

AIRONE CENERINO

Ardea cinerea



The Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) is a wading bird of the heron family Ardeidae.

The Grey Heron is a large bird, standing 1 m tall, and it has a 1.5 m wingspan. It is the largest European heron. Its plumage is largely grey above, and off-white below. It has a powerful yellow bill, which is brighter in breeding adults. It has a slow flight, with its long neck retracted (S-shaped). This is characteristic of herons and bitterns, and distinguishes them from storks, cranes and spoonbills, which extend their necks

This species breeds in colonies in trees close to lakes or other wetlands, although it will also nest in reed beds. It builds a bulky stick nest.

It feeds in shallow water, spearing fish or frogs with its long, sharp bill. Herons will also take small mammals and birds. It will often wait motionless for prey, or slowly stalk its victim.

The call is a loud croaking "fraaank".

This species is very similar to the American Great Blue Heron. The Australian White-faced Heron is often incorrectly called Grey Heron

ALLODOLA

Alauda arvensis



The Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) is a small passerine bird. It breeds across most of Europe and Asia and in the mountains of north Africa. It is mainly resident in the west of its range, but eastern populations of are more migratory, moving further south in winter.

Even in the milder west of its range, many birds move to lowlands and the coast in winter. Asian birds appear as vagrants in Alaska; this bird has also been introduced in Hawaii and western North America.

The Skylark is 16-18 cm long. It is a bird of open farmland and heath. It is known throughout its range for the song of the male birds, which is delivered in hovering flight from heights of 50-100 meters, when the bird itself may appear to be just a dot in the sky from the ground. The song is generally 2 to 3 minutes long and it tends to get longer later in the season. The males have broader wings than the females.

This adaptation for more efficient hovering flight has probably evolved owing to female birds' preference for males that hover and sing for longer periods - probably as an indicator of overall fitness.

Like most other larks, it is a rather dull-looking species on the ground, mainly brown above and pale below, and with a short blunt erectile crest. In flight it shows a short tail and short broad wings. The tail and the rear edge of the wings are edged with white, which are visible when it is flying away, but not if it is flying towards the observer. They spend a lot of time on the ground looking for food and they have sturdy legs. It feeds on seeds supplemented with insects in the breeding season.

The skylark makes a grass nest on the ground. Generally the nests are very difficult to find, hidden between foliage. 3-6 eggs are laid in June. A second or third brood may be started later in the year. The eggs are yellow/white with brownish/purple spots mainly at the large end.

In the UK skylark numbers have declined over the last 30 years, as determined by the Common Bird Census started in the early 1960s by The British Trust for Ornithology. There are now only 10% of the numbers that were present 30 years ago. The RSPB have shown that this massive decline is mainly due to changes in farming practices and only partly due to pesticides. In the past cereals were planted in the spring, grown through the summer and harvested in the early autumn. Cereals are now planted in the autumn, grown through the winter and are harvested in the early summer. The winter grown fields are much too dense in summer for the skylarks to be able to walk and run between the wheat stems to find their food.

Farmers are now encouraged and paid to maintain biodiversity and they can get a few points (toward DEFRA's Entry Level Stewardship financial rewards) for improving the habitat for Skylarks.

The RSPB's research of winter-planted wheat fields over the last 6 years has shown that suitable nesting areas for the Skylark can be made by turning the seeding machine off (or lifting the drill) for a 5 to 10 metres stretch as the tractor goes over the ground to briefly stop the seeds being sown. This is repeated in several areas within the same field to make about 2 skylark areas per hectare. Subsequent spraying and fertilizing can be continuous over the entire field. DEFRA suggests that the skylark areas should not be near to the perimeter of the field (ie should not be within 24 meters from the perimeter of the field), should not be near to telegraph poles and should not be enclosed by trees.

When the crop grows the unseeded areas in the field become areas of less dense growth suitable for Skylarks to build well-hidden nests and also suitable for them to hunt insects. These areas of low vegetation are just right, but the wheat in the rest of the field becomes too closely packed and too tall for the Skylarks to hunt on the ground for their food. At the RSPB's research farm in Cambridgeshire the Skylark numbers have increased three fold (from 10 pairs to 30 pairs) over 6 years. The RSPB hope this simple effective technique can be copied nationwide. Fields near too or over where larks were seen the year before would be an obvious good site for these skylark areas. Farmers have reported that the method is easy to implement.

AVERLA PICCOLA

Lanius collurio



The Red-backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*) is a member of the shrike family *Laniidae*. This bird breeds in most of Europe and western Asia and winters in tropical Africa. Its range is contracting, and it is now probably extinct in Great Britain as a breeding bird, although it is frequent on migration. It is named as a protected bird in Britain under a Biodiversity Action Plan; its decline is due to overuse of pesticides and scrub clearance due to human overpopulation. It breeds in open cultivated country with hawthorn and dog rose.

