eggs of a whitish colour, spotted with pale yellow, and of a roundish form. This bird is common in England, where it continues the whole year. It is found in various parts of Europe, in very northern latitudes.



THE BUTCHER BIRD.

THIS bird is about the size of the thrush. It has a strong black bill, nearly an inch long, and hooked at the end, which, together with its carnivorous appetites, rank it among birds of the rapacious class: though the slenderness of its legs, and the formation of its toes, seem to make it a shade between them and such as subsist chiefly upon grain and insects. Its habits correspond exactly with its formation, as it feeds indiscriminately on either flesh or insects: but it prefers the former; and will attack birds much larger than itself with astonishing spirit, and often with success. When it has killed a bird or insect, it fixes it on some neighbouring thorn, and tears it to pieces with its bill, its claws being too weak for this purpose. This bird is extremely affectionate to its young.



THE OWL.

WHEN other birds have mostly all resigned themselves to sleep and repose, the owl leaves his obscure retreat, comes forth to seek his prey, and destroys birds and other small animals. So much are his eyes oppressed with light, that in the pursuit of food, if he be overtaken by the day, he is perplexed to return to his haunts. His flights are short and low, as if afraid of dashing against unseen objects. If the sun arise, he is so completely dazzled, that he can go no farther, but must remain on the spot till the return of evening. In this situation, the jay, the thrush, the redbreast, &c. perceive his perplexity, and harass him with cries and with strokes of their wings.



THE HORNED OWL.

AT first view, this species appears very large ; which is in a great measure owing to the fulness of its plumage. Its horns, which distinguish it from all others, are composed of six feathers each ; which rise about an inch high, variegated with yellow and black ; and which it can erect or depress at pleasure. The breast and belly are of a dull yellow, marked with slender brown spots : the back and coverts of the wings are varied with deep brown and yellow. This bird usually breeds in caverns, hollow trees, or ruined turrets. It lays four or five eggs, and the young ones are white. It is found all over Europe, and in many places of America.



THE WHITE OWL.

THIS bird, commonly called the barn owl, is the best known of any. It is about the size of the pigeon. Its beak is hooked at the end, and more than an inch and a half long. The breast, belly and feathers of the inside of the wings, are white and marked with a few dark spots. It may be considered as almost domestic, as it inhabits barns and out-buildings the greatest part of the year and is extremely useful in clearing them of vermin. At the season of incubation, however, it takes up its residence in the woods. It seldom hoots; but snores and hisses in a most violent manner, and often screams tremendously. In ancient mythology, this bird was consecrated to Minerva, the goddess of wisdom.



THE COCK.

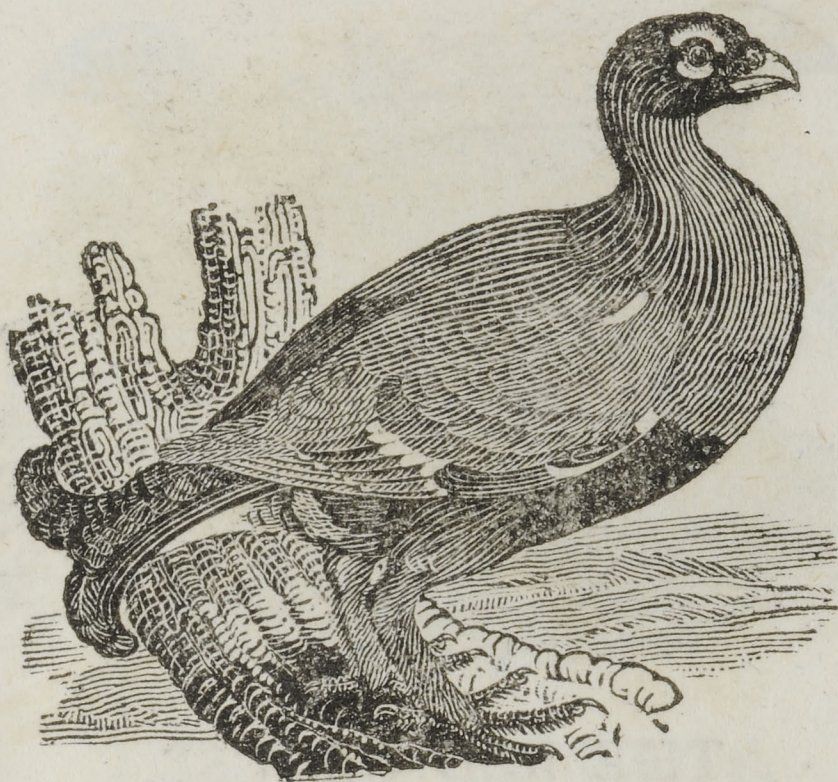
OF all birds the cock seems to have been first reclaimed, and earliest taken under the protection of man. At what period this valuable fowl was first domesticated is wholly unknown; but it is generally supposed to have been introduced into the western part of the world from Persia. When opposed to its own species, the cock is among the most courageous of animals; and, wherever the refinements of humanity and the polish of good manners have not superseded ferocity and barbarism, cockfighting seems to constitute a principal diversion. Fortunately for our national reputation, this savage sport is approaching to decay in England; and will, it is to be hoped, soon be regarded with abhorrence, even by the lowest classes.

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THE PHEASANT.

