

Birds in Switzerland

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BIRDS IN SWITZERLAND.

The following article is reprinted from the October 1st issue of the "BIRMINGHAM POST" with due acknowledgement.

The Alps are more remarkable for their flowers than for their birds, yet in a stay in the Bernese Oberland I saw much of interest.

When one walks through the woods, the trees seem full of tiny little cries denoting the presence of birds which are so difficult to see that one soon tires of looking. Sit in a clearing, however, with scabious and campanula growing in the cropped grass among the grey boulders, surrounded by tall spruce and with views through the trees to snow-covered mountains, and you will find that birds can be seen.

The small birds that make the tiny sounds fly from one branch to another on the edge of the clearing; they are coal tits, gold-crests, or perhaps crested tits. There are chaffinches and occasional bullfinches; cross-bills fly over in flocks or in pairs and sometimes settle on the tree-tops. In the higher meadows, where in early July are gentians, anemones, globe flowers, and Alpine lilies, there are citril finches, lesser redpolls and occasional ring ouzels.

Higher still, where Soldanellas bloom in the wake of melting snow, are flocks of Alpine choughs with yellow beaks and curious twittering cry; in the eaves of an hotel two thousand feet above Wengen, snow finches were feeding young. With luck a wall-creeper may be seen on the great rocks. In the trees standing among the close-mown fields round the villages are common redstarts, spotted and pied fly-catchers and robins, and everywhere there are black redstarts.

The crested tit is a charming little bird, common throughout France, Switzerland and other parts of Europe. There appears to be no reason why it should not also occur in suitable areas in this country, yet a sub-species is found in a small area of Scotland only. In habit it is similar to other tits; its presence can, however, be detected by its characteristic note, difficult to describe, but which one authority calls a "low purring trill." Its general colouring is brown, grey and white, but the black and white crest are characteristic.

The black redstart, too, is common on the Continent. In Switzerland it occurs, almost everywhere, from towns and villages to the highest chalet, and its shrill oft-repeated song can be heard from a telegraph wire, a roof or the top of a boulder. The male is similar in size and shape to the common redstart and has the same quivering red tail; but there the resemblance ends, for he is dark grey above, with white wing patches and his throat and chest are jet black. The female is rather nondescript, but the cock is a handsome fellow and adds greatly to the scene as he sings his gay little song silhouetted against a snow peak, flies down to pick up an insect and up again to some other perch.

The black redstart used to be an uncommon visitor to England. One January day I saw several on the coast near Dungeness; they were in dull plumage, the only bright thing about them being their tails. A development of recent years has been the occurrence of breeding pairs on bombed sites in London. Two years ago, above the noise of London traffic, I heard one singing among the ruins not far from Euston Station. More recently a bird has been reported on a bombed site in a Midland town.


One of the most interesting birds of the Alps is the wall-creeper; it has occurred only about twelve times in England. I have been fortunate to see them both in the Alps and in the Pyrenees. At one place in the Bernese Oberland they seemed to be not uncommon. Above the Cirque de Gavarnie, on the borders of France and Spain, I once saw one high up in the mountains, perhaps a reward for the fierce climb up from the Spanish side. The books say that in summer it does not often occur below 7,000 feet.

Settled or running over rocks or cliffs the wall-creeper has a dignified and serious appearance; perhaps the rather long decurved bill, like that of a tree-creeper but longer, gives this appearance of gravity and sobriety. When they fly, however, they are fantastic — they look like huge butterflies. In summer plumage the throat and head are black and the upper parts are grey, but there are brilliant patches of crimson on the wing coverts and white spots on the ends of the tail and wing feathers.

F.R.B.

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