This migratory medium-sized passerine eats large insects, small birds, voles and lizards. Like other shrikes it hunts from prominent perches, and impales corpses on thorns or barbed wire as a "larder". The general colour of the male's upper parts is reddish. It has a grey head and a typical shrike black stripe through the eye. Underparts are tinged pink, and the tail has a black and white pattern similar to that of a wheatear. In the female and young birds the upperparts are brown and vermiculated. Underparts are buff and also vermiculated.

BALLERINA BIANCA

Motacilla alba



The White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) is a small passerine in the wagtail family Motacillidae, which also includes the pipits and longclaws.

This species breeds in much of Europe and Asia and parts of north Africa. It is resident in the mildest parts of its range, but otherwise migrates to Africa. It has a toehold in Alaska as a scarce breeder.

This is an insectivorous bird of open country, often near habitation and water. It prefers bare areas for feeding, where it can see and pursue its prey.

It nests in crevices in stone walls and similar natural and man-made structures.

This is a slender bird, 16.5-19cm in length, with the characteristic long, constantly wagging tail of its genus. It is basically grey above and white below, with a white face, black cap and black throat.

The resident British subspecies, the Pied Wagtail, *Motacilla alba yarrellii*, is a generally blacker bird than the nominate race of western Europe, *M. a. alba*, but is otherwise identical in its behaviour.

It is likely that the differentiation of White Wagtail into two subspecies (or races) in western Europe has arisen because of the partial isolation of the mainly resident British form, although *M. a. yarrellii* now also breeds in adjacent areas of the neighbouring European mainland.

BALLERINA GIALLA

Motacilla cinerea



The wagtails are a group of small passerine birds with long tails which they wag frequently. *Motacilla*, the root of the family and main generic name, means *moving tail*.

Wagtails are slender, often colourful, ground-feeding insectivores of open country in the Old World. They are ground nesters, laying up to six speckled eggs at a time.

BIGIARELLA
Sylvia curruca



The Lesser Whitethroat, *Sylvia curruca*, is a common and widespread Old World warbler which breeds in temperate Europe, except the southwest, and in western and central Asia. This small passerine bird is strongly migratory, wintering in Africa just south of the Sahara, Arabia and India.

This is a bird of fairly open country and cultivation, with large bushes for nesting and some trees. The nest is built in low shrub or brambles, and 3-7 eggs are laid.

As with most warblers, the sexes are almost identical. This is a small warbler with a grey back, whitish underparts, a grey head with a darker "bandit mask" through the eyes and a white throat. Like most warblers, it is insectivorous, but will also take berries and other soft fruit.

It is slightly smaller than the closely related Whitethroat, and lacks the chestnut wings of that species. It is likely that the two species separated in the last ice age, with their ancestor being forced into two enclaves, one in the south east, which became the Lesser Whitethroat, and one in the south west which became the Whitethroat. When the ice sheets retreated, the two forms no longer recognised each other as the same species.

Because warblers depend on song for breeding recognition, the change in this important signal would be enough in itself to ensure genetic isolation. The Lesser Whitethroat's song is fast and rattling, and quite different from its relative's scolding song.

A similar situation occurs with the Chiffchaff and the Willow Warbler, where two very similar leaf warbler species are separated by their very different songs.

The Lesser Whitethroat has at least six subspecies, of which three have been suggested as species in their own right:

- Desert Lesser Whitethroat, subspecies *minula* (also known as Small Whitethroat)
- Margelanic Lesser Whitethroat, subspecies *margelanica*
- Hume's (Lesser) Whitethroat, subspecies *althaea*

CANNAIOLA
Acrocephalus scirpaceus



The Eurasian Reed Warbler, or just Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, is an Old World warbler in the genus *Acrocephalus*. It breeds across Europe into temperate western Asia. It is migratory, wintering in sub-Saharan Africa.

This small passerine bird is a species found almost exclusively in reedbeds, usually with some bushes. The 3-5 eggs are laid in a basket nest in reeds. The chicks fledge after 10 or 11 days.

Reed warblers are one of the species that are brood parasitised by the common cuckoo.

This is a medium-sized warbler, 12.5-14cm in length. The adult has an unstreaked brown back and buff underparts. The forehead is flattened, and the bill is strong and pointed. The sexes are identical, as with most warblers, but young birds are richer buff below. Like most warblers, it is insectivorous, but will take other small food items including berries.

The song is a slow, chattering *jit-jit-jit* with typically acrocephaline whistles and mimicry added.

CAPINERA

Sylvia atricapilla



The Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla*, is a common and widespread Old World warbler which breeds throughout northern and temperate Europe.

This small passerine bird is migratory, and northern and central European breeders winter in southern Europe and north Africa where the local populations are resident. It is hardier than most warblers, partly because it will readily eat small berries as well as the more typical warbler insect diet.

An interesting development in recent years is for substantial numbers of central European birds to winter in gardens in southern England. Presumably the ready availability of food, and the avoidance of migration over the Alps, compensates for the sub-optimal climate. Moreover an article in the magazine *Science* reports that the birds wintering in England tend to mate only with each other. The authors suggest that the division of the population into different migration routes may be the first step in the evolution of distinct species.