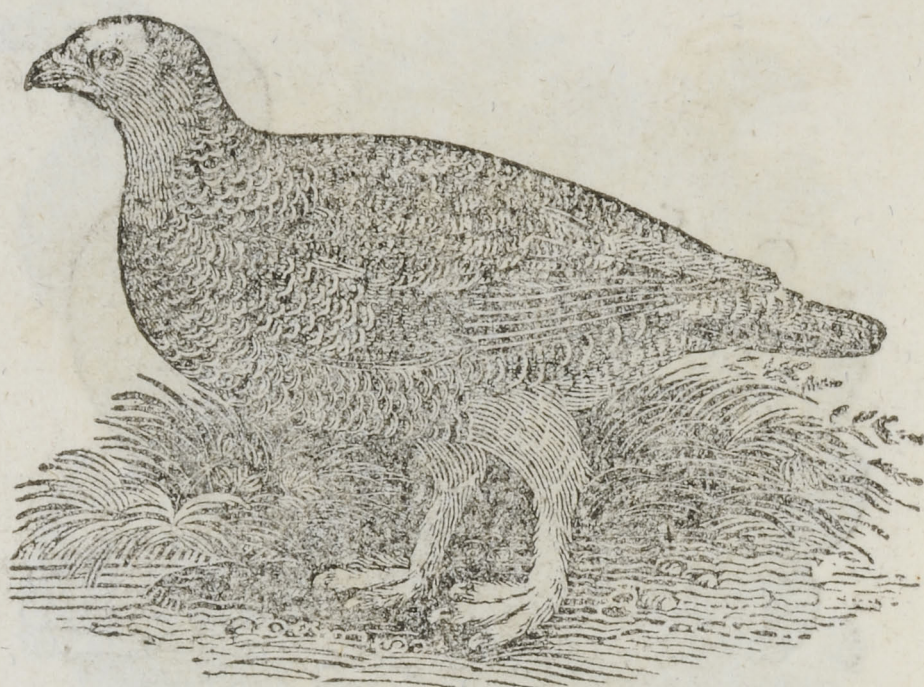
THE pheasant is said to have been first brought into Europe from the banks of the Phasis, in Asia Minor, and to have been at first artificially propagated in this country. However, notwithstanding the coldness of our climate, and the tenderness of its constitution, it has multiplied in a wild state; and, as if disdainful of the protection of man, has left him, to take shelter in the thickest woods and the remotest forests. In fact, this spirit of independence seems to attend the pheasant even in captivity. In the woods the female lays from eighteen to twenty eggs in a season; but in a domestic state she seldom produces above ten. This bird seems better adapted to range at large in the woods than to be brought up in a state of captivity.



THE BLACK GROUSE.

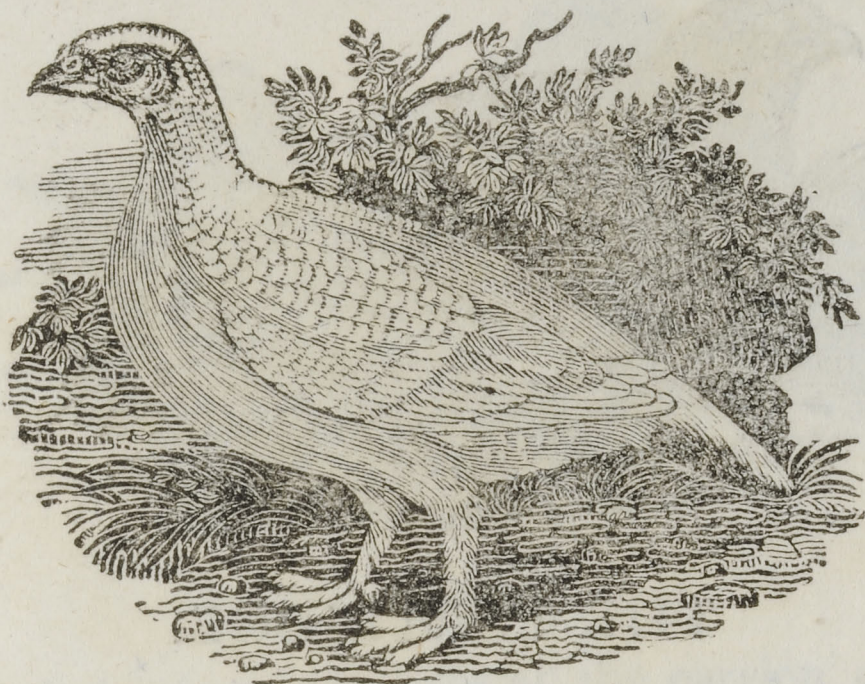
THIS bird is usually about one foot ten inches in length, and weighs about four pounds. The general colour of the plumage is a deep black, glossed with violet and green. These birds are found chiefly in high and wooded situations. They feed principally on the leaves and buds of the birch tree, berries, and other fruits, the produce of wild and mountainous places. The black grouse is found in the mountainous parts of the north of England and Scotland, in Norway, Sweden, Russia, and Poland. In Norway they pass the winter beneath the snow in a state of torpor.

The female makes an artless nest upon the ground, laying six or seven eggs, rather less than those of the common hen.



THE RED GROUSE.

THIS bird is fifteen inches in length, and weighs about nineteen ounces. The plumage is beautifully mottled with red, black, and white; but the female has less red, and more white, than the male. The red grouse is found in great abundance in the wild, mountainous heaths in the north of England, Wales, and the Highlands of Scotland. It feeds on the buds of trees, the cones of the pine, the berries of the hawthorn, the rose tree and other mountain plants. It likewise devours insects and worms with great avidity. The female lays eight or ten eggs on the ground; the young ones follow the hen the whole summer, but having nearly attained their full growth in winter, they unite in flocks of forty or fifty, and become extremely wild and shy. They run with excessive swiftness, and fly very heavily.



THE WHITE GROUSE.

