

CHAPTER V.

Length of Day—Sedge Warbler—Different Birds near Loch Naver—Ben Cleebriek—Rain—Loch Maddie—Frost—Ben Laighal—Foxes—Sheep Killing—Catching Wild-ducks—Peregrine Falcon ; Manner of catching their Young—Golden Eagles—Tongue—Fine Scenery of Bay of Tongue and Islands—Wild-cat—Seals.

THE nights at this season are most enjoyable ; in fact, there is no darkness. I went out of the inn at midnight, and was much amused at hearing the different cries of the birds. Close to the door is a small enclosed clump of larch, where the grass and weeds are very high and rank. In this little patch it seems that a sedge warbler had made her nest. All day long had the male bird been singing to his mate, and now at midnight he was still uttering unceasingly his merry note ; I never met with so indefatigable a songster ; night or day he seemed never to weary.

Towards the loch a constant tumult was kept up amongst the waders and water-fowl. High in the air was heard the common snipe, earning his Gaelic name of “ air goat ” by his incessant bleating cry ; while redshanks, curlews, golden plovers, and peewits, all seemed to be as lively as if it had been

noon instead of midnight ; occasionally, too, both widgeon and teal were heard to whistle each after its own peculiar fashion ; and the quack of the common mallard was also constant. Now and then a note expressive of alarm was uttered by some bird, and immediately a dead silence was kept by the whole community for a few moments ; but this was soon succeeded by a greater noise than ever, particularly amongst the peewits, which seemed by their cries to be darting about the head of some intruder or enemy. Probably on these occasions a fox, wild-cat, or owl had made his appearance amongst them in search of tender food for his own young ravening brood.

Though I had to rise very early, I betook myself to bed with great regret, and left the window open in order to hear the serenade of the sedge warbler to the last moment of being awake.

Ben Cleebriek, the highest hill (or nearly so) in Sutherland, is immediately in front of the inn ; and the forester, after looking at me from head to foot, pronounced his dictum that he thought I should get to the top in two hours or so ; at any rate, that he could do it in that time. Notwithstanding the threatening look of the mist on its summit, I started, hoping to see some ptarmigan nests amongst the loose stones near the top. Dunbar warned

me that we should not succeed in reaching the summit, owing to the state of the weather; and he was correct; for, although there was an occasional clearing away of the clouds, when we were about half-way up there commenced such a determined and heavy torrent of rain that we had to give in; the whole mountain, too, was enveloped in a cloud like a wet blanket, impenetrable to the sight. For a long time we sat down under my plaid, which kept us tolerably dry (Dunbar, myself, and the dog); with nothing else to enliven us except watching the curious antics of two ravens on a great lump of rock in front of us. At last, in despair, we made our way home as quickly as we could, splashing through the rain-water which had converted the whole hill-side into pools. Near the loch-side, amongst the birch-trees, I saw a great many red-poles and other small birds.

From Aultnaharrow we drove again to Loch Maddie, where I caught some fine trout. We saw a few Gray lag geese, and found the gray crows again tenanting the nests which we had attacked three or four weeks ago. Of course I smashed every egg and killed every crow that came within my reach.

On the 10th of June the frost was so severe in Strath Naver that it cut down all the potatoes

to the ground, and even the ferns and some other wild plants near the waterside were entirely blackened. A hard white frost at this season is always supposed to be followed by heavy rain, and the saying was this time quite correct.

On our road to Tongue the following day I stopped for an hour or two about Loch Laighal, one of the most beautiful of the lakes in Sutherland. Ben Laighal is a fine and picturesque mountain, and of great extent. We learned at a shepherd's house that the fox-hunter of that district had been up on the mountain since three o'clock in pursuit of some foxes who had established themselves in the rocky corries near the summit, and had commenced killing the old sheep. It is not the general custom of foxes to destroy the old and full-grown sheep where lambs are plentiful; but a colony or pair of foxes having once commenced this habit, the mischief and havoc which they commit are beyond calculation, more particularly as they seldom tear or eat much of so large an animal, but feed on the blood. According to the accounts of the shepherds the foxes of Ben Laighal are very prone to this kind of prey, and kill the old sheep in preference to lambs or game.