This is a bird of shady woodlands with ground cover for nesting. The nest is built in low shrub, and 3-6 eggs are laid.

This is a robust warbler, mainly grey in plumage. Although most warblers have the sexes identical, several *Sylvia* species have distinct male and female plumages. The male has a small black cap, which in the female is light brown.

The song is a pleasant chattering with some clearer notes like a Blackbird. The song can be confused with that of the Garden Warbler.



As a side note, the presence and sounds of this bird inspired Italian poets and writers. "*La Capinera*" (Italian for blackcap) is the title of one of the most famous poems by Giovanni Pascoli. More recently "*Storia di una Capinera*", was a 1993 movie directed by Franco Zeffirelli. The movie is distributed with the international title "Sparrow".

CARDELLINO *Carduelis carduelis*



The Goldfinch or European Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis*, is a small passerine bird of the finch family.

The Goldfinch breeds across Europe and most of Asia in open, partially wooded lowlands. It is resident in the milder west of its range, but migrates from colder regions. It will also make local movements, even in the west, to escape bad weather. This bird is a rare vagrant to eastern North America. In 2005, one was spotted and photographed on a bird feeder in Michigan.



The Goldfinch is 12-13.5 cm (4-5 inches) long and weighs 16 to 22 grams. Sexes are alike, with a red face, black and white head, warm brown upperparts, white underparts with buff flanks and breast patches, and black and yellow wings. The ivory-coloured bill is long and pointed, and the tail is forked. Juveniles have a plain head and a greyer back but are unmistakable due to the yellow wing stripe.

The food is small seeds such as thistles (the Latin name is from *carduus*, thistle) and teasels, but insects are also taken when feeding young. The song is a pleasant silvery twittering. They nest in the outer twigs of tall leafy trees, laying four to six eggs which hatch in 11-14 days.

In the winter they group together to form flocks of up to about 40 birds.

The call is a melodic *tickeLIT*, and the song is a pleasant tinkling medley of trills and twitters, but always including the trisyllabic call phrase or a *teLLIT-teLLIT-teLLIT*. In earlier times, The Goldfinch was kept as a cagebird for its song.

CINCIALLEGRA

Parus major



The Great Tit, *Parus major*, is a passerine bird in the tit family Paridae. It is a widespread and common species throughout Europe and Asia in any sort of woodland. It is resident, and most birds do not migrate.

It is an easy tit to recognise, large in size at 14 cm, with a broad black line (broader in the male) down its otherwise yellow front. The neck and head are black with white cheeks and ear coverts. Upperparts are olive. It has a white wingbar and outer tail feathers. In young birds the black is replaced by brown, and the white by yellow.

There are many races of this widespread species, but they fall into three groups. Birds in temperate Europe and Asia are essentially green above and yellow below. Great Tits in China, Japan and southeastern Russia are green above and white or yellow-tinged white below, and birds in India and southeast Asia are grey above and whitish below.

It is, like other tits, a vocal bird, and has a large variety of calls, of which the most familiar is a "teacher, teacher", also likened to a squeaky wheelbarrow wheel. Interestingly, the birds from the two south Asian groups of races do not recognise the calls of the temperate Great Tits, and they may be a separate species.

Any hole will do for a nest, and it will readily take to nest boxes. The number in the clutch is often very large, but seven or eight white eggs, spotted red, are normal, with bigger clutches being laid by two or even more hens. The bird is a close sitter, hissing when disturbed.

Like other tits, its food is insects, especially caterpillars when feeding young, and seeds. In England, Great Tits learned to break open the foil caps sealing bottles of milk that had been delivered to homes to get at the cream floating on top. This is a common and

popular European garden bird, due to its acrobatic performances when feeding on nuts or seed. It will join winter tit flocks with other species.

CODIROSSO

Phoenichurus phoenichurus



The Redstart or Common Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) is a small passerine bird that was formerly classed as a member of the Thrush family (Turdidae), but is now more generally considered to be an Old World flycatcher (Muscicapidae).

It is a summer visitor in Europe. Its winter quarters are in north Africa. The Redstart is common in Great Britain but in Ireland it is very local.

The male Redstarts first arrive early in April, often a few days in advance of the females. It is a bird of the woodlands and open park land, especially where the timber is old enough to supply cracks and crannies suitable for its nest. Five or six light blue eggs are laid during May, and a second brood is rare.

In many of its habits and actions the Redstart shows an affinity to the European Robin. It has the same general carriage, and chat-like behaviour, and is the same size at 14 cm (5.4 in) length.

The rich chestnut tail, from which it and other redstarts gets their names ("start" is an old word for "tail"), is always in motion. Only the Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochrurus*) has a similar tail.