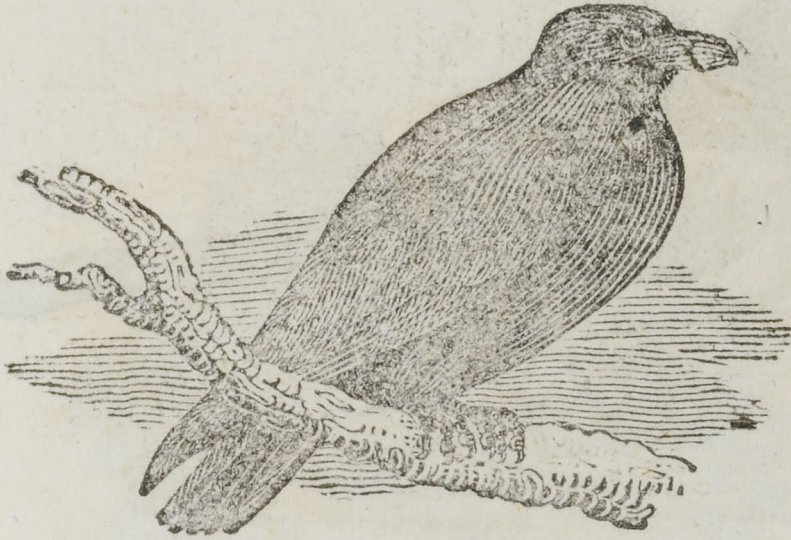
THE white grouse is nearly of the size of the preceding. The winter dress of this bird is almost entirely white, excepting two black spots between the bill and the eye. The white grouse is found in most of the northern regions of Europe, and even in Greenland. In this country it is met with only on the summits of the highest hills, principally in the Highlands of Scotland. It feeds upon the young shoots of the pine, the birch, the thorn, and other wild productions of the mountains; and the bitter taste which their flesh sometimes has, must doubtless be attributed to the nature of their food. From the singularity of its constitution it delights only in the biting frosts of the mountains. The female lays eight or ten eggs, making no nest, but depositing them on the ground.



THE PARTRIDGE.

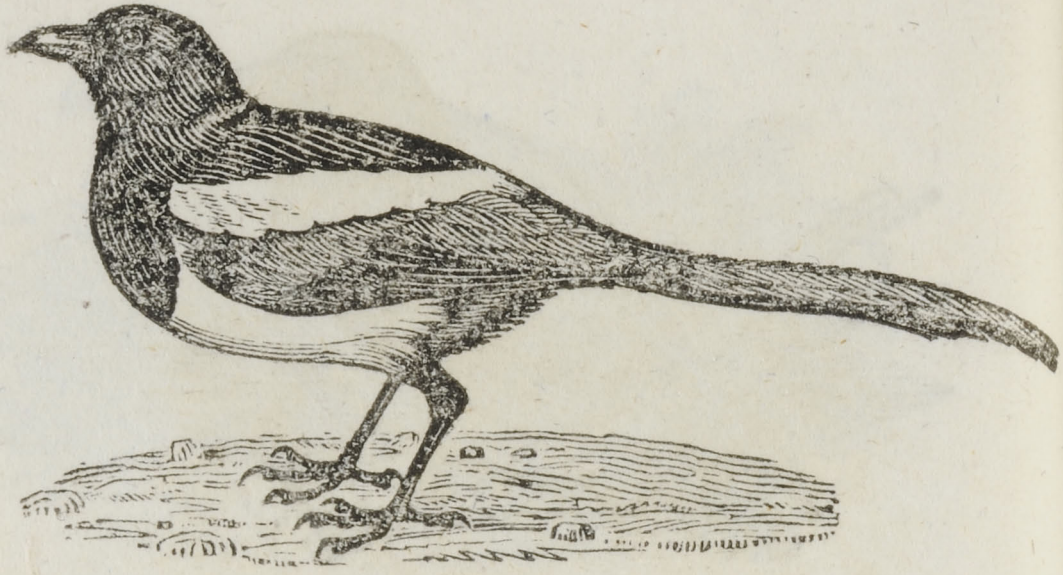
THIS bird is found in every country and in every climate, in the frozen regions of the pole and the torrid tracts of the equator. It is adapted by nature to its place of residence. The Greenland partridge is brown in summer; but toward winter a warm down grows beneath, and the feathers above take the colour of its native snows. The manners of this bird resemble those of the poultry kind, but its cunning and instinct are superior. Living in the middle of enemies, the arts of evasion and deception, perhaps, become habitual. They are generally from ten to fifteen in a covey; and they will live, if unmolested, from fifteen to seventeen years.

There are several varieties of the partridge; but the grey and the red seem to be the two prime divisions, of which the latter is by far the largest, but the former the most prolific. Corn-fields are the principal delight of this bird.



THE ROOK.

THE rook is about the size of the carrion crow, and, excepting its more glossy plumage, very much resembles it. They are useful in preventing a too great increase of that destructive insect the chafer or dor-beetle, and thereby make large recompense for the depredations they may occasionally commit on the corn-fields. Rooks are gregarious, and fly in immense flocks at morning and evening to and from their roosting places in quest of food. During the breeding time they live together in large societies, and build their nests on trees close to each other, frequently in the midst of large and populous towns. These rookeries, however, are often the scenes of bitter contests; the new-comers are frequently driven away by the old inhabitants, their half-built nests torn in pieces, and the unfortunate couple forced to begin their work anew in some more undisturbed situation. The female lays five or six eggs.



THE MAGPIE.

THE magpie is in length about eighteen inches, and ranks among the most elegant birds of this island. The black of his feathers is accompanied with a changing gloss of green and purple. It is a very loquacious creature, and can be brought to imitate the human voice as well as any parrot. He feeds on every thing; worms and other insects, meat and cheese, bread and milk, all kind of seeds; and also on small birds when they come in his way; the young of the blackbird, and of the thrush, and even a strayed chicken, often fall a prey to his rapacity. Fond of hiding pieces of money or wearing apparel, which he carries away by stealth, and with much dexterity, to his hole, he has often been the cause of apparently grounded suspicions against innocent servants. His cunning is also remarked in the manner of making his nest, which he covers all over with thorny branches, leaving only one hole for his ingress and egress.



