

GENUS II.—SIALIA, *Swains.* BLUE-BIRD.

Bill of ordinary length, nearly straight, broader than high at the base, compressed toward the end; upper mandible with the dorsal line straight and slightly declinate, until near the end, when it becomes convex, the ridge narrow, the sides convex toward the end, the edges overlapping, with a distinct notch close to the narrow deflected tip; lower mandible with the angle of moderate length, and narrow, the dorsal line straight, the sides convex, the edges direct, the tip narrow. Nostrils basal, oval. Head rather large, ovate, neck short; body moderately full. Feet of ordinary length, rather slender; tarsus shorter than the middle toe and claw, its lower scutella only distinct; toes of moderate length, the first stouter, the lateral equal, the third much longer; the fourth adherent at the base; claws moderate, well curved, compressed, laterally grooved, acute. Plumage soft and blended; short bristles at the base of the upper mandible. Wings very long, pointed; the first quill very small, second, third, and fourth longest. Tail rather long, emarginate, of twelve rather strong feathers.

COMMON BLUE-BIRD.
+ SIALIA WILSONII, *Swains.*

PLATE CXXXIV.—MALE, FEMALE, AND YOUNG.

This lovely bird is found in all parts of our country, and is generally a permanent resident of the Southern States. It adds to the delight imparted by spring, and enlivens the dull days of winter. Full of innocent vivacity, warbling its ever pleasing notes, and familiar as any bird can be in its natural freedom, it is one of the most agreeable of our feathered favourites. The pure azure of its mantle, and the beautiful glow of its breast, render it conspicuous, as it flits through the orchards and gardens, crosses the fields or meadows, or hops along by the road-side. Recollecting the little box made

for it, as it sits on the roof of the house, the barn, or the fence-stake, it returns to it even during the winter, and its visits are always welcomed by those who know it best.

When March returns, the male commences his courtship, manifesting as much tenderness and affection towards his chosen one, as the dove itself. Martins and House Wrens! be prepared to encounter his anger, or keep at a respectful distance. Even the wily cat he will torment with querulous chirpings, whenever he sees her in the path from which he wishes to pick up an insect for his mate.

The Blue-bird breeds in the Floridas as early as January, and pairs at Charleston in that month, in Pennsylvania about the middle of April, and in the State of Maine in June. It forms its nest in the box made expressly for the purpose, or in any convenient hole or cavity it can find, often taking possession of those abandoned by the Woodpecker. The eggs are from four to six, of a pale blue colour. Two and often three broods are raised in the year. While the female sits on the second set of eggs, the male takes charge of the first brood, and so on to the end.

The food of this species consists of coleoptera, caterpillars, spiders, and insects of various kinds, in procuring which it frequently alights against the bark of trees. They are also fond of ripe fruits, such as figs, persimons, and grapes, and during the autumnal months they pounce on grasshoppers from the tops of the great mullein, so frequent in the old fields. They are extremely fond of newly ploughed land, on which, especially during winter and early spring, they are often seen in search of the insects turned out of their burrows by the plough.

The song of the Blue-bird is a soft agreeable warble, often repeated during the love-season, when it seldom sings without a gentle quivering of the wings. When the period of migration arrives, its voice consists merely of a tender and plaintive note, perhaps denoting the reluctance with which it contemplates the approach of winter. In November most of the individuals that have resided during the summer in the Northern and Middle Districts, are seen high in the air moving southward along with their families, or alighting to seek for food and enjoy repose. But many are seen in winter, whenever a few days of fine weather occur, so fond are they of their old haunts, and so easily can birds possessing powers of flight like theirs, move from one place to another. Their return takes place early in February or March, when they appear in parties of eight or ten of both sexes. When they alight at this season, the joyous carols of the males are heard from the tops of the early-blooming sassafras and maple.

During winter, they are extremely abundant in all the Southern States, and more especially in the Floridas, where I found hundreds of them on all

the plantations that I visited. The species becomes rare in Maine, still more so in Nova Scotia, and in Newfoundland and Labrador none were seen by our exploring party.

My excellent and learned friend Dr. RICHARD HARLAN of Philadelphia, told me that one day, while in the neighbourhood of that city, sitting in the piazza of a friend's house, he observed that a pair of Blue-birds had taken possession of a hole cut out expressly for them in the end of the cornice above him. They had young, and were very solicitous for their safety, insomuch that it was no uncommon thing to see the male especially, fly at a person who happened to pass by. A hen with her brood in the yard came within a few yards of the piazza. The wrath of the Blue-bird rose to such a pitch that, notwithstanding its great disparity of strength, it flew at the hen with violence, and continued to assail her, until she was at length actually forced to retreat and seek refuge under a distant shrub, when the little fellow returned exultingly to his nest, and there carolled his victory with great animation.

This species has often reminded me of the Robin Redbreast of Europe, to which it bears a considerable resemblance in form and habits. Like the Blue-bird the Redbreast has large eyes, in which the power of its passions are at times seen to be expressed. Like it also, he alights on the lower branches of a tree, where, standing in the same position, he peeps sidewise at the objects beneath and around, until spying a grub or an insect, he launches lightly towards it, picks it up, and gazes around intent on discovering more, then takes a few hops with a downward inclination of the body, stops, erects himself, and should not another insect be near, returns to the branch, and tunes his throat anew. Perhaps it may have been on account of having observed something of this similarity of habits, that the first settlers in Massachusetts named our bird the Blue Robin, a name which it still retains in that state.

