

A PELICAN BOOK

JAMES FISHER

# Bird Recognition

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The third volume in this series, describing the appearance, life, and habits of the rails, game-birds, and larger perching and singing birds, with many maps and charts and nearly seventy illustrations by 'FISH-HAWK'

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*Bird Recognition* has probably the widest circulation of any European bird-book. It provides more up-to-date information than has previously been fitted into a relatively small space; and deals much more fully and scientifically with the habits and yearly life of the British birds than does any other pocket identification book. Our present knowledge of the habits and distribution of birds is of an entirely different order from that of our grandfathers: this book is an essential introduction for the beginner to, and reminder for the expert of, the very numerous detailed facts of British ornithology, stored in the literature and experience of bird-watchers.

This volume, the third, of *Bird Recognition* deals with the rails, game-birds, and larger singing and perching birds. The first volume (A175) deals with sea birds and waders, and the second (A176) with the birds of prey and waterfowl. A fourth volume is in advanced preparation and will conclude the British birds with the smaller perching and singing birds.

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BIRD RECOGNITION

III

RAILS, GAME-BIRDS AND LARGER PERCHING  
AND SINGING BIRDS

JAMES FISHER





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3 BIRD RECOGNITION

III

RAILS, GAME-BIRDS AND LARGER PERCHING  
AND SINGING BIRDS

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*With 68 illustrations by*  
FISH-HAWK

*71 maps compiled by*  
W. B. ALEXANDER

*and 61 charts compiled by the*  
*writer*



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## INTRODUCTION

THIS is the third of four volumes whose object is to enable bird-watchers to distinguish the different sorts of birds likely to be met with in the British Isles, and to recognize their place in nature and general importance.

Volume I, on sea-birds and waders, was first published in 1947, and a second, revised, edition was issued early in 1954. Volume II, on birds of prey and water-fowl, was published in 1951. It is hoped that the fourth and last volume, on the smaller perching and singing birds, will be published in 1955.

*Bird Recognition* attempts to provide a statement of the present status of the British birds, as well as of their recognition-points. Observers still increase. The numbers and habits of birds continue to change, as they always will. All bird books are out of date before they are published. Readers of the previous volumes have been kind enough to send me information and corrections, and I hope readers of the present one will do the same.

Once more I thank 'Fish-Hawk' and W. B. Alexander for their lucid and excellent pictures and maps. David Lack and Derek Goodwin have given me very helpful advice about some of the species in this volume, and I thank them, too.

I must refer the reader to Vol. I, pp. 5-14, for an explanation of the general system, a list of books on bird recognition, a key vice-county list and map, an explanation of the year-cycle charts and a diagram of the externals of a bird. The Witherby, or W numbers, attached to each species at the bottom of the page, correspond with those in the check-list in the *Handbook*, which until late 1952 was accepted as the standard list of British birds. The B numbers correspond with those in its successor, the *Check-List* of the British Ornithologists' Union.

Many hundreds of new members have joined the British Trust for Ornithology and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, using the membership forms at the end of the previous volumes: new ones can be found at the end of this.

# KEY: HABITAT WHEN NOT AT BREEDING-PLACE: GAME-BIRDS, PIGEONS AND RAILS

	Alpine Moor	Heather Moor and Heaths	Marshland	Agricultural Land	Scrubland, Parks and Hedges	Woodland	Flat Coastland and Dunes	Rocky Coastland	Towns
PTARMIGAN									
RED GROUSE									
ROCK-DOVE*									
PARTRIDGE									
PHEASANT									
BLACK GROUSE									
CORN-CRAKE									
CAPERCAILLIE									
PALLAS'S SAND-GROUSE									
RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE									
QUAIL									
TURTLE-DOVE									
WOOD-PIGEON									
STOCK-DOVE									
* Including the feral pigeons descended from domesticated rock-doves.	Alpine Moor	Heather Moor and Heaths	Marshland	Agricultural Land	Scrubland, Parks and Hedges	Woodland	Flat Coastland and Dunes	Rocky Coastland	Towns
	Coastal Waters	Large Fresh Lakes and Open Waters	Rivers and Streams	Small Lakes and Reedy Meres	Water-meadows, Floodland and Ditches	Marshes, Boggy Pools and Sewage-farms	Towns and Parks	Grass and Arable Land	Moorland
COOT									
WATER-RAIL									
LITTLE CRAKE									
MOORHEN									
SPOTTED CRAKE									
BAILLON'S CRAKE									