THE JAY.

THE jay is one of the most elegant birds produced in the British islands. The head is covered with very long feathers, capable of being erected into a crest, at pleasure. The forehead is white streaked with black; the neck is black and white; and the tail is entirely black. This bird is remarkable for its harsh grating voice, and restless disposition. Upon seeing the sportsman, it gives, by its cries, the alarm of danger, and thereby defeats his aim and disappoints him. The jay builds in woods, and makes an artless nest composed of sticks, fibres, and tender twigs: the female lays five or six eggs, of a greyish ash colour, mixed with green, and faintly spotted with brown. The jay feeds on fruits, and is very injurious to gardens. In winter it derives part of its subsistence from acorns, and will sometimes kill small birds.



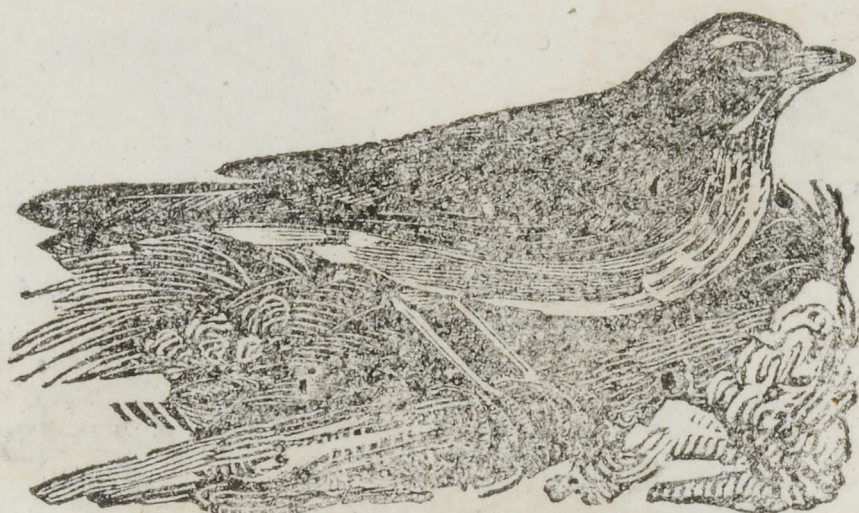
THE GREEN WOODPECKER.

THE green woodpecker is about the size of a jay; the throat, breast, and belly, are of a pale greenish colour; and the back, neck, and covert feathers of the wings are green. But the tongue is its most distinguished characteristic, as it serves both for its support and defence. This is round, ending in a sharp bony tip, dentated on both sides like the beard of an arrow, and capable of being thrust out three or four inches from the bill, and drawn in again at pleasure. The woodpecker generally chooses for its habitation trees that are decayed, or soft wood, as elm and poplar. In these, with very little trouble, it makes holes, exactly round as a mathematician could with compasses; and here the female lays five or six eggs, of a whitish colour, and without any thing to keep them warm, except the heat of her own body.



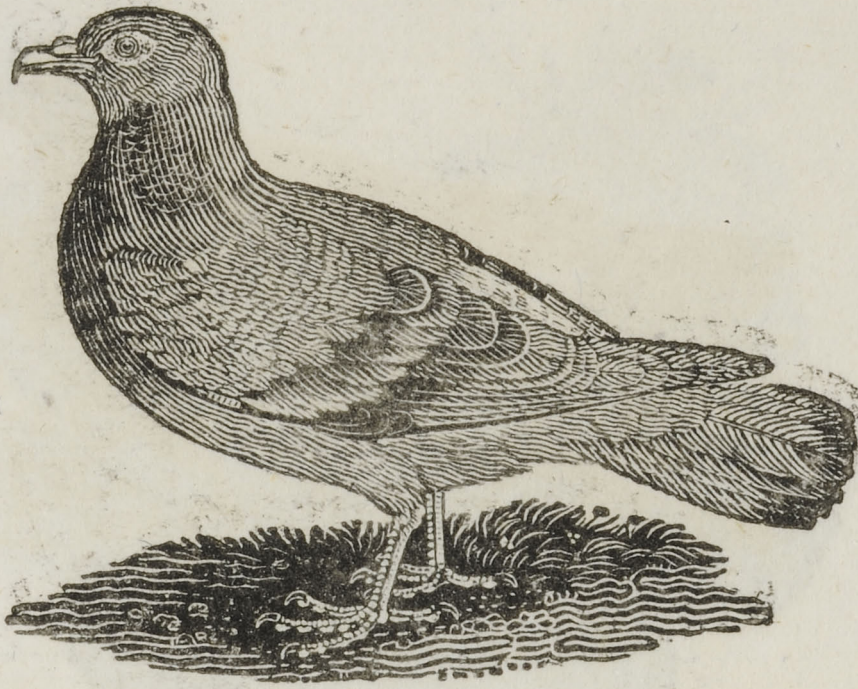
THE SPOTTED WOODPECKER.

THE spotted woodpecker is about nine inches in length, sixteen in breadth, and weighs nearly three ounces. The crown of the head is of a glossy black, and the hind part is marked with a rich deep crimson spot. The neck is encircled with a black colour; and the breast is of a yellowish white. The back and the small coverts of the wings are black. Woodpeckers subsist entirely on insects; and their principal action is that of climbing up and down the branches and trunks of trees, for the purpose of procuring their food. When a woodpecker discovers a hollow rotten tree, likely to contain its favourite insects, it immediately begins boring till it opens the whole internal habitation. It then emits its loud cry, which alarming the insects, they are all instantly put in motion, and devoured at the pleasure of their successful assailant.