I have not received any intimation of the occurrence of this interesting bird to the west of the Rocky Mountains, although it was observed by Mr. TOWNSEND on the head waters of the Missouri. Dr. RICHARDSON mentions it as being found in summer to the eastward of the Rocky Mountains, up to the 48th parallel of latitude, beyond which none were seen by the members of the expedition. I found it abundant and breeding in the Texas. The eggs measure seven and a half eighths of an inch in length, five-eighths and three-fourths in breadth, and are rather more bulky than is usual in birds of this family. In the United States, when in an uncultivated district, it forms its nest in the hollow or hole of a tree.

SAXICOLA SIALIS, Bonap. Syn., p. 39.

ERYTHACA (SIALIA) WILSONII, Swains. and Rich. F. Bor. Amer., vol. ii. p. 210.

BLUE-BIRD, *Ampelis Sialis*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 444.

BLUE-BIRD, *Sylvia Sialis*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. ii. p. 84; vol. v. p. 452.

Adult Male.

Bill of ordinary length, nearly straight, broader than deep at the base, compressed towards the end; upper mandible with the dorsal line convex, the tip declinate, the edges sharp. Nostrils basal, oval. Head rather large, neck short, body rather full. Feet of ordinary length, slender; tarsus compressed, covered anteriorly with a few long scutella, acute behind, scarcely longer than the middle toe; toes scutellate above, the two lateral ones nearly equal; claws arched, slender, compressed, that of the hind toe much larger.

Plumage soft and blended, slightly glossed. Wings of ordinary length, broad, the first quill longest, the second scarcely shorter, the secondary quills truncato-emarginate. Tail rather long, broad, nearly even, of twelve broad, rounded feathers. Short bristle-pointed feathers at the base of the mandible.

Bill and feet black, the soles yellow, iris yellowish-brown. The general colour of the upper parts is bright azure-blue, that of the lower yellowish-brown, the belly white. Shafts of the quills and tail-feathers dusky.

Length 7 inches, extent of wing 10; bill along the ridge $\frac{1}{2}$, along the edge $\frac{3}{4}$; tarsus $\frac{8}{12}$.

Adult Female.

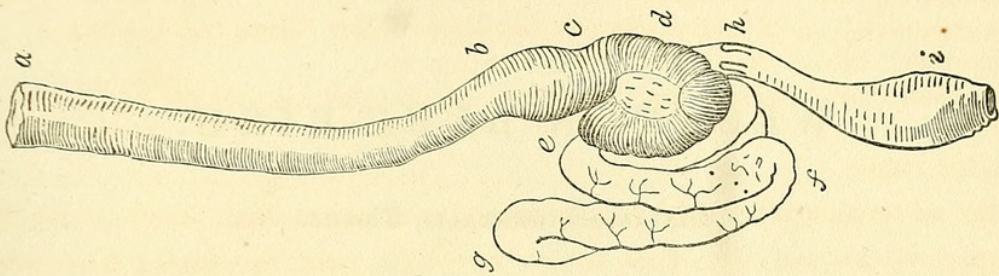
The female has the upper part of a tint approaching to leaden, the foreneck and sides yellowish-brown, but duller than in the male, the belly white.

Length $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

Young Bird.

When fully fledged, the young have the upper part of the head, the back of the neck, and a portion of the back broccoli-brown; the rest of the upper part much as in the female. The lower parts are light grey, the feathers of the breast and sides margined with brown.

In a male preserved in spirits, the roof of the mouth is flat, and similar to that of the Thrushes; the tongue triangular, deeply emarginate and papillate at the base, very thin, flat above, horny towards the end, tapering to a slit point, and having the edges lacerated. The œsophagus, *a b c*, is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, its width at the upper part 4 twelfths; the proventriculus, *b c*, large. The stomach, *d e*, is of moderate size, broadly elliptical, a little compressed, 8 twelfths long, 7 twelfths broad; its muscles distinct, the lateral of considerable thickness, the lower very thin, the tendons elliptical; the epithelium tough, dense, with longitudinal rugæ. The intestine, *e f g h*



i, is rather short and wide, its length being $7\frac{1}{4}$ inches, its breadth in the duodenal portion $2\frac{3}{4}$ twelfths, contracting to 2 twelfths; the rectum of the same width at first, but enlarging into an oblong cloaca, *i*, 5 twelfths wide; the cœca, *h*, 2 twelfths long, $\frac{1}{2}$ twelfth broad, cylindrical, 1 inch 1 twelfth distant from the extremity. Elongated salivary glands.

The trachea is 1 inch 10 twelfths long, moderately flattened, its rings 65, firm, with 2 additional half rings. There are four pairs of inferior laryngeal muscles; the bronchi of about 15 half rings.

THE GREAT MULLEIN.

VERBASCUM THAPSUS, Willd., Sp. Pl., vol. i. p. 1001. *Pursch*, Flor. Amer., vol. i. p. 142. *Smith*, Engl. Flor., vol. i. p. 512.—*PENTANDRIA MONOGYNIA*, Linn.—*SOLANÆÆ*, Juss.

This plant, which is well known in Europe, is equally so in America; but whether it has been accidentally or otherwise introduced into the latter country, I cannot say. At present there is hardly an old field or abandoned piece of ground on the borders of the roads that is not overgrown with it. In the Middle and Southern Districts, it frequently attains a height of five or six feet. The flowers are used in infusion for catarrhs, and a decoction of the leaves is employed in chronic rheumatism.



Common Blue Bird

1. Male. 2. Female. 3. Young.

Great Mullein. Verbascum Thapsus.



Audubon, John James. 1841. "Common Blue-Bird, *Sialia wilsonii*, Swains. [Pl. 134]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 2, 171–175. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319247>.

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