

LETTER VII.

" When Autumn scatters his departing gleams,
 Warned of approaching Winter, * * *
 * * * * *
 O'er the calm sky, in convulsion swift,
 The feathered eddy floats; * * *
 * * * * *
 * * into warmer climes convey'd
 With other kindred birds of season, there
 They twitter cheerful, till the vernal months
 Invite them welcome back; for, thronging, now
 Innumerable wings are in commotion all."

THOMSON'S SEASONS.

Periodical transit of Flocks of small Birds through the
 County— Various Species— The Goldfinch— " Har-
 bour-Birds " and " Flight-Birds "— Anxiety of the
 Bird-catcher— Pied Wagtail— Arrival on the Coast in
 Spring— Plumage— Pilgrim Fathers— Progress to
 the Interior— Return towards the Coast— Deter-
 mined Direction of Flight— Geographical Considera-
 tions.

I HAVE for a long time been inclined to believe
 that many British birds, usually supposed to be
 permanent residents, as well as those generally
 admitted to be summer or winter visitors, perform

gray linnets (*Linota cannabina*), and green grosbeaks (*Coccothraustes chloris*), pass in considerable numbers ; and such multitudes of the first-named species are occasionally taken,* that the market of the song-bird dealers is literally glutted with them, even their most capacious family-cages being quite filled with recently captured goldfinches ; and from this circumstance, as well as from the comparatively trifling value attached to these birds at this season — when, from the immaturity of the greater proportion of the little prisoners, and the deficient state of their plumage, the sex cannot be satisfactorily ascertained — they are frequently doomed to death, and being afterwards tied up with yellow wagtails, green grosbeaks and gray linnets, in variegated bundles, from which their own little crimson heads protrude like ripe berries, they are hawked about by the juvenile members of the bird-catching fraternity, and occasionally sold to those who can find it in their hearts to purchase such an ornithological bouquet.

* May not this account in some degree for the total disappearance of the goldfinch from certain inland counties during the winter months? Herefordshire, for example ; a fact to which the editor of the 'Zoologist' has directed the attention of his correspondents. 'Zoologist,' vol. iii. page 984.

I have already said that many of our conirostral or hard-billed birds, as well as others of the den-tirostral or insectivorous division of the *Insessores* hitherto supposed to be constantly resident, at least in the south of England, leave this country in considerable flocks about the beginning of autumn, and return to it in diminished numbers during the ensuing spring. It would be taxing your patience too much if I were to transcribe from my journal all the notes and records committed to paper within the last few years which bear upon this particular subject ; such an infliction might test even your ornithological zeal too severely, and would necessarily exceed the limits of many letters ; but feeling, as I do, that the subject is one of more than common interest, I propose to select two well-known examples, which have heretofore been supposed to be constant residents in our island, the goldfinch and the pied wagtail ; the one a hard-billed bird, the other soft-billed : and an account of their migrations will be sufficient to illustrate my theory, and perhaps comprehend as much as would prove interesting to you on this subject.

Of the departure of large flocks of goldfinches in the autumn I have already spoken, a few, however, remain in different parts of the county throughout the entire year, and in winter are

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Of the departure of large flocks of goldfinches in the autumn I have already spoken, a few, however, remain in different parts of the county throughout the entire year, and in winter are

generally found on wild, bushy ground, among the remote valleys of the Downs, or on hedges near waste land or commons. The periodical arrival of fresh birds in the spring is well known even to the most inexperienced bird-catchers in the neighbourhood of Brighton, and anxiously expected by them for many days previously: the goldfinches which have remained all the winter are called by them "harbour birds," meaning that they have sojourned, or harboured — as the local expression is — here during that season; those which arrive in April are called "flight-birds." When the latter are expected the bird-catcher watches his nets with an anxious countenance, and his disappointment is great, if upon disengaging from the meshes a newly captured prisoner, he perceives by the dull-coloured back, dirty red forehead, and general shabbiness of the plumage, that it is only what he contemptuously terms "a harbour bird." Far different are his feelings when he entraps one with a light-coloured back, snow-white cheeks, and bright vermilion forehead; he knows then that "the flight" has commenced, and the hour of sunrise finds him at his post on the following morning, eager to avail himself of the precious moments.

It is worthy of remark that the "harbour birds" are much more shy than the newly arrived "flight birds," which, with their plumage advanced to that

of the breeding season—the effect of a warmer climate — are comparatively tame and easily caught; they are at once attracted by the decoy, and fly into the net in unsuspecting haste.

Goldfinches again become numerous in October, when detached parties, including the young of the year, which have been spread through other portions of the island during the summer, draw towards the sea, and pass eastward in succession, until they find—in some part of Kent as I imagine—a favourable spot for crossing the Channel.