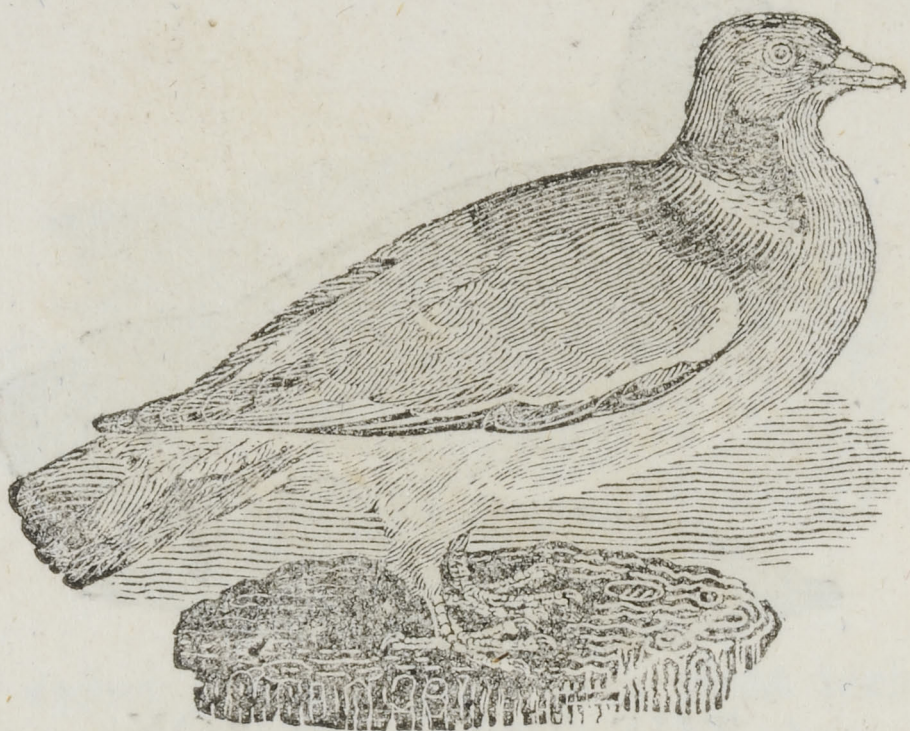
THE REDWING.

THE redwing is not more than eight inches in length. The bill is of a dark brown colour; eyes deep hazel; the plumage in general is similar to that of the thrush, but a white streak over the eye distinguishes it from that bird; the belly is not quite so much spotted, and the sides of the body and the feathers under the wings are tinged with red, which is its peculiar characteristic; whence also it derives its name. These birds make their appearance a few days before the fieldfare, and are generally seen with them after their arrival; they frequent the same places, eat the same food, and are very similar to them in manners. Like the fieldfare they leave us in spring. The female builds her nest in low bushes or hedges, and lays six eggs, of a greenish blue colour, spotted with black. All their season of music and pleasure, however, is employed in the more northern climates, where they sing most delightfully.



THE TAME PIGEON.

THIS bird, in all its beautiful varieties, derives its origin from the stock-dove; but the discriminations are become so numerous from cultivation, that it is impossible to enumerate or describe them. The domestic pigeon is wonderfully prolific; it lays two eggs, and usually breeds every month: and, except during severe weather, is in general capable of supplying itself with food. The period of incubation is fifteen days, during which, the male and the female relieve each other. When the young are hatched, they require no food for the first three days, but only to be kept warm. After this the parents feed them for eight days, by discharging into their mouths whatever they have themselves been able to treasure up in their crops. They join their bills in their courtship, and utter a mournful or plaintive note.



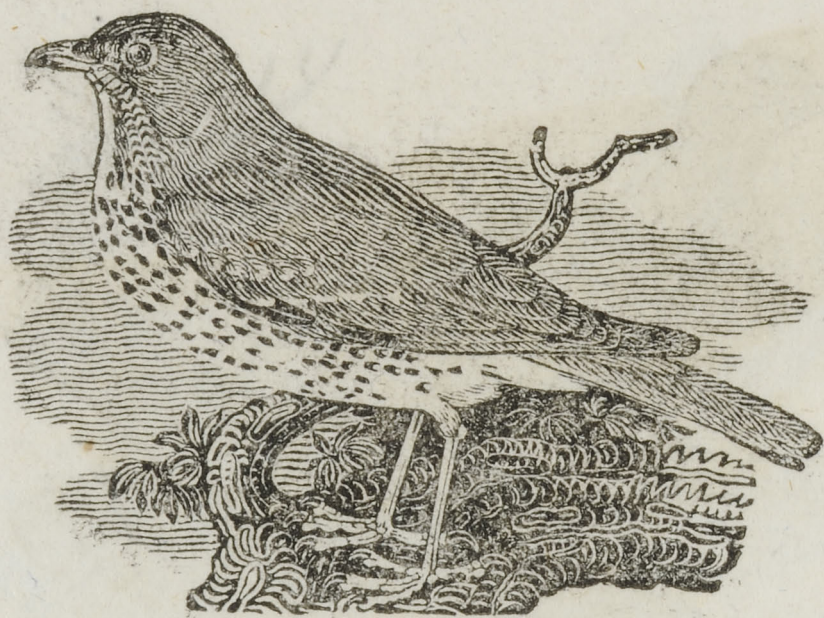
THE RING-DOVE.