**KEY: HABITAT WHEN NOT AT BREEDING-PLACES: PERCHING NON-PASSERINES AND MUSCICAPID PASSERINES (THRUSHES, CHATS, NIGHTINGALE, ROBIN, DIPPER, etc.)**

	Inland Cliffs	Moorland and Heath	Agricultural Land	Scrubland, Park and Wood-edge	Spinneys	Forest-woodland	Marsh, Lakeside and River	Flat Coastland and Dunes	Rocky Coastland	Ruins	Towns
BLACK REDSTART											
REDSTART											
WHEATEAR											
WHINCHAT											
STONECHAT											
SWIFT											
RING-OUZEL											
BLACKBIRD											
GREEN WOODPECKER											
CUCKOO											
MISTLE-THRUSH											
NIGHTJAR											
WRYNECK											
DIPPER											
BLUETHROAT											
HOOPOE											
FIELDFARE											
REDWING											
SONG-THRUSH											
BEE-EATER											
ROLLER											
NIGHTINGALE											
ROBIN											
GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER											
LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER											
KINGFISHER											
	Inland Cliffs	Moorland and Heath	Agricultural Land	Scrubland, Park and Wood-edge	Spinneys	Forest-woodland	Marsh, Lakeside and River	Flat Coastland and Dunes	Rocky Coastland	Ruins	Towns

# KEY: HABITAT WHEN NOT AT BREEDING-PLACE: OTHER LARGER BRITISH PASSERINES

	Inland Cliffs	Moorland and Heath	Agricultural Land	Scrubland, Park and Wood-edge	Spinneys	Forest-woodland	Marsh, Lakeside and River	Flat Coastland and Dunes	Rocky Coastland	Ruins	Towns
HOUSE-MARTIN											
JACKDAW											
RAVEN											
CHOUGH											
CARRION-CROW											
HOODED CROW											
GREAT GREY SHRIKE											
WOOD-LARK											
SKY-LARK											
ROOK											
STARLING											
SHORE-LARK											
SAND-MARTIN											
SWALLOW											
ROSY STARLING											
MAGPIE											
RED-BACKED SHRIKE											
WAXWING											
JAY											
GOLDEN ORIOLE											
	Inland Cliffs	Moorland and Heath	Agricultural Land	Scrubland, Park and Wood-edge	Spinneys	Forest-woodland	Marsh, Lakeside and River	Flat Coastland and Dunes	Rocky Coastland	Ruins	Towns

# FIELD CHARACTER KEYS

THE use of these keys is explained in Vol. I, pp. 15-16. The precise meanings of the words for size are as follows:

<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Length in inches</i>	<i>Example</i>
Minute	5-6	Robin
Very small	6-8	Sky-lark
Small	8-12	Blackbird
Small-medium	12-16	Stock-dove
Medium	16-20	Rook
Medium-large	20-24	Blackcock
Large	24-28	Hen capercaillie
Immense	32-36	Cock capercaillie

There are no gigantic (length over 36), very large (28-32), very minute (4-5), or tiny birds (under 4 inches) mentioned in this volume.

## FIELD CHARACTER KEY TO BRITISH PIGEONS AND SAND-GROUSE

1. *a.* Small-medium. Light-coloured; sandy with black patch on belly noticeable in flight. Wings and tail taper to sharp point. Rapid, plover-like flight, wings clatter and whistle. Small head, short neck, bill and legs. Feet feathered. Waddle on ground; never perch. Voice chuckling.....

PALLAS'S SAND-GROUSE (p. 32)

- b.* Small to medium. Darker than *a*, light under-parts. Tails not sharply pointed. Rapid, flicking flight, wings clatter and whistle. Head relatively larger than *a*, bill and legs longer. Feet not feathered; perch. Voice crooning.....

