

William E Beckwith's Nineteenth century Birds of Shropshire with notes on surrounding districts

John & Peter Tucker

The introductory section is an account of the man, his life and times, giving a context for his work. He had independent means and was able to devote much of his life to the study of the biological world, especially birds. The text gives an account of his family background and the social and ornithological settings of the late nineteenth century and the state of the natural environment at the time. He apparently kept no diary and the information is drawn from the public record, his printed word and what they tell of his field-work, travels, correspondents and library.

The major section of the book is the reproduction of all Beckwith's known short notes and extended papers, published between 1867 and 1893 on the subject of the birds of Shropshire bringing them together between two covers for the first time. Most significant were his second and greatly expanded series of nine "Notes on the Birds of Shropshire", published in the *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society* between 1887 and 1893, the final element posthumously. This last series was the

culmination of all his previous work and what would have become the backbone of his planned "*Birds of Shropshire*." However he died on 1 July 1892 aged 48 having completed around a half of the species accounts needed for the book.

The book measures 148mm x 210mm and comprises around 320 pages. It will be illustrated with woodcut illustrations by the celebrated Thomas Bewick, much admired by Charlotte Bronte, William Wordsworth and the great American bird artist John James Audubon. The book will therefore appear very much as it would had Beckwith completed it himself more than a century ago.

The Rook and Chimney Swallow wood engravings by Thomas Bewick have been kindly provided by the *Natural History Society of Northumbria*, Great North Museum, Hancock.

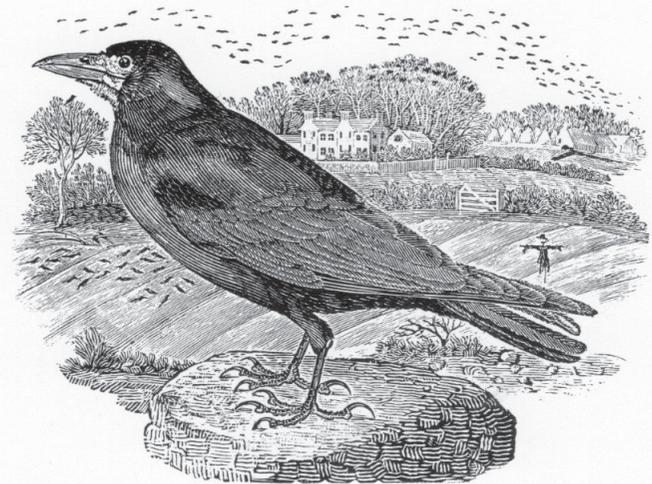
<http://www.nhsn.ncl.ac.uk>

The Historical Ornithology of Shropshire, a complete online resource of everything published about the ornithology of Shropshire is available at:

<http://www.lanius.org.uk/sos>

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and in association with the Shropshire Ornithological Society

This pre-publication offer is £20 available until the end of August, the published price will be £30

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Part 1 is an account of the life and times of William Edmund Beckwith (1844-1892), the premier Shropshire ornithologist of the nineteenth century. He died suddenly before completing draft installments of the first *Birds of Shropshire* for publication at the end of the century.

Part 2 is the major section and comprises, together for the first

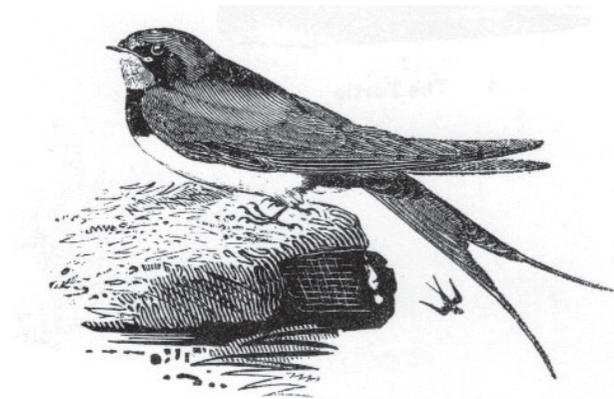
time, all Beckwith's known published writings on birds. The 17 short notes and 15 extended and detailed contributions, comprising close to 100,000 words, are presented exactly as separately published.

In the style of the nineteenth century, illustrations are wood engravings by the celebrated Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) of

Northumberland. The woodcuts first appeared in *A History of British Birds* of 1797 and 1804. Extracts of Bewick's texts are used to give a view of the time and reveal some the contemporary attitudes to birds.

The centre spread overleaf shows a sample two facing pages from the book.

The material below is taken verbatim from Thomas Bewick (1821 edition)
A History of British Birds. 1: Land Birds, page 259



THE CHIMNEY SWALLOW.

HOUSE SWALLOW.

(*Hirundo rustica*, Lin.—*L'Hirondelle domestique*, Buff.)

“Swallows soon become familiar [tame] after they have been caught ; that from which the foregoing figure was taken had been slightly wounded in the wing, so as to prevent it from flying away. It sat on the bench while the cut was engraved, and from its having been fed by the hand with flies, when sitting for its portrait, watched every motion, and at every look of the eye, when pointed directly towards it, ran close up to the engraver, in expectation of a fresh supply of food.”

NOTES ON SHROPSHIRE BIRDS.

By William E. Beckwith.

Continued from p. 198, 2nd Series, Vol. IV. Part III.

SWALLOW, *Hirundo rustica*.

The Swallows and Martins gliding through the air, like the Wagtails which brighten our fields, delight us with their graceful elegance ; and, by their winning gentle ways, gain themselves friends, even among those who care little for other birds. At the same time it is curious that, with regard to such universal favourites, so few people should discriminate between the three kinds, but should term them all indifferently Swallows.

Each species, however, exhibits, even to the ordinary observer, very marked distinctions ; and these, not only in form and plumage, but also in manner of flight. Let any one desirous of distinguishing them take his stand upon some bridge over a river, or large brook, on a warm sunny day in May ; the three kinds will soon pass underneath, and can thus be easily recognised. The Swallow, with its steely blue back, long wings, and deeply forked tail, floats along close to the surface of the water, its plumage glistening in the sunshine, as it turns again and again up and down the stream ; or, rising in the air, displays its chestnut and black throat. The House Martin, with shorter wings and tail less forked, pursues a more even course higher in the air ; and now half hovering, reveals the pure white of its under parts, or descending, shows the white rump and tail coverts which form a conspicuous patch upon its back.

The Sand Martin, again, clad in mouse colour above and white beneath, with uncertain wavering flight, more like that of a butterfly¹

¹ It will be known to our readers that the able author of these “Notes” is no more, having died the 1st July, 1892, after only two days’ illness, at his residence, Radbrook House, Shrewsbury. He had been engaged from a boy in the study of birds, more particularly those of his native county, and exhibited scrupulous care in verifying every fact that came to his knowledge. His first contribution to these Transactions was printed in Vol. I., and continued in Vols. IV., X., XI., and in the New Series, Vols I., II., III., and IV. His sister, Miss Beckwith, has kindly sent us all the MS. he had prepared for the Press previous to his lamented death, which completes his “Notes” as far as the Black Grouse (*Tetrao tetrix*).—Editors.]