

## CHAPTER XXIX.

The Landrail; Arrival and Habits of — Cuckoo — Swift — Associations connected with Birds — Enjoyment of Life by Birds — Falcons — Water-Fowl; their different modes of Swimming — Wild-fowl shooting — Wounded Ducks — Retrievers; care which should be taken of them — Plumage of Water-Fowl; its imperviousness to wet; the cause and limits of this.

THE landrail is one of the most numerous and most regular of our birds of passage. For several seasons the 1st of May has been the earliest day on which I have noticed them. At first I hear a single bird or two croaking in some small patch of early wheat or long clover: their numbers then increase rapidly every day. In the early morning I see them along the sides of the paths, and more particularly near grassy ditches. The rapidity with which this bird threads its way through thickly-growing clover is astonishing. With head crouched to the ground it glides, in a horizontal position, almost with the quickness of an arrow, scarcely moving the grass as it passes through it. One moment he is at your feet, and the next he is standing far off, with erect head and neck, and

croaking with a voice of brass. By the end of May or the beginning of June every field is full of them ; and the noise they make during the night time, or after a shower of rain, is incessant. By the middle of August they become quiet ; and the corn being high, they are then seldom seen. Before the crops are carried they have almost entirely disappeared, having left the country quietly and unseen. Sometimes during the shooting season a landrail rises in some very unexpected place, and they are then as fat as it is possible for a bird to be. On their first arrival also they are in good condition, till the business of breeding commences, when they become comparatively lean.

Though the voice of the landrail is *per se* so peculiarly harsh and grating, there are few birds whose note falls more pleasantly on my ear—associated as it is with the glad season of spring and summer. The monotonous cry of the cuckoo has nothing delightful in it beyond recalling to the mind pleasing ideas of spring and woody glades ; yet I believe every one listens to this bird with pleasure. From seeing and hearing so many of them about the wild rocks and glens of Scowrie and Assynt, the cuckoo now always brings that rugged district before my eyes, instead of the tranquil groves where I formerly had seen it. The nest, which of all others the

knaveish cuckoo prefers to lay her eggs in, is that of the titlark ; and in Scowrie and Assynt those birds abound.

Another bird, whose cry is invariably associated by me with one kind of locality, is the swift. I never hear the loud scream of this bird without having some well-remembered steeple or other lofty building brought vividly before my mind's eye : thus, also, the martin and swallow recall the recollection of some favourite stream, whose waters abound in trout, and whose banks swarm with the May-fly and grey drake.

The crow of the grouse is as inseparable in my mind from the mountains of Scotland, as the song of the ring-ousel is from its birch-covered glens, or the spring call of the peewit from the marshy meadows.

There is, I think, great pleasure in thus recollecting by the sounds and notes of living animals scenes which the eye has dwelt upon with delight, and so constant is every bird to its own locality, that the associations thus called forth are invariably correct.

In preserving game, quiet and food are the two things to be attended to. No animals will remain in places where they are frequently disturbed ; vicinity to favourable feeding-ground is also a *sine quâ*

*non.* In large and extensive tracts of wood where there are miles of unbroken forest, birds are always rare, excepting indeed some of the far wandering hawks