

ON THE POSITION OF THE GENUS
EPHTHIANURA.

[BY COL. W. V. LEGGE, R.A., F.Z.S.]

THIS singular and interesting genus, which is located by Gould next to *Acanthiza*, finds a place in the 7th Vol. of Sharpe's "Catalogue of Birds," among the somewhat heterogeneous family of the *Timeliidæ*. This family is reserved by the author for a large number of "Turdiform" birds with hollow-shaped wings, many of which are allied in some points to the thrushes, warblers, and fly-catchers, but cannot well be placed with them, owing to existing features of dissimilarity. In the Catalogue, *Ephthianura* is associated with *Accentor*, the typical species of which is the well-known Hedge Sparrow of Europe, the two genera forming the group *Accentores*. It is open to question whether either of these genera should be placed on the *Timeliidæ*,—they have neither the external structure nor the habits of the typical members of this family; but the tendency of the author of the "Catalogue of Birds" has been to relegate to this family any bird which cannot well be placed elsewhere in the Turdiform section of the *Passeres*, until it has become an unwieldy and somewhat heterogeneous one. The position of *Accentor* in this family has been unfavourably commented upon, and I cannot but think that *Ephthianura* is equally out of place in it.

As a matter of fact, this is one of the most puzzling forms in the whole list of Australian avifauna; and to the cabinet naturalist, who has not the advantage of observing its habits, its true position must be very difficult to determine. Its straight compressed bill, devoid of any notch at the tip, and its somewhat lengthened and slender legs, with a moderately long hind toe and claw, recall, to some extent, the pipits and wagtails, to some of which latter birds its plumage has a resemblance. The wing is, however, thrush-like, straight and pointed, and with a diminutive first-primary, which at once removes the bird from the 9-quilled *Passeres*, among which the wagtails take their place. To determine, therefore, its position among the 10-quilled *Passeres*, we must call to our aid the testimony furnished by its habits. Its actions and deportment, and its flight, in a small degree, are chat-like. It frequents low ground in open places, and perches on the tops of low bushes, or on a fence or mound, from which it often gives forth its singular little note; but nevertheless there is wanting the motion of the tail, which is a characteristic of the more-typical chats. Notwithstanding the absence of this feature, however, it would seem to be

allied to the *Saxicolidæ*, a group which some systematists place with the warblers, and others next to them. Its structural characteristics, above alluded to, combined with its chat-like habits, lead to this conclusion, and I have therefore located it with the *Sylviidæ*, or Warblers; but, at the same time, on account of its somewhat aberrant features, placed it a distinct sub-family—*Ephthianurinae*.

The sub-family comprised three species, appertaining to the genus *Ephthianura*. They are—*E. albifrons*, Jard. and Selby; *E. aurifrons*, Gould; *E. tricolor*, Gould; all three being more or less migratory. Our bird, *E. albifrons*, arrives here in September, commencing to breed soon after its appearance, and departs in March. It is not uncommon in the Hobart district; but, singularly enough, it has not been recorded from the North, past which it must migrate to come here.