

CHAPTER IX.

List continued—Game Birds ; Destruction of by Shepherds—
Plovers—Sandpipers and Snipes, etc.—Water-fowl ; Swans,
Geese, varieties of Ducks, Grebes, Terns, Gulls, etc.—
Decrease of many kinds of birds—Egg Dealers.

THE next class of birds inhabiting Sutherlandshire that I will enumerate are those more immediately coming under the denomination of game.

84. First among which is the *Blackcock*, certainly the finest game bird of Britain. In the numerous and extensive plantations of the Duke of Sutherland this bird abounds, and extends throughout the county wherever it has the least protection from vermin and shepherds, and wherever there are any patches of wood. I saw several near the shore of Loch Laighal. It is, however, a bird easily destroyed. The shepherds and their boys generally carry guns, under the excuse of shooting foxes (which they never *do*), and in consequence black game and everything that is eatable fall a prey to these men at all seasons of the year, whilst gray crows and other destructive birds pass by unharmed.

85. *Grouse*, of course, abound only where vermin

are kept under. In the north and north-west districts of the county, excepting in one or two small districts, grouse are very rare indeed. In Assynt, where a clever keeper and trapper is kept, these birds have increased rapidly within a few years. The Duke of Sutherland, I believe, only preserves that part of the country nearer to Dunrobin, and which is within reach of his friends. Even if all his immense territory were preserved and protected from vermin, etc., a great part of it, from its distance, would be useless as shooting-ground. No bird is handsomer or more game-like than a cock grouse in the spring-time, as he struts and crows with erect comb on some hillock, scarcely taking notice of the passer-by.

86. The *Ptarmigan* is tolerably numerous on the more lofty ranges of mountains, such as Ben Hee, Ben Cleebriek, Ben Laighal, and many others, the summits of which this bird frequents, seldom coming down to the heather, but living, a true child of the mist, above all vegetation, amongst the rocks and loose stones. The *Ptarmigan* requires protection as well as the grouse, more particularly from shepherds and their boys.

87. The *Common Pheasant* is nowhere very abundant in Sutherland; in the lower districts, near Dunrobin, there are some, but no great

number, sufficient, however, to make a beautiful variety in the game of the county.

88. *Partridges*, on the contrary, are very numerous in all the southern range, where the finely-cultivated fields, bordering on the young plantations, offer every advantage for their breeding. I have occasionally seen partridges in very wild parts of Sutherland, where no bird but grouse would be looked for.

89. The *Quail* appears occasionally near Dunrobin. This bird may be here oftener than is supposed; for, arriving when the wheat is at a sufficient height to conceal it, seldom taking wing, and departing before the crops are well off the ground, its presence can only be known by its peculiar call or whistle.

90. The *Landrail*, as I have before said, is in every corner of the county where it can find a patch of corn. I heard it at Tongue in great numbers; also at Heilam Ferry in a small patch of oats. The gamekeeper at Tongue told me that he kills it frequently during the winter.

From the landrail one naturally comes to that class of birds which comprise the plovers, etc.

91. The *Golden Plover* is very numerous in all the higher districts during the breeding season. Its eggs are beautifully marked and very large in

proportion to the size of the bird. I saw these plovers on all the elevated moors: in winter they collect and descend towards the shores.

92. The *Dotterel*, a rare bird anywhere, breeds on Cleebriek, but is by no means numerous.

93. The *Ring Dotterel* is very numerous, breeding near the lakes and streams, and also near the sea-shore: they leave the inland parts of the country entirely on the approach of winter.

94. The *Peewit* or *Lapwing* is numerous everywhere from the end of February to the end of October.

95. The *Turnstone* is only a visitor, not breeding here.

96. The *Godwit*.

97. The *Sanderling*.

98. The *Knot*, and a great variety of *waders* and *sandpipers* which, not being thoroughly acquainted with throughout all their changes of plumage, I cannot enumerate, swarm on all the sandy and muddy creeks and bays of the county. It would require many years, and a most accomplished naturalist, to describe accurately all the varieties that are to be found on these coasts. I am confident that, at different times, almost every known kind of shore-bird could be procured.

99. The *Oyster-catcher* breeds here and re-

mains during the winter, always finding a good supply of food.

100. The *Curlew*, too, breeds on all the high moors, and takes to the shore in the winter.

101. The *Dunlin*, and

102. *Common Sandpiper*, also breed near most of the lakes and streams.

103. The *Jack-snipe* is said to breed in one or two localities, as is also

104. The *Great Snipe* (*Scolopax major*); but I never was quite satisfied with the authenticity of these accounts, particularly as regards the jack-snipe; for the very man whom I was referred to as having seen this bird breeding (Mr. Ross, the keeper at Tongue) distinctly assured me that it *never* had been seen in that country in the breeding season.

105. The *Common Snipe* breeds in every locality suited to its habits.

106. The *Woodcock*, of late years, has commenced breeding also in most of the large woods, laying four large eggs, similar in colour to those of the snipe.

107. The *Redshank* breeds also very commonly in all marshy parts of the hills.

108. The *Greenshank* is not so common, but I saw it breeding about Loch Naver, Loch Laighal, and in many other places throughout the county.

109. The *Water-rail* is not uncommon in the winter, but from its retired habits is seldom seen : it may perhaps breed in the larger tracts of reeds and rushes, though I have never heard of its nest being found.