THIS bird receives its appellation from a very regular and beautiful white circle round its neck: the parts above and below this are delightfully variegated with changeable colours, according to the position in which they are viewed by the spectator. The ring-dove is the largest bird of its kind which is a native of Britain. It seldom flies single, but in large flocks; and subsists on ivy berries and other vegetable substances. It builds its nest on the branches of trees, and all attempts to tame it have hitherto proved ineffectual. Averse to confinement, as soon as it can fly it betakes itself to its native woods. At the commencement of winter, this species desist from cooing; but they pair again about the beginning of March.



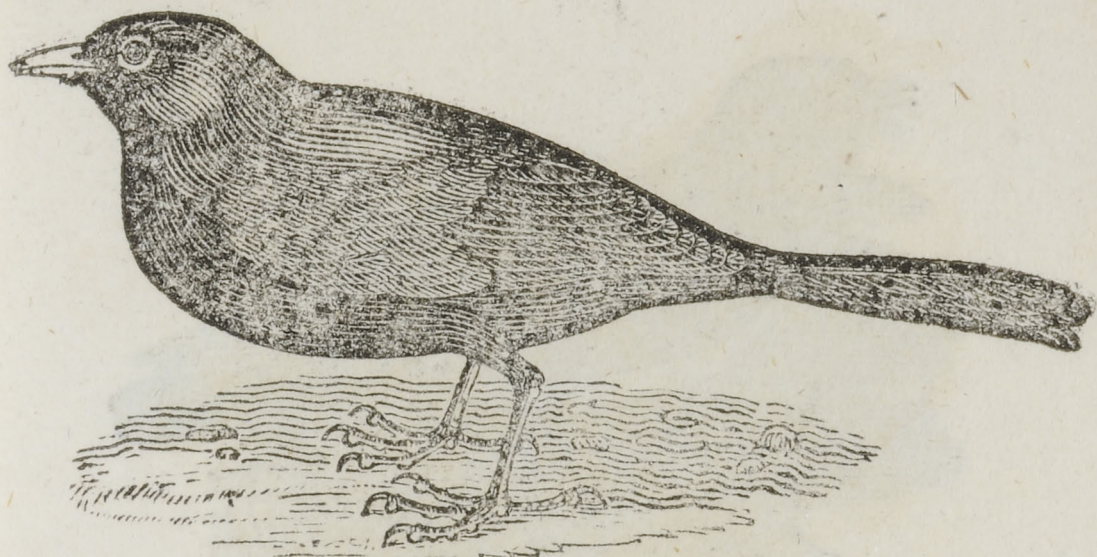
THE TURTLE-DOVE.

THE turtle-dove is a smaller bird than any of the former. It may easily be distinguished from the rest by the iris of the eye, which is of a fine yellow, and by a beautiful crimson circle that encompasses the eyelids. The turtle-dove is a bird of passage, and few or none remain in our northern climates in winter. They fly in flocks when they come to breed here in summer, and delight in open, mountainous, sandy countries. Its faithful attachment to its mate has been proverbial in every age; and, according to vulgar tradition, when either of them dies, the survivor remains for ever after in a state of disconsolate solitude. It feeds on a variety of vegetable substances. This bird is found in several parts of England, but particularly in the western counties.



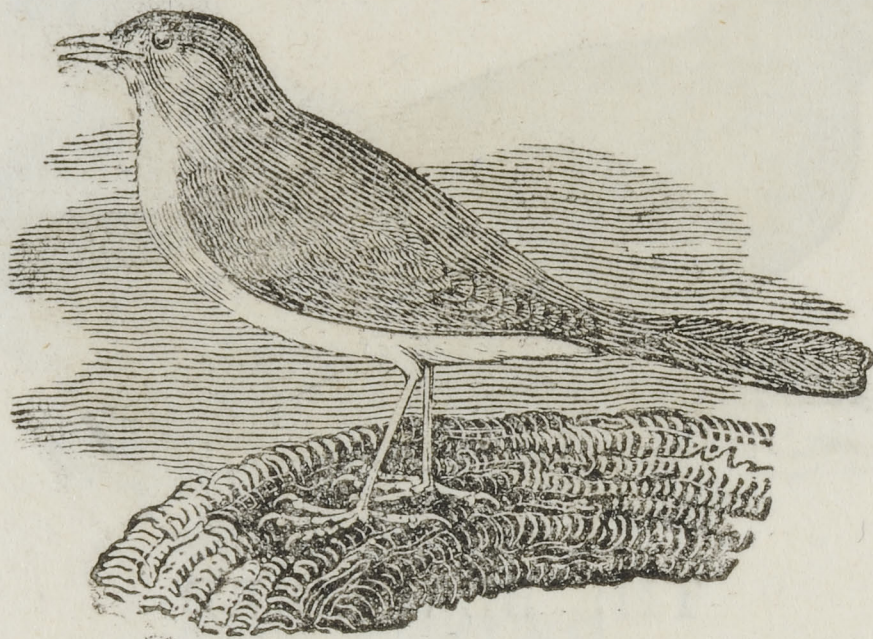
THE THRUSH.

THE length of this bird is about eleven inches. Its breast is of a yellowish white, spotted with black dashes, like ermine spots. The female builds her nest in bushes or low trees, and lays four or five eggs, of a bluish colour, marked with dusky spots. It feeds on various kinds of berries, particularly those of the mistletoe, of which bird-lime is made; it likewise feeds on caterpillars and various kinds of insects, with which it also feeds its young. It begins to sing very early, often on the turn of the year in blowing showery weather, whence in some places it is called the storm-cock. Its note of anger is very loud and harsh, between a chatter and a shriek, which accounts for some of its names. This bird is found in various parts of Europe, and is said to be migratory in some places, but continues in England the whole year, and frequently has two broods. There are several varieties of this species.