The foxes in the Highland districts must frequently be put to many shifts for their living, and

no doubt become proportionally cunning. To keep himself in the fine and sleek condition in which a fox always is, many a trick and *ruse de guerre* of surpassing cleverness must be practised. The stories of their manœuvres to catch animals are endless; and, though many of them would be amusing enough, I do not like quoting as facts incidents of this kind, the authenticity of which I cannot vouch for, however much I may believe them to be true, and I must confess to being very credulous on this point. I have been assured by a person, not given at all to exaggerate nor easily deceived, that he once witnessed the following trick: Very early one morning he saw a fox eyeing most wistfully a number of wild-ducks feeding in the rushy end of a Highland lake. After due consideration, the fox, going to windward of the ducks, put afloat in the loch several bunches of dead rushes or grass, which floated down amongst the ducks without causing the least alarm. After watching the effects of his preliminary fleet for a short time, the fox, taking a good-sized mouthful of grass in his jaws, launched himself into the water as quietly as possible, having nothing but the tips of his ears and nose above water. In this way he drifted down amongst the ducks, and made booty of a fine mallard. Though this story seems extraordinary, it

must be remembered that the fox manages to capture wild-ducks, wood-pigeons, hares, and numberless other animals, sufficient to keep himself and family; and it is self-evident that in doing so he must practise many a trick and manœuvre that would seem most improbable if related, and quite beyond the instinct of animals. I have seen one in confinement lay out part of his food just within reach of his chain, in order to attract the tame ducks and chickens about the yard, and then, having concealed himself in his kennel, wait in an attitude ready to spring out till some duck or fowl came to his bait, which he immediately pounced upon. Those, too, who have trapped foxes can tell of the extreme cunning and sagacity displayed by them in avoiding danger. In fact, altogether, a fox in a state of nature is as interesting an animal as he is beautiful, and nothing can exceed the grace and agility of his movements when he is hunting or playing unobserved, as he fancies, by his enemy man. It has happened to me frequently to have opportunities of watching a fox, and I have always been unwilling to put a stop to my amusement by shooting him, which, in a country where hounds cannot be kept, one feels bound to do, as a punishment for the endless mischief which he commits.

On the east or north-east side of Loch Laighal

there is a very beautiful hill covered with wood to a considerable height, and surmounted by a curiously-formed steep cliff—the very place for an eagle's nest: I was told that a nest had been destroyed there last year.

The whole view of Ben Laighal is magnificent, and in driving round it we had the advantage of seeing it on every side. Towards the loch the mountain slopes down, covered with bright green herbage; but to the north and west nothing can surpass the savage grandeur of its rocky precipices. Viewed from Tongue, Ben Laighal is, I think, the most magnificent-looking mountain in Sutherlandshire. Our attention was attracted by the cries of the peregrine falcon, and we saw the two birds flying about a high rock. Having hailed a shepherd's boy, we learned where the nest was, and under his guidance climbed up the mountain—and a good steep climb it was—till we got within a few yards of the nest; so near, indeed, did we reach,¹ that with two joints of my fishing-rod I could just touch the young birds, who were sitting eyeing us boldly and fearlessly on a ledge of rock where the nest was placed. When, however, we attempted to push them out of the nest, they retired farther in, where they were in tolerable security. All the time we were there the old

birds flew screaming over our heads. I did not think of a plan that is adopted sometimes to capture young peregrine falcons when the nest cannot be reached without danger. It is very simple, and succeeds with all the courageous kinds of hawks. A person having reached the top of the rock immediately above the nest, ties a rough blue bonnet, or some similar substance, to a bundle of heather the size of a man's head; then dropping this attached to a rope upon the nest, the young falcons, instead of being frightened, immediately attack it, and, sticking their talons into the cap, hold on courageously and determinedly till they are dragged up to the top of the cliff. Even then it is sometimes necessary to cut the cap to pieces before they will relinquish their hold. In this way the young birds are captured without risk to the capturer or injury to themselves. Indeed, on the present occasion I was not very anxious to get them, as they would probably only have been destroyed in travelling.

Between Loch Laighal and Tongue, on driving round the corner of a rock, we suddenly came upon two golden eagles who were hunting close to the road. They were nearly within shot of us; so, leaving the horse and carriage to take care of themselves, we jumped out, gun in hand, to try to get

shots at them. Two or three times the birds swooped down, and one of them carried off some bird, probably a grouse, taking it far away round the cliffs of Ben Laighal. The other eagle then made a sudden swoop down to the ground, within a hundred yards of us, but just behind a small hillock; we ran to the place, confident of getting the bird, but arrived just in time to see the eagle carrying off its prey, whatever it was, in the same direction as that taken by its mate, in all probability straight to the nest.