The pied wagtail* arrives from the continent on the shores of Sussex about the middle of March. Although several spend the winter here, these bear but a small proportion to the numbers that visit us in the spring. On fine days during this season I have frequently seen them approaching the coast, aided by a gentle breeze from the south, their well-known call-note being distinctly audible, under such favourable circumstances, from a

* A few years have elapsed since I was first struck by the incorrectness of the received opinion that our pied wagtail was migratory only in the northern, but stationary in the southern counties of England; and a portion of the following remarks on that bird appeared at the time in a communication made by me to the 'Zoologist,' which was subsequently noticed by Mr. Yarrell, in the second edition of his 'History of British Birds.'

considerable distance at sea, even long before the birds themselves could be perceived,

The fields in the immediate neighbourhood, where but a short time before scarcely an individual was to be found, are soon tenanted by numbers of this species, and for several days they continue dropping on the beach in small parties. The old males arrive first, presenting the beautiful jet black and clear white plumage of the breeding season, while the females, and the males of the preceding year which still partially resemble their partners—the feathers on the back being of an iron gray colour—do not make their appearance until a few days afterwards. It may be observed that the white on the forehead and cheeks of these newly arrived birds is much more pure at this time than in those which winter in England, and altogether they have a fresher and cleaner look than even they themselves present a short time after their arrival in this country.

Some of the old males seem to have made their nuptial contract before their departure from the continent; for after alighting on the shore they exhibit many signs of restlessness and anxiety, performing short flights and incessantly calling for their mates.

It is worthy of remark that those pied wagtails which remain with us during the winter, do not

assume the summer garb at so early a period as their travelled brethren ; indeed, on the arrival of the latter, which have already attained the full nuptial plumage, the former have but partially commenced the change, only a few black patches beginning to show on the throat, and the light gray of the back being varied with occasional feathers of a darker hue. In about a fortnight afterwards this process is complete, and at the expiration of that time the pied wagtails which have arrived from the continent, and those which have sojourned in England during the winter, present the same appearance.

After remaining in the neighbourhood of the coast for a few days, these birds proceed inland in a northerly direction ; and any practical observer in the interior of the county may perceive how much their numbers increase at this period. There is scarcely a pool, road-side ditch, or village horse-pond, where they may not be seen in pairs, and this in districts where, but a week before, the species was thinly distributed.

Pied wagtails moult soon, about the end of July or early in August. The black feathers gradually disappear from the throat in both sexes, and the dorsal plumage becomes of a lighter colour in each ; the back of the male being scarcely darker than that of the female during the

summer, which now assumes a still paler gray. Young birds of both sexes resemble the latter.

About the middle of August there is a general move towards the sea-coast, and these birds now first appear to become gregarious.

At this season I have frequently noticed them in considerable numbers on village commons and similar localities in the interior of the county, where they remain but a few days, making way for fresh detachments, which, in their turn, pursue the same route towards the south. About the latter end of the month, or in the beginning of September, an early riser, visiting the fields in the neighbourhood of the coast, may observe them flying invariably from west to east, parallel with the shore, and following each other in constant succession. These flights continue from daylight until about ten o'clock in the forenoon; and it is a remarkable fact, that so steadily do they pursue this course, and so pertinacious are they in adhering to it, that even a shot fired at an advancing party, and the death of more than one individual, have failed to induce the remainder to fly in a different direction; for, after opening to the right and left, their ranks have again closed, and the progress towards the east has been resumed as before.

I have observed that their proximity to the

coast during this transit from west to east seems to depend in some degree upon the character and extent of the country intervening between the Downs and the sea. For instance, in the more westerly portion of the alluvial district, which may be said to extend from Chichester to Brighton, the flocks of pied wagtails are evidently less numerous, appear to be more scattered, and to occur at greater distances from the coast, than at its eastern extremity. This, I think, may be accounted for. In the neighbourhood of Chichester, Pagham and Bognor, that flat, maritime tract attains its greatest breadth; tall hedges, well-sheltered meadows, and highly cultivated fields lie around, and offer many inducements to these pilgrim bands to divide their forces, and even to pause in the midst of their journey, while at the same time their movements are here in some measure concealed from ordinary observation. But as they advance towards Brighton, where the bleak, naked Downs approach the sea, and the intervening plain becomes narrower, the fields being more open and the fences low and trifling, these migratory flocks seem to accumulate—to become, as it were, more concentrated—as they proceed in a continuous stream towards the east.

It would appear that these birds—the greater part of which are the young of the year, at this

time but a few months old and unequal to protracted flights—in thus steadfastly pursuing this course, are impelled by a wonderful instinct to seek the shores of the neighbouring county of Kent, from whence the voyage to the continent may be performed with ease and security. At any rate, from this period throughout the whole county, the species continues to be comparatively but sparingly distributed, until augmented by fresh arrivals from the south during the warm days of the ensuing spring.