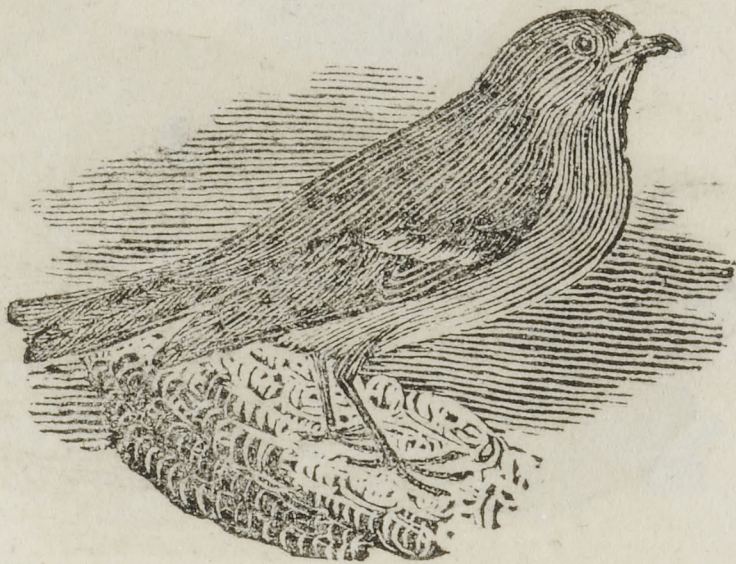
THE BLACKBIRD.

THIS beautiful and well-known bird is one of the first that proclaims the genial spring, and his note, when heard at a distance, is the most pleasing of all the grove; though it is rather unpleasant in a cage, being loud and deafening. It is of a retired and solitary disposition, and is generally found in sequestered woods, or other secluded situations. It feeds on worms, snails, and insects, but when domesticated it will eat any sort of flesh meat, either raw or dressed, provided it be not salt. The female builds an artificial nest, well plastered on the inside with clay, straw, and hair, and usually lays four or five bluish eggs. The plumage of the male blackbird is of a coal-black colour: that of the female is a brown or dark russet. In some very cold countries, and particularly on the Alps, a variety of this bird is sometimes found of a pure white colour. The blackbird may be taught to whistle a tune, and even to imitate the human voice.



THE NIGHTINGALE.

THIS universally admired songster is not remarkable for the variety or richness of its tints; the upper part of the body being of a rusty brown, tinged with olive; the under parts of a pale ash colour, inclining to white about the throat and belly. Its music, however, is exquisitely soft and harmonious, and is rendered still more pleasing as being exerted in the night, when the other warblers are all silent. The nightingale visits England in the beginning of April, and generally retires in August. It is only found in some of the southern parts of the country, being totally unknown in Scotland, Ireland, and North Wales; and as it generally keeps in the middle of its favourite bush or tree, it is but rarely seen. The female constructs her nest of the leaves of trees, straw, and moss, and usually lays four or five eggs.



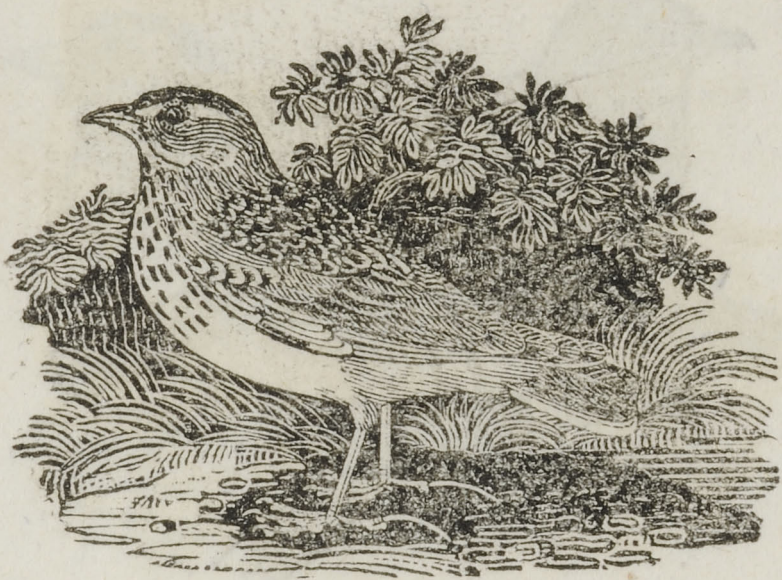
THE REDBREAST.

OF all birds this is the most familiar, and therefore it is in a manner consecrated to the domestic affections. The beauty of its form, the vivacity of its motions, and the confidence it seems to repose in man, all unite to secure it from annoyance. Added to this, several popular prejudices operate in its favour, and seem to prevail in every country where it is known. It feeds on insects; eats crumbs of bread when its usual food fails; and, while other birds are ready to perish with cold and hunger, seeks the shelter of a house or cottage, in which it is generally a welcome guest. The song of the redbreast is remarkably soft and sweet; and the more to be valued, as we enjoy it during the greater part of the winter, when the other feathered choristers are silent. In summer it is equally musical, but at that time its modest notes are undistinguished in the general warble of the choir.



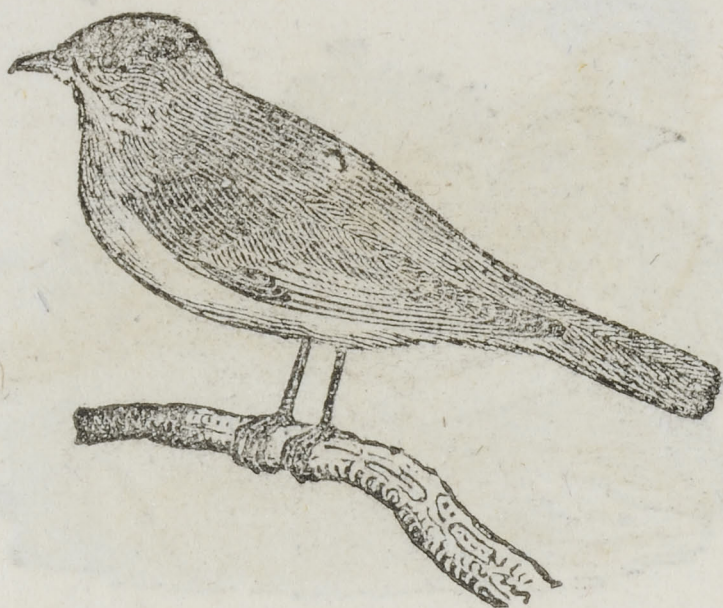
THE SKY-LARK.