Reaching the brow of a hill, we came in full view of the fine plantations and bay of Tongue. Beautiful and refreshing to the eye were the woods and cultivated fields of Tongue, bursting into view suddenly as they did, after some days' travelling through the rugged wilds of the interior of Sutherland. The beautiful bay was as smooth as glass, the timber growing to the water's edge; and the whole scene was made still more striking by the abrupt and precipitous outline of the headlands both of the mainland and the islands at the mouth of the Kyle. It is worth a journey of many miles to see the Kyle of Tongue alone.

Tongue House, formerly the residence of Lord Reay, the then proprietor of a magnificent range of mountain property, is one of the most beautiful places of the sort that I ever saw. The house itself

is irregular, but picturesque; and the gardens, overlooking the sea, are warm, sheltered, and most enjoyable in every respect. The fruit, flowers, and vegetables were growing with as much luxuriance, and were nearly as forward as I should have expected to have seen had they been situated in the southern instead of the northern extremity of the island; while the fine avenues and groves of elm and other trees would do credit to any place in England. All this, combined with the wild outline of rocks and cliffs which nearly surround the bay, and the magnificent precipices of Ben Laighal—all this combined, I say, formed a coup d'œil, which, though it may be equalled, can scarcely be surpassed in any country. I understood from Mr. Horsburgh, the Duke of Sutherland's factor in this district, that his Grace contemplates making a harbour within the Kyle of Tongue.

The keeper pointed out to me from near the inn the sites of two eagles' nests in the rocks of Ben Laighal, and a more appropriate or fitting locale for eyries I never saw.

At the entrance to the bay are some islands—one named Roan Island, or the Seal Island; and the others are called the Rabbit Islands, from being tenanted by numbers of these animals. The rabbits, however, must there be of little use, excepting as

food to birds of prey. In the winter the eagles and hawks feed greatly upon them. The eider-ducks also breed on these islands, and are so tame when nesting that they allow themselves to be lifted off their nest, and the down of which it is formed to be taken away without deserting it. I saw a few eider-ducks swimming about in the bay, amongst numerous cormorants and other birds. The rocks along the coast are inhabited by a great number of wild-cats, otters, etc., who live here in tolerable peace, as the game is not much looked after excepting in particular localities. Indeed, the ground near the coast here is not well adapted for grouse. The keeper showed me at his house an immense cat, which he said was bred between a tame and a wild cat; and though such an occurrence is very rare, I am sure that he was correct in this instance. The animal showed certain peculiarities of his wild father's race, in the size and shape of his head, the shortness and roughness of his tail; and in other points had a likeness to the wild-cat, which, though difficult to explain, was unmistakable. I have seen this resemblance to both parents in mules of different kinds, such as a mule between blackcock and pheasant, or pheasant and common fowl, in all which birds something catches an accustomed eye which immediately points out what the parents

were. The cat, too, belonging to Ross, the keeper at Tongue, had peculiar wildness and antipathy to strangers, not suffering himself to be caressed, or indeed scarcely to be looked at, by any one excepting the keeper's wife, for whom the animal showed great attachment. When I entered the house he bolted out, and it was with difficulty that Mrs. Ross caught him; and when she brought him in again in her arms, the animal showed the greatest fear of and animosity to me, and was constantly endeavouring to escape.

It was delightful to hear in the plantations at Tongue the coo of the wood-pigeon and the songs of thrush, siskin, etc. etc. The trees seemed to be full of birds, most of which, to reach these woods, must have wandered over many miles of ground very uncongenial to their habits and tastes. Indeed it is difficult to understand how many of the birds, such as the golden-crested wren, the little blue titmouse, etc., could ever have found their way here. The landrails too seemed to be numberless; in every patch of corn they were calling and answering each other in such quantities, that it was impossible to tell how many were croaking at once. I also heard two or three goatsuckers (*Caprimulgus*) making their whirring noise about the stone walls and belts of plantations. All

night the sedge-warbler was cheering his mate with his sweet and constant song.

I saw some seals playing the most extraordinary gambols in the smooth water. The sea was as calm as possible, and like a mirror everywhere, excepting where these animals were swimming after each other in a circle, so rapidly that their track resembled a complete whirlpool. Occasionally they lifted themselves perpendicularly up in the water, showing half their bodies, and looking as like the representation of a mermaid as possible.

I should have liked to prolong my stay had it been in my power to do so, as there is much to interest the visitor, both in the varied and magnificent scenery of land and water, and also in the numerous wild animals, common enough here, but rare in the more southern parts of the country.