The male in summer has a slate-grey head and upperparts, except the rump and tail, which, like the flanks, underwing coverts and axillaries are orange-chestnut. The forehead and supercilium are white; the sides of the face and throat are black. The wings and the two central tail feathers are brown. The orange on the flanks shades to almost white on the belly. The bill and legs are black. In autumn, broad margins obscure the colours of the male, giving a washed-out appearance.

The female is browner, with paler underparts; she lacks the black and slate, and her throat is whitish.

The male's song is similar to that of the Robin, but never more than a prelude, since it has an unfinished, feeble ending.

The Redstart feeds like a flycatcher, making aerial sallies after passing insects, and most of its food consists of winged insects. The call is chat-like and the alarm a plaintive single note, *wheet*, like that of the Wren.

CODIROSSO SPAZZACAMINO

Phoenichurus ochruros



The Black Redstart (*Phoenichurus ochruros*) is a small passerine bird that was formerly classed as a member of the Thrush family (Turdidae), but is now more generally considered to be an Old World flycatcher (Muscicapidae).

It is a widespread breeder in south and central Europe, but very localised in Great Britain. It is resident in the milder parts of its range, but northern birds winter in southern Europe or north Africa. It nests in crevices or holes in buildings.

It is more common in Britain as a bird of passage and winter visitor. On passage it is fairly common on the east and south coasts.

Reports of early Common Redstarts (*Phoenichurus phoenicurus*) may sometimes refer to this species. The "fire" of the tail labels the bird as a Redstart, but it may be distinguished from the Common Redstart, which is the same size, at 14 cm length, by its sootier appearance, even when the distinctive white wing patch is not apparent, as in immature males.

The Black Redstart is 13-14.5cm in length. The male has no chestnut on the flanks nor white on the forehead. The female is greyer than the Common Redstart, and at any age the grey axillaries and under wing-coverts are distinctive. In the Common Redstart these are buff or chestnut.

Migrant Black Redstarts arrive in Britain in October or November and pass on or remain to winter, returning eastward in March or April.

They typically frequent cliffs and stony ground, but in Britain often breed and winter in industrial complexes that have the bare areas and cliff-like buildings it favours. It will catch passing insects in flight, and migrants may or hunt in the tide-wrack for flies or tiny crustaceans.

Its quick ducks of head and body are robin-like, and its tail is often flicked.

The male has a rattling song and a *tick* call .

CORNACCHIA GRIGIA

Corvus corone



The Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*) can be distinguished from the Common Raven by its size (48–52 cm in length) and from the Hooded Crow by its black plumage, but there is frequent confusion between it and the Rook. The beak of the Crow is stouter and in consequence looks shorter, and whereas in the adult Rook the nostrils are bare, those of the Crow are covered at all ages with bristle-like feathers.

This species breeds in western and central Europe, with an allied form or race *C. c. orientalis* (50–56 cm in length) occurring in eastern Asia. The separation of these two populations is now believed to have taken place during the last ice age, with the closely allied Hooded Crow (now given species status) filling the gap between. Fertile hybrids occur along the boundary between these two forms indicating their close genetic relationship.

The plumage of Carrion Crow is black with a green or purple sheen, but the gloss is much greener than that of the Rook. The bill, legs and feet are also black.

The Rook is generally gregarious and the Crow solitary, but Rooks occasionally nest in isolated trees, and Crows may feed with Rooks; moreover, Crows are often sociable in winter roosts. The most distinctive feature is the voice. The rook has a high-pitched *kaaa*, but the Crow's guttural, slightly vibrant, deeper croaked *kraa* is distinct from any note of the rook.

The Carrion Crow is noisy, perching on the top of a tree and calling three or four times in quick succession, with a slight pause between each series of croaks. The wing-beats are slower, more deliberate than those of the Rook.

Though an eater of carrion of all kinds, the Carrion Crow will kill and eat any small animal it can catch, and takes eggs. Crows are by nature scavengers, which is why they tend to frequent sites inhabited by humans in order to feed on their household waste.

The bulky stick nest normally placed in a tall tree, but cliff ledges, old buildings and pylons may be used. Nests are occasionally placed on or near the ground. The nest resembles that of the Common Raven, but is less bulky. The four to six brown-speckled blue or eggs are incubated for 17-19 days by the female alone, who is fed by the male. The young fledge after 32-36 days.

It is not uncommon for an offspring from the previous years to stay around and help rear the new hatchlings. It will not, itself, take a mate but will instead search for food and assist the parents with feeding the young.

CUTRETTOLA

Motacilla flava



The Blue-headed Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) is a small passerine in the wagtail family Motacillidae, which also includes the pipits and longclaws.

This species breeds in much of temperate Europe and Asia and has a foothold in North America in Alaska. It is resident in the milder parts of its range, such as western Europe, but northern and eastern populations migrate to Africa and south Asia. The American population, sometimes separated as the Eastern Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla tschutschensis*, winters further down the Pacific coast.

This is an insectivorous bird of open country near water, such as wet meadows. It nests in tussocks, laying 4-8 speckled eggs.