PIGEONS, see 2

2. *a.* Small. Slight. Long tail, black with broad white tip. Rufous wing-coverts. Mixed black and white patch on sides of neck. Voice a purring croon, usually of 3 or 4 beats.....TURTLE-DOVE (p. 30)

- b.* Small-medium or medium. Robust. Shorter black-ended square tail, no white on tip. Upper-parts, including wing-coverts, mostly blue-grey. Greenish iridescent patch on sides of neck. Voice a rhythmic coo.....see 3

3. *a.* Medium. Heavy. White patch on sides of neck below iridescent patch (adults, not young). Broad white wing-bar. Breast vinous. Voice cooing, in rhythm 'two coos, Taffy take' .....WOOD-PIGEON (p. 24)
  - b.* Small-medium. Lighter. No white on neck or wings. Voice 'coo, roo' .....see 4
  4. *a.* Dark blue-grey upper-parts. Breast vinous. Under-parts light. Wings blue-grey, primaries black, two short black bars on inner part wing. ....STOCK-DOVE (p. 26)
  - b.* Pale back; whitish rump. Breast and under-parts dark blue-grey. Wings light grey with two broad, long black bars across wing .....ROCK-DOVE (p. 28)
- Note.* Some domestic pigeons are almost identical with their ancestor, the rock-dove.

## FIELD CHARACTER KEY TO BRITISH CRAKES AND RAILS

1. *a.* Small-medium. Plumage mostly uniform dark. Bill medium, with shield at base.....see 2
- b.* Small or very small. Plumage mottled, streaked or barred. No shield at base of bill.....see 3
2. *a.* Smaller than *b.* Plumage brown-black with white band along flanks. No wing-bar. White patch with centre black line under tail. Legs and feet of adult green (red garter on tibia). Bill red, with red shield, yellow tip (brown and green in juvenile). Voice 'curruc' ....MOORHEN (p. 42)
- b.* Larger than *a.* Plumage uniformly black. Whitish wing-bar in flight. Legs and feet green (orange tibia); feet have prominent lobes on toes. Bill and shield white, very conspicuous. Voice 'cowk', 'kicowk' .....COOT (p. 44)
3. *a.* Small. Long red bill. Under tail-coverts white. Voice consists of frightful groans, squeaks, whistles and hisses....  
WATER-RAIL (p. 40)
- b.* Small or very small. Short bill, never entirely red. Under tail-coverts not purely white. Voice purring, ticking or rattling.....CRAKES, see 4
4. *a.* Small. Voice 'rasp-rasp', or 'tick-tack'.....see 5
- b.* Very small. Voice a feeble purring or clucking.....see 6

5. *a.* Voice 'rasp, rasp', like drawing stick across a comb. Plumage yellow-buff, dark centres to feathers, paler below. Wings conspicuously chestnut. Under tail-coverts chestnut-brown. Bill pale brown. Legs and feet pale flesh  
CORN-CRAKE (p. 34)
- b.* Voice sharp 'quit, quit, quit', or 'tick-tack'. Smaller and darker than *a.* Dark stripe from eye to bill. Plumage olive-brown, noticeably speckled with white above. Wings brown with small white flecks. Under tail-coverts buff (noticeable). Bill green-yellow, red at base. Legs olive-green .....SPOTTED CRAKE (p. 36)
6. *a.* Under-parts, throat, and sides of face and neck blue-grey. Under tail-coverts barred black and white.....see 7
- b.* Under-parts buff, throat white. Under tail-coverts buff-brown. Bill green with red base. Legs green.....  
FEMALE LITTLE CRAKE (p. 38)
7. *a.* No white streaks on wing-coverts. Flanks blue-grey, not barred. Bill green with red base. Legs green.....  
MALE LITTLE CRAKE (p. 38)
- b.* White streaks on wing-coverts. Black and white barring of under tail-coverts extends over whole flanks. Bill all green. Legs brownish-flesh .....BAILLON'S CRAKE (p. 39)

## FIELD CHARACTER KEY TO BRITISH GAME-BIRDS

1. *a.* Conspicuous long tail .....PHEASANT, see 2
- b.* Short tail.....see 3
2. *a.* Medium. Tail 15-20 in. Burnished plumage, large red skin-patch round eye, head and neck metallic green. 'Ear-tufts'. Sometimes white neck-ring. Voice 'kork, kork'  
COCK PHEASANT (p. 54)
- b.* Small-medium. Tail 8-10 in. Dull brown plumage, no skin-patch round eye. Silent, or low whistle when flushed.  
HEN PHEASANT (p. 54)
3. *a.* Immense to small-medium. Cocks at least have red wattles above eye. Feathered legs. Woods and moors....  
see 4

