



OUR FEATHERED SONGSTERS.

“**B**E that at midnight, when the labourer sleeps securely, should hear, as I have heard, the clear air, the sweet descant, the rising and falling, the doubling and redoubling of her voice, might well be lifted above the earth, and say, ‘Lord, what music hast Thou provided for the saints in Heaven, when Thou affordest bad men such music upon earth!’”

The nightingale, or night-singers, is a migratory bird, visiting us early in the spring (about the middle of April), and leaving us about August or September. The male birds arrive first, and are instantly sought after by the bird-catchers, who generally make the most of the interval of ten days or a fortnight that elapses before the arrival of the females, well knowing that those males which are taken after they have paired seldom survive. The bird-fanciers have a notion that a Surrey nightingale possesses the finest quality of tone. To dwell upon the richness and variety of its song, a subject which has employed the pens of poets of all ages, and of all countries where the bird is known, would be superfluous here; but there are points connected with the habits and geographical distribution of the bird which require notice.

The following is a description of this bird:—Rich brown above; rump and tail with a reddish tinge; throat and middle part of belly dirty or greyish white; lateral parts of the neck, breast, and flanks grey; bill and legs light brown. Sexes alike.

The nightingale shuns observation, abiding in the thickest coverts, and in these the nest is sometimes placed on a

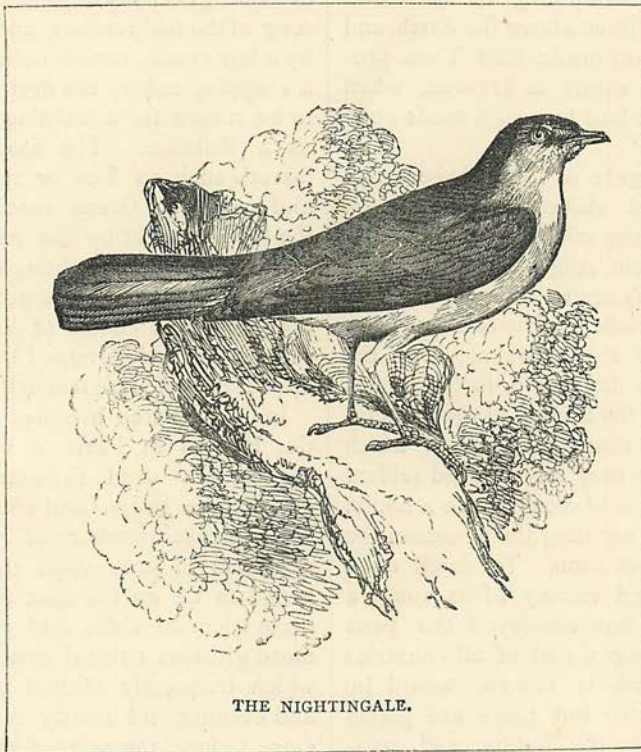
low fork, but generally on the ground. Withered leaves, particularly those of the oak, very loosely conjoined with dried bents and rushes, and lined internally with fine root-fibres, form the structure. The eggs, of an olive brown, are four or five in number. After the young are hatched, generally in June, the melodious song of the male ceases, and is succeeded by a low croak, varied occasionally with a snapping noise; the first is considered to be meant for a warning, and the last as a defiance. The food consists of insects, such as flies or spiders, moths, and earwigs. Green caterpillars were the food brought by the parent birds to the nest of young nightingales taken by Colonel Montagu. It is not improbable that the bird's choice of localities is in some measure determined by the absence or presence of some favourite insect food.