This is a slender 15-16 cm long bird, with the characteristic long, constantly wagging tail of its genus. It is the shortest tailed of the European wagtails. The breeding adult male is

basically brown above and yellow below. In other plumages, the yellow may be diluted by white.

The heads of breeding males come in a variety of colours and patterns depending on subspecies.

The nominate *M. f. flava* of western Europe has a blue-grey head with a white supercilium.

The British subspecies, the Yellow Wagtail (*M. f. flavissima*) has a yellow head with a brighter yellow supercilium.

Nominate Blue-headed Wagtail and Yellow Wagtail form a narrow hybrid zone in northern France. Birds from this zone vary in appearance, but one type, which resembles nominate Blue-headed Wagtail (except that the blue tones to the head are paler and more mauve and the white of the head is more extensive, particularly on the throat, ear-coverts, and supercilium) is colloquially referred to as Channel Wagtail.

Black-headed Wagtail (ssp. *feldegg*) of southeast Europe has a jet-black cap.

FOLAGA

Fulica

atra



The Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*), or just Coot, is a member of the rail and crane bird family, the Rallidae.

It breeds across much of the Old World on freshwater lakes and ponds. It is resident in the milder parts of its range, but migrates further south and west from much of Asia in winter as the waters freeze.

The Coot is much less secretive than most of the rail family, and can be seen swimming on open water or walking across waterside grasslands. It is an aggressive species, and strongly territorial during the breeding season.

It is reluctant to fly and when taking off runs across the water surface with much splashing. They do the same, but without actually flying, when travelling a short distance at speed in territorial disputes. As with many rails, its weak flight does not inspire confidence, but on migration, usually at night, it can cover surprisingly large distances. It bobs its head as it swims, and makes short dives from a little jump.

The Coot is 36-42 cm long, and is largely black except for the white facial shield (which gave rise to the phrase "as bald as a coot"). As a swimming species, the Coot has partial webbing on its long strong toes. The juvenile is paler than the adult, has a whitish breast, and lacks the facial shield; the adult black plumage develops when about 3-4 months old, but the white shield is only fully developed at about one year old, some time later.

This species builds a nest of dead reeds and grasses near the water's edge or on underwater obstacles protruding from the water, laying up to 10 eggs.

The Coot is an omnivore, and will take a variety of small live prey including the eggs of other water birds.

This is a noisy bird with a wide repertoire of crackling, explosive or trumpeting calls, often given at night.

The Eurasian Coot is one of the species to which the *Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds* (AEWA) applies.

FRINGUELLO

Fringilla coelebs



The Chaffinch, (*Fringilla coelebs*), is a small passerine bird in the finch family Fringillidae. Its large double white wing bars, white tail edges and greenish rump easily identify this 14-16 cm long species. The breeding male is unmistakable, with his reddish underparts and a grey cap. The female is drabber and greener, but still obvious.

This bird is widespread and very familiar throughout Europe. It is the most common finch in western Europe. Its range extends into western Asia, northwestern Africa, the Canary Islands and Madeira. On Tenerife and Gran Canaria, it coexists with its sister species, the endemic Blue Chaffinch.

uses a range of habitats, but open woodland is favoured, although it is common in gardens and on farmland. It builds its nest in a tree fork, and decorates the exterior with moss or lichen to make it less conspicuous. It lays about six eggs.

This bird is not migratory in the milder parts of its range, but vacates the colder regions in winter. The *coelebs* part of its name means "bachelor". This species was named by Linnaeus; in his home country of Sweden, where the females depart in winter, but the males often remain. This species forms loose flocks outside the breeding season, sometimes mixed with Bramblings. This bird occasionally strays to eastern North America, although some sightings may be escapees.

The food of the Chaffinch is seeds, but unlike most finches, the young are fed extensively on insects.

The powerful song is very well known, and its *fink* or *vink* sounding call gives the finch family its English name. Males typically sing two or three different song types, and there are regional dialects too.

The acquisition by the young Chaffinch of its song was the subject of an influential study by British ethologist William Thorpe. Thorpe determined that if the Chaffinch is not exposed to the adult male's song during a certain critical period after hatching, it will never properly learn the song. He also found that in adult Chaffinches, castration eliminates song, but injection of testosterone induces such birds to sing even in November, when they are normally silent (Thorpe 1958).

In a number of countries such as Belgium, the Chaffinch is a popular pet bird, although it is nowadays forbidden to catch the birds in the wild. In some areas of Western Belgium, finching (also called finch singing contests or finch song contests or vinken-zetting) is a quite popular sport. In a finching contest, a number of cages each housing a male finch are lined up, usually along a street. Every time the bird sings its song (which should be the correct tune!) this is marked with a chalk stripe on a wooden stick, and the bird singing its song the most times during one hour wins the contest.

Vinken-zetting, from the Dutch for *finch-sitting*, is a traditional sport played primarily in the Flemish regions of Belgium. Participants sit in front of caged finches and count how many times each finch sings a particular birdsong (most often transcribed as *suske-wiet*).