THE sky-lark is generally distinguished from other sorts of birds, by the long spur of its back toe, the earthy colour of its feathers, and its singing as it mounts up in the air. It begins its song before the dawn of day; nor can any thing be more agreeable to the lover of nature than to behold it warbling on the wing, and hear it raising its notes as it soars, till it is lost to his view in the immense heights above him. And to see it afterward descending with a swell of its note, and sinking gradually as it approaches its nest, the spot where all its delights are centred, fills the heart of sensibility and intellectual refinement with inexpressible delight. The female builds her nest on the ground, lays four or five eggs, and commonly produces her young about the beginning of May. In winter larks assemble in large flocks, and are caught in great numbers for the sake of their flesh, which is fat and delicate.



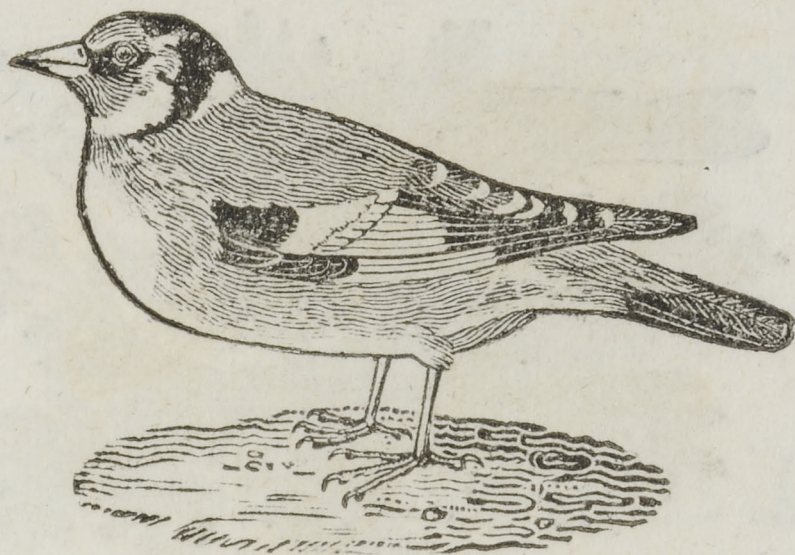
THE WOOD-LARK.

THE wood-lark is accounted the best singing bird in this kingdom, being possessed of the most soft and delightful notes; vying with the nightingale itself either in the cage or field. It is very beautiful, being of a pale yellow colour; the breast and belly spotted with black, and the head with black and a reddish yellow. It is very tender; builds at the foot of a bush or hedge under some dry turf, a nest of withered grass, fibrous roots, with some hair, and the like. It is smaller than the sky-lark, and differs principally in having a circle of white feathers encompassing the head, like a crown or wreath. They feed on beetles, caterpillars, and other insects, and conscious of their own excellent notes, will, with difficulty, learn another's strain. They sing nine months every year. These birds sit and perch upon trees, which habit the common lark has not.



THE BLACKCAP.

THE crown of the head of this small bird is black, from whence it derives its name. The hind part of the neck is of a light ash colour, the back and coverts of the wings are of a greyish green, and the breast and belly are of a pale ash colour. The blackcap visits us about the middle of April, and retires in September: it frequents gardens, and builds its nest near the ground; it is composed of dried grass, moss, and wool, and lined with hair and feathers. The female lays five eggs, of a pale reddish brown, sprinkled with spots of a darker colour. During the time of incubation the male attends the female, and sits by turns; he likewise procures her food, such as flies, worms, and insects. This bird sings sweetly, and so like the nightingale, that in Norfolk it is called the mock nightingale. Blackcaps feed chiefly on flies and insects, and not unfrequently on ivy and other berries.



THE GOLDFINCH.

THE goldfinch is a very beautiful bird. His form is small, but pleasing; his voice not loud, but sweet. He begins to sing about the beginning of March, and continues the well-known melody through the spring. His notes are sweet and various, and the beauty of his song is enhanced by the elegance of his form, the brilliancy of his colours, and the docility of his manners. Goldfinches in winter assemble in large flocks. They feed on the thistle and other seeds. They frequent orchards, and build in fruit trees; and the nest is elegantly contrived with moss and bents, lined with hair, wool, and down. The female lays five or six eggs of a white colour, marked at their upper end with purple dots. The goldfinch is easily tamed, and often exhibited as a captive, with a chain round his body, drawing up two small alternate buckets, one containing his meat, and the other his drink.



THE LINNET.

THIS favourite bird, which is universally admired for the melody of its voice, is in length, from the point of the bill to the end of the tail, five inches and a half; the upper parts of the head, neck, and back, are of a dark reddish brown, the edges of the feathers pale; the under parts are of a dirty reddish white; the breast is deeper than the rest and in spring becomes a very beautiful crimson. These birds commonly build in a thick bush or hedge, and sometimes among furze bushes, making a small, pretty nest, on which she lays four, and sometimes five white eggs, with fine red specks especially at the blunt end; and has young ones by the middle of April or beginning of May.

FINIS.