110. The *Whimbrel* breeds in the northern and most retired parts of the country ; I saw several on the island of Handa in the month of June.¹

111. The *Heron* is common everywhere, though the only breeding-place that I know of is near Louberoy, on the Oykel river, where these birds breed on an island in a loch situated some two miles from the roadside.

112. The *Bittern* is rare : but I have heard its cry near Shinness, on Loch Shin.

113. That very pretty and elegant little bird the *Red-necked Phalarope* is found in the breeding season, but only rarely. I saw a pair close to Loch Naver in the month of June : they evidently had a nest not far from the spot.

The varieties of water-fowl are very numerous, and no doubt the county is visited by nearly every known European species at different seasons.

114. The *Common Wild Swan*, and

115. *Bewick's Swan*, are not uncommon during the winter. Their appearance in any of the sea-

¹ See Appendix, page 354.

lochs, such as Loch Erriboll, is considered to foretell severe weather.

116. The *Gray Lag Goose* breeds in Loch Maddie, Loch Laighal, Loch Urigil, etc.; but I am sorry to see that these fine birds have every chance of being entirely driven away from their haunts.

117. The *Bean Goose* breeds on Loch Shin. [?]

118. The *White-fronted Goose* is a winter visitor, and the rarest and handsomest species that frequents this country.

119. The *Brent Goose* comes to most of the inlets of the sea in immense numbers during the winter: it is one of the best wild-fowl for the table.

120. The *Bernicle Goose*, though an occasional visitor, is much more rare than the last-named species. The brent goose is more frequent on the east coast, while the bernicle keeps to the western side of the county.

121. The *Sheldrake* breeds very commonly about the sandy parts of the coast.

122. The *Pintail*, a very beautiful bird, visits this county in the winter.

123. The *Common Mallard* is everywhere to be found, as is its miniature likeness,

124. The *Teal*, during the whole year.

125. The *Widgeon* breeds in a few localities—

for instance, near Loch Naver : in the winter it is one of the most numerous of all wild-fowl.

126. The *Eider Duck* breeds on some islands at the entrance of the Kyle of Tongue.

127. The *King Duck* is seen in the same district, but only rarely.

128. The *Velvet Duck* is in abundance during the winter on the east coast.

129. The *Common Pochard*,

130. The *Scaup Duck*,

131. The *Golden Eye*, are all common during the winter; the latter is said to breed here occasionally: I saw a pair about the 15th of May in Loch Laighal.

132. The *long-tailed Duck* is very numerous on the east coast during the winter.

133. The *Merganser* breeds about some of the lakes near Scowrie and elsewhere.

134. The *Goosander* also is not uncommon.

135. The *Slavonian Grebe*, and

136. The *Little Grebe*, are permanent inhabitants: the latter is to be found in most localities.

137. The *Great Northern Diver* frequents the northern parts of the county. I saw this bird near Durness about the 14th of May. The people tell me that it is frequently seen about that coast accompanied by a young one, apparently

just hatched; its nest, however, has not been found.

138. The *Black-throated Diver* is gradually diminishing in number, but still breeds in the lakes of Assynt, Loch Laighal, and elsewhere.

139. The *Red-throated Diver* breeds also in the northern parts of the county.

140. The *Foolish Guillemot* breeds in countless numbers on the island of Handa and elsewhere.

141. The *Black Guillemot* is much rarer, but I saw it near the same island in June.

142. The *Puffin* is also numerous in Handa, etc.; as is

143. The *Razor-bill*.

144. The *Little Auk* is a winter and occasional visitor.

145. The *Cormorant*, and

146. The *Shag*, breed in many different places along the coast. I saw great numbers of them about Whiten Head, Handa, etc. etc.

147. The *Gannet* breeds on some rocks off the northern coasts.

Of Terns I have seen the following varieties:—

148. The *Roseate Tern*.

149. The *Common Tern*.

150. The *Arctic Tern*.

151. The *Lesser Tern*;

and no doubt there are many other varieties.

152. The *Black-headed Gull* breeds on inland lakes in great numbers.

153. The *Kittiwake Gull* breeds on the rocky cliffs of Handa and elsewhere.

154. The *Common Gull* breeds also in great numbers on the rocky coasts and on different islands.

155. The *Greater black-backed Gull*, and

156. The *Lesser black-backed Gull*, breed in great numbers on different lochs: I particularly observed both kinds on Loch Laighal. No doubt many other species of the sea-gull and skua, besides a great variety of wild-fowl, visit this county at different seasons; but I am determined only to enumerate those that I have seen myself. No part of Britain, or indeed scarcely of Europe, is better adapted for a resting-place for migratory birds on their way to and from their more northern breeding-places; and the extensive lakes and wilds afford shelter to many that are not generally known to remain in Britain during the summer. The numerous bays and inlets of the sea, leaving at low water great tracts of sand and mud, afford food during the winter for innumerable wild-fowl and waders.

Many of the finer kinds both of land and water-birds certainly are becoming almost extinct, being hunted down by both gamekeepers and egg-dealers,

the latter being frequently a set of mercenary and ignorant men, deceived themselves and deceiving others as to the kind of eggs which they offer for sale ; and, instead of furthering the knowledge of natural history, rendering it more obscure by passing off one egg for another, and having recourse to as many tricks as a horse-jockey in selling their specimens, which are often bought by people who have not the slightest knowledge of the natural history of the bird whose eggs they fancy that they are buying.