In the lime-tree avenues of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris a vast flight of cockchafers used to assemble about every three years, and with them came an immense number of nightingales, doubtless to prey upon them. I happened to be on the spot during one of these triennial visits, and never heard a more glorious natural concert than that which frequently saluted my ears, day and evening, till nearly twelve o'clock. Once before, the same sort of pleasure had been afforded me in Chislehurst-lane, in Kent, when slowly riding along it on a very warm day in spring; and to which place it will be readily supposed I daily turned my horse's head while I remained in the neighbourhood. People flocked to the Jardin des Plantes to hear the songsters, who were not intimidated by company, and they continued their strains at intervals for at least fourteen hours out of the twenty-four. They seemed to utter challenges from one

end of the avenue to the other, and one musician above all others, strained its throat till it seemed impossible it should find any more breath to continue dwelling on one note; it then suddenly descended to the rolling sounds. Often it would stop and listen, and the challenge would be answered, and then most of the performers would be roused, and all sing together.

towards the place where the player stood, at the same time making a sort of sub-warbling, which it soon changed into its usual beautiful and lengthened song." They with difficulty accustom themselves to cages; and "if a male bird be taken after his song has won for him a partner, he hardly ever survives, and dies broken-hearted."

The "Gardener's Chronicle" affords a



Nightingales are very sensible to the sound of musical instruments. Dr. Stanley says, that "the German hymn, played upon a flute very softly, near a bush in which there was a nest, soon attracted the attention of the birds. Scarcely was the air finished, than the cock was heard to chirp; and when played a second time, it was seen to hop through the bushes with great quickness

curious instance of the effect which education will produce on birds. "A gentleman," says the narrator of the story, "informed me that a friend of his was possessed of a most wonderful bird, that he should much like me to see and hear. I went at an early day to view the prodigy. On entering the house and presenting my card, I was at once ushered into the drawing-room. I there

saw two nightingales' -cages suspended on the wall; one of them, with a nightingale in it, had an open front, the other had a green curtain drawn down over the front, concealing the inmate. After a little discourse on the subject of ornithology, my host asked me if I should like to hear one of his nightingales sing. Of course, I was all expectation. Placing me beneath the cage, and drawing up

involuntarily to exclaim with Coleridge—

‘That strain again,
Full fain it would delay me!’

And so it did. I stood riveted to the spot, knowing how seldom nightingales in a cage so deported themselves. After listening some time, and expressing my astonishment at the long-repeated efforts of the performer, so unusual, I asked



THE GARDEN WARBLER.

the curtain before alluded to, the bird above, at a whistle from his master, broke out into a succession of strains that I never heard surpassed by the nightingale. They were indeed surprisingly eloquent. ‘What a nightingale!’ ejaculated I. The rapid utterance of the bird, his perfect *abandon* to the inspiration of his muse, and his indifference to all around him, caused me

to be allowed a sight of him. Permission was granted, and I saw before me—*a robin!* This bird had been brought up under the nightingale from his very earliest infancy, and not only equalled, but very far surpassed his master in song. The robin retained no one single note of his own whereby the finest ear could detect him.”

But in spite of such reminiscences, it

is to be feared that that "great" musician who could not bear the country because "there were so many birds, and all singing out of time," will be able soon to ruralise almost anywhere in our country without having his hyper-sensitive ears pained at least by a nightingale.

The hedge sparrow is a "gentle, innocent, confiding little brown bird, which creeps like a mouse through our garden flower-beds, picks up a meagre fare in our roads and lanes, builds its nest in our thorn-edges, and, though dingy itself, lays brilliant blue eggs.

This bird is one of the few belonging to the tribe (of warblers) who remain with us all the winter; we should suppose, indeed, that he never wandered far from the place of his birth. At all seasons his habits and food appear to be the same. All day long he is shuffling about on the ground, picking up minute atoms,—whether seeds or insects, who knows? Every day nearly all the year round he repairs at intervals to the

nearest hedge, where he sings a song soft and gentle like himself; and every evening, when the blackbird rings his curfew bell, he fails not to respond with his drowsy 'cheep, cheep,' as he repairs to the bush he has selected for his night's rest. Very early in spring, before his brother warblers have arrived from the south, he has chosen his mate, built his snug nest, and too probably commenced to settle; for, unsuspecting in nature, he does not retire to solitary places for this purpose, and the leafless edges but ill conceal his labours from the peering eyes of all destroying boys. Such are nearly all his short and simple annals. He quarrels with no one; he achieves no distinction, throwing no one into ecstasies with his song, and stealing no one's fruit; unobtrusive and innocent, he claims no notice, and dreads no resentment; and so, through all the even tenour of his way, he is, without knowing it, the favourite of children, and of all the good and gentle."



THE BLACK-CAP.