The oldest known records of vinken-zetting are from 1593; however, it is believed to be considerably older, as the 1593 records were in a context implying that any reader would already be familiar with it.

By the late nineteenth century, vinken-zetting's popularity had diminished significantly; however, it saw a resurgence after the First World War, largely because of the large number of newly-blinded veterans who considered themselves unable to participate in other sports. As of 2006, it is estimated that there are over 13000 vinkenier, or "finch-holders".

GALLINELLA D'ACQUA

Gallinula chloropus



The Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) is a bird in the rail family with an almost worldwide distribution outside Antarctica and Australasia. In North America it was previously called the Common Gallinule.

This is a common breeding bird in marshy environments and well-vegetated lakes. It is often secretive, but can become tame in some areas. Populations in areas where the waters freeze, such as southern Canada, the northern USA and eastern Europe, will migrate to more temperate climates.

This is a distinctive species, with dark plumage apart from the white undertail, yellow legs and a red facial shield. The young are browner and lack the red shield. It has a wide range of gargling calls.

This species will consume a wide variety of vegetable material and small aquatic creatures. They forage while swimming, sometimes upending to feed, or walking through the marsh.

The nest is a roofed basket built on the ground in dense vegetation. 8-12 eggs are laid, which are incubated for about three weeks. Both parents incubate and feed the young. More than one brood may be raised in a year.

Despite loss of habitat in parts of its range, this bird remains common and widespread.

GERMANO REALE

Anas platyrhynchos



The Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*, Greek for "flat billed duck"), also known in North America as the Wild Duck, is a common and widespread dabbling duck which breeds throughout the temperate and sub-tropical areas of North America, Europe and Asia. It also frequents Central America and the Caribbean, and has been introduced into Australia and New Zealand. It is now the most common duck in New Zealand. It is probably the best-known of all ducks.

This dabbling duck is 56-65 cm length, with an 81–98 cm wingspan, and weighs 750–1000 g. It is strongly migratory in the northern parts of its breeding range, and winters farther south. It is highly gregarious outside of the breeding season and will form large flocks. They are exceptionally fast flyers for their size, reaching speeds of 65 km/h (40 mph).

The breeding male is unmistakable, with a green head, black rear end and a blue speculum edged with white, obvious in flight or at rest. Males also possess a yellow bill with a black tip, whereas females have a dark brown bill.

The female Mallard is light brown, with plumage much like most female dabbling ducks. It can be distinguished from other ducks, by the distinctive speculum. In non-breeding (eclipse) plumage, the drake looks more like the female.

It is a bird of most wetlands, including parks, small ponds and rivers, and usually feeds by dabbling for plant food or grazing. It nests usually on a river bank, but not always particularly near water.

This is a noisy species. The male has a nasal call, whereas the female has the very familiar "quack" always associated with ducks.

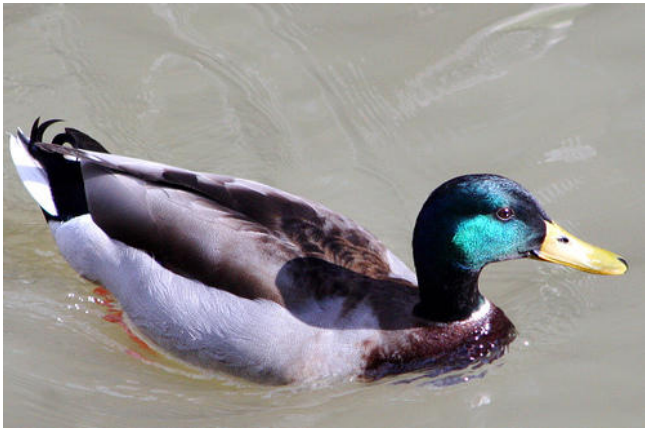
Mallards frequently interbreed with the American Black Duck, Northern Pintail and domesticated species, leading to various hybrids. A Mallard has been recorded as living for 29 years.

The Mallard is one of the rare examples of both Allen's Rule and Bergmann's Rule in birds. Bergmann's Rule, which states that polar forms tend to be larger than related ones from warmer climates, has numerous examples in birds. Allen's Rule is that appendages like ears tend to be smaller in polar forms, to minimize heat loss, and larger in tropical and desert equivalents to facilitate heat diffusion, and that the polar taxa are stockier overall. Examples of this rule in birds are rare, as they lack ears. However, the bill of ducks is very well supplied with blood vessels and vulnerable to cold.

The size of the Mallard varies clinally, and birds from Greenland, although larger than birds further south, have smaller bills and are stockier. It is sometimes separated as subspecies *Greenland Mallard* (*A. p. conboschas*).

The Mallard is one of the species to which the *Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds* applies

In captivity Mallards come in wild-type Grey patterns as well as Snowy, White, Blonde, Blue Fawn and Pastel. Although most of these colors are rare, there is a steady increase in the number of domestic collections containing these varieties. (AEWA) applies.