- b. Small-medium to very small. No marked wattle above eye. Legs not feathered. Agricultural land.....see 9
4. a. General colour black or dark slate.....see 5  
 b. General colour mottled brown or grey, or white....see 6
5. a. Immense. Dark slate with fine vermiculations. Glossy green band on breast. Belly and under tail-coverts grey marked white, look greyish. Bill whitish horn. Breaks loudly from cover. Hissing, chuckling, ecstatic, not very penetrating song .....COCK CAPERCAILLIE (p. 46)  
 b. Medium-large. Glossy black, somewhat mottled in summer. White wing-bar. Lyre-shaped tail, white under tail. Bill black. Usually breaks silently out of cover. Sneezing call and 'rookoo' song .....BLACKCOCK (p. 48)
6. a. Large or medium. No red wattle over eye. Legs greyish. Woodland and scrub.....see 7  
 b. Small-medium. Red wattle over eye. Legs whitish. Moor and mountain .....see 8
7. a. Large; decidedly larger than b. Richly and boldly barred buff, black, grey and white. Rufous breast contrasts with lighter belly. No white wing-bar. Tail not forked. Voice 'cock-cock' .....HEN CAPERCAILLIE (p. 46)  
 b. Medium. Smaller and less richly and boldly barred than a (longer and less ruddy than red grouse, see 8a). Underparts almost uniformly rufous-buff, barred dark. Broad white wing-bar. Tail distinctly forked. Voice 'chuck-chuck' .....GREYHEN (p. 48)
8. a. Dark red-brown plumage – looks very dark at a distance. Wings dark. Eye-wattle larger than b's. Voice of cock 'Kok-ok-ok', 'go-back'. Heather moor.....  
 RED GROUSE (p. 50)  
 b. In winter almost pure white. During rest of year always white wings and belly. Upper-parts in autumn grey patterned with black; in summer, those of male rich brown, of female buff-brown. Eye wattle smaller than a's. Voice of cock horse croak, and 'snore'.....  
 PTARMIGAN (p. 52)

9. *a.* Very small. Voice 'wet-m'lips'. Sandy plumage streaked, mottled and barred black and buff. Tail brown-black barred buff. Under-parts pale buff .....QUAIL (p. 60)
- b.* Small to small-medium. Voice disyllabic. Tail rufous, shows in flight. Under-parts grey and orange-buff or chestnut ..... see 10
10. *a.* Small. Round portly form. Orange-brown head. Grey neck and under-parts with dark chestnut horseshoe on males and some females. Flanks barred with chestnut and streaked with white. Back brown streaked with buff. Bill greenish. Legs yellow-grey. Voice 'ker-wit'.... PARTRIDGE (p. 56)
- b.* Small-medium. Fore-half of crown grey, rest brown. Face, cheeks and upper throat white, crossed by dark line from beak 'through' eye and down sides of neck, downwards to form black bib on lower throat. Breast blue-grey; belly russet. Flanks barred broadly with black, white and chestnut on blue-grey ground. Back brown, not streaked. Bill and legs red. Voice 'chuckor'.....  
RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (p. 58)

## FIELD CHARACTER KEY TO BRITISH NON-PASSERINE PERCHING BIRDS

The swift belongs to the order Macrochires; the nightjar to the Caprimulgi; the bee-eater, roller, hoopoe and kingfisher to the Coraciae; the woodpeckers to the Pici; and the cuckoo to the Cuculi.

1. *a.* Very small; almost uniformly sooty; very long-winged, agile, diurnal noisy bird with forked tail ..SWIFT (p. 62)
- b.* Small; camouflage-patterned; long-winged, agile, nocturnal, big-mouthed.....NIGHTJAR (p. 64)
- c.* Small-medium to minute; conspicuous in pattern, colour or voice, diurnal.....see 2
2. *a.* Very small; aquatic; brilliant colours; penetrating high voice .....KINGFISHER (p. 70)
- b.* Small-medium or small; generally in open country; do not climb trunks.....see 3

- c. Small-medium to minute; generally woodland; undulating flight; climb trunks with tail support. . . . .  
 WOODPECKERS (also TREE-CREEPER, vol. 4), see 6
3. a. Small-medium or small; conspicuously coloured . . . see 4  
 b. Small-medium. Hawk-like barred plumage; conspicuous voice 'cuc-koo' or weird bubbling . . . . .CUCKOO (p. 80)
4. a. Small-medium or small. Turquoise plumage . . . . .see 5  
 b. Small; pink-brown with conspicuously barred black-and-white tail and wings. Crest. Long down-curved bill. Voice 'hoo-poo-poo' . . . . .HOOPOE (p. 68)
5. a. Small. Triangular wings; projecting tail-feathers. Besides turquoise, chestnut and gold on upper-parts, and yellow throat. Pursues insects, uttering liquid note . . . . .  
 BEE-EATER (p. 66)  
 b. Small-medium. Crow-like build. Chestnut on upper-parts but no yellow; bluish band on wing. Like huge shrike. Pursues insects, uttering loud rattling note . . . . .  
 ROLLER (p. 67)
6. a. Small-medium. A study in greens and gold with a crimson crown. Often seen on ground . . . . .  
 GREEN WOODPECKER (p. 72)  
 b. Small or minute. A study in black and white. Truly woodland . . . . .see 7  
 c. Very small. A study in subtle camouflage colouration. Voice 'queen, queen, queen, queen . . .' lower in pitch and more penetrating than that of 7b . . . .WRYNECK (p. 78)
7. a. Small. *Much* larger than *b* (size of thrush). Black back, big white shoulder-flashes, red undertail. Male (not female) has crimson patch on nape . . . . .  
 GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (p. 74)  
 b. Minute. Only size of house-sparrow. Barred across wings, upper-parts not pied, no red undertail. Male (not female) has crimson crown . . . . .  
 LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER (p. 76)



# FIELD CHARACTER KEY TO LARGER BRITISH PASSERINES

About three-fifths of the world's birds, and not quite two-fifths of those on the British List belong to the great order of Passeres, which can be generally described as perching and singing birds, though some hardly ever perch off the ground, others can be hardly said to sing – while some non-passerines both perch and sing. The fundamental distinction of passerines from others is, of course, anatomical.

About two-sevenths of the world's passerines, and about three-sevenths of those on the British List, belong to the great family of Muscicapidae, of which the members described in this volume are the thrushes, chats, redstarts, nightingale, bluethroat, robin and dipper; in vol. 4 will be the (generally) smaller flycatchers, goldcrests, warblers and wren. The B.O.U. *Check-List* divides the British Muscicapidae into six families, but, following the recent work (1951) of E. Mayr and D. Amadon, I prefer to regard these as subfamilies.

The rest of the birds in this book belong to seven other passerine families. To the Corvidae belong the raven, crows, rook, jackdaw, magpie, jay and chough; to the Sturnidae, the starlings; to the Oriolidae, the golden oriole; to the Alaudidae, the larks; to the Laniidae, the shrikes; to the Bombycillidae, the waxwing; and to the Hirundinidae, the swallow and martins.

1. *a.* Minute. Aerial. Feed entirely in air .....see 2
- b.* Small or very small. Arboreal. Hop. Only momentarily in contact with ground in search for food.....see 4
- c.* Small-medium to minute. Forage at least partly on ground, where hop (walking quite exceptional).....see 7
- d.* Large to very small. Mainly ground-feeders. Can walk or run as well as hop .....see 17

## 2. HIRUNDINIDAE

*Warning:* the very small (*not* minute) almost uniformly sooty swift (p. 13) is also an air-feeder:

- a.* Long tail-streamers. Shiny blue upper-parts; red forehead, face and throat, blue throat-band, cream under-parts.....SWALLOW (p. 146)
- b.* Forked tail, but no tail-streamers.....see 3
3. *a.* Steel-blue-black, with pure white rump and under-parts.  
   . HOUSE-MARTIN (p. 148)