Mallards form pairs only until the female lays eggs, at which time she is left by the male. The clutch is 9–13 eggs, which are incubated for 27–28 days to hatching with 50–60 days to fledging. The ducklings are precocial, and can swim and feed themselves on insects as soon as they hatch, although they stay near the female for protection. Young ducklings are not naturally waterproof and rely on the

mother to provide waterproofing. Mallards also have rates of male-male sexual activity that are unusually high for birds. In some cases, as many as 19% of pairs in a Mallard population are male-male homosexual

When they pair off with mating partners, often one or several drakes will end up "left out". This group will sometimes target an isolated female duck — chasing, pestering and pecking at her until she weakens (a phenomenon referred to by researchers as *rape flight*), at which point each male will take turns copulating with the female. Male Mallards will also occasionally chase other males in the same way. (In one documented case, a male Mallard copulated with another male he was chasing after it had been killed when it flew into a glass window .

MARTIN PESCATORE
Alcedo atthis



The European Kingfisher or Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis*, is widely distributed in Europe, Africa, and Asia. It is resident except in northern areas where the rivers freeze. It will then move to milder regions. In most of its European range it is the only kingfisher.

The general colour of the upper parts of the adult bird is bright metallic blue, cobalt on the back, and showing greenish reflections on the head and wings. The ear coverts and under parts are warm chestnut, the chin and sides of neck white.

The bill is black and reddish orange at the base; the legs are bright red. In the young the bill is black. Length averages 19 cm (7.5 inches) and wings average 7.5 cm (2.95 inches).

The flight of the Kingfisher is rapid, the short rounded wings whirring until they appear a mere blur. It usually flies near the water, but during courtship the male chases the female through and over the trees with loud shrill whistles.

From February onwards the male has a trilling song, a modulated repetition of many whistles. He also signals with a whistle to the female when he is feeding her, this being his share of the nesting duties. This whistle is produced even when his bill is loaded with food, yet is clear and distinct. The female will reply and emerge from the nesting hole, and may fly to meet him, take the fish from him in the air, and return to the nest.

The bird has regular perches or stands from which it fishes. These may be a few inches or many feet above the water. It sits upright, its tail pointed downwards. It drops suddenly with a splash and usually returns at once with a struggling captive.

Large fish are beaten on a bough or rail; small fish and insects are promptly swallowed. A fish is usually lifted and carried by its middle, but its position is changed, sometimes by tossing it into the air, before it is swallowed head downwards.

The Kingfisher sometimes hovers over the water, with body held almost vertical, the tail and head bent slightly forward and the bill inclined downward.

It is a bird of the waterside, since it feeds entirely upon aquatic animals. It is frequent beside lakes, ponds, canals or dykes and streams.

In winter, especially when inland waters are icebound, it may move to tidal marshes and the shore, taking its stand on the mussel or limpet covered rocks and diving into the shallow pools.

Fish, aquatic insects and crustaceans are eaten. It eats numerous freshwater shrimps *Gammarus*.

The nest is a tunnel in a sandy bank, usually, though not always over water. Both birds excavate, except when an old hole of a Sand Martin or Water Vole is appropriated. Most incline upward for about three feet before the nesting chamber is reached.

There is no nest, but the six to seven or even more round white eggs are placed on a litter of fish bones and disgorged pellets. The eggs are pink. The first clutch is usually laid in

April, but second broods are often in the nest at the end of July, and an exceptional case of young in early October is recorded.

The young come to the mouth of the hole to be fed when old enough. They are at first without down and clothed with numerous small blue feathers. Their bills are steel-blue and their feet lighter colored than adults. When they leave the nest they differ little from their parents, except that the colours are duller, the spot on the neck is buff, and the grey margins to the breast feathers give a mottled appearance. Their call is then an insistent, continuous trill.

TUFFETTO

Tachybaptus ruficollis



The Little Grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, or Dabchick is, at 23-29 cm in length, the smallest European member of the grebe family of water birds.

The adults are unmistakable in summer with a reddish neck and cheeks, with a bright yellow gape. Its breeding call sounds like a horse whinnying. In winter, its size, buff plumage with a darker back and cap, and "powder puff" rear end enable identification. One Cornish bird interbred with a vagrant Pied-billed Grebe.

The juvenile has a yellow bill with a slight black tip and black and white streaks on the cheeks and sides of the neck. This yellow bill darkens as the bird matures, eventually turning black.

This bird breeds in small colonies in heavily vegetated areas of freshwater lakes across Europe, much of Asia down to New Guinea, and most of Africa. Most birds move to more open or coastal waters in winter, but it is only migratory in those parts of its range where the waters freeze.

Like all grebes, it nests on the water's edge, since its legs are set very far back and it cannot walk well. Usually four to seven eggs are laid, and the striped young are sometimes carried on the adult's back.

It is an excellent swimmer and diver, and pursues its fish prey underwater. It uses the vegetation skilfully as a hiding place.

PORCIGLIONE

Rallus aquaticus



The Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*) is a small wetland bird of the rail family. Its breeding habitat is marshes and reedbeds across Europe and Asia. It nests in a dry location in marsh vegetation, laying up to a dozen eggs. Northernmost and eastern populations are migratory, but Water Rails are permanent residents in western and southern Europe, with numbers augmented by migrants in winter. Adults are 23-26 cm long, and have mainly brown upperparts and blue-grey underparts, with black barring on the flanks. The body is flattened laterally to allow easier passage through the reeds. They have long toes, a short tail and a long (3-4.5 cm) slim reddish bill. Legs are yellowish. Immature birds are similar to the adults, but the blue-grey is replaced by buff. The downy chicks are black, as with all rails. These birds probe with their bill in mud or shallow water, also picking up food by sight. They mainly eat insects and aquatic animals. Water Rails are very secretive in the breeding season, and are then mostly heard rather than seen. They are noisy birds, with a rich variety of sounds including a distinctive pig-like squeal. They are easier to see in winter, especially if freezing conditions push them to the edge of the reedbeds.

CANNARECCIONE

Acrocephalus arundinaceus



The Great Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*, is an Old World warbler in the genus *Acrocephalus*. It breeds in Europe and westernmost temperate Asia. It is migratory, wintering in tropical Africa. It does not breed in Great Britain, but is a regular visitor.

This passerine bird is a species found in large reed beds, often with some bushes. 3-6 eggs are laid in a basket nest in reeds.

This is a large Song Thrush-sized warbler, 16-20cm in length. The adult has an unstreaked brown back and buff underparts. The forehead is flattened, and the bill is strong and pointed. It is very like a giant Reed Warbler, but with a stronger supercilium. The sexes are identical, as with most warblers, but young birds are richer buff below. Like most warblers, it is insectivorous, but will take other small prey items.

The song is very loud and far carrying. It is a slow, chattering *jit-jit-jit* with typically acrocephaline whistles and mimicry added.

SVASSO MAGGIORE

Podiceps cristatus



The Great Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus*, is a member of the grebe family of water birds.

The Great Crested Grebe is 46-51 cm long with a 59-73 cm wingspan. It is an excellent swimmer and diver, and pursues its fish prey underwater. The adults are unmistakable in summer with head and neck decorations. In winter, this is whiter than most grebes, with white above the eye, and a pink bill. It is the largest European grebe.

It breeds in vegetated areas of freshwater lakes across Europe and Asia. It is resident in the milder west of its range, but migrates from the colder regions. It winters on freshwater lakes and reservoirs or the coast.

It has an elaborate mating display. Like all grebes, it nests on the water's edge, since its legs are set very far back and it cannot walk well. Usually two eggs are laid, and the striped young are sometimes carried on the adult's back. Young grebes are capable of swimming and diving almost at hatching. The Crested Grebe feeds mainly on fish, but also little crustaceans, insects and little frogs.

This species was hunted almost to extinction in the United Kingdom in the 19th century for its head plumes, which were used to decorate hats. The RSPB was set up to help protect this species, which is again common.

TARABUSINO

Ixobrychus minutus



The Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) is a wading bird of the heron family Ardeidae.

The Little Bittern is a very small bittern. At 33-38 cm in length and a 49-58 cm wingspan it is the smallest European heron. It has a short neck, longish bill and buff underparts. The male's back and crown are black, and the wings are black with a large white patch on each wing. The female has a browner back and a buff-brown wing patch.

It is of Old World origins, breeding in much of temperate Europe and western Asia. It is a migrant, wintering in Africa. It is rare north of its breeding range.

The Little Bittern's breeding habitat is reedbeds. It nests on platforms of reeds in shrubs, and 4-8 eggs are laid. It can be difficult to see, given its skulking lifestyle and reedbed habitat.

These bitterns feed on insects, fish and amphibians.

MIGLIARINO DI PALUDE

Emberiza schoeniclus



The Reed Bunting, *Emberiza schoeniclus*, is a passerine bird in the bunting family Emberizidae, a group now separated by most modern authors from the finches, Fringillidae.

It breeds across Europe and much of temperate and northern Asia. Most birds are migrate south in winter, but those in the milder south and west of the range are resident. It is common in reedbeds and also breeds in drier open areas such as moorland and cultivation.

The Reed Bunting is a medium sized bird, 13.5-15.5 cm long, with a small but sturdy seed-eater's bill. The male has a black head and throat, white neck collar and underparts, and a heavily streaked brown back. The female is much duller, with a streaked brown head, and is more streaked below.

The familiar, if somewhat monotonous, song of the cock is a repetitive *zrip*. Its natural food consists of insects when feeding young, and otherwise seeds. The nest is in a bush or reed tussock. 4-7 eggs are laid, which show the hair-like markings characteristic of those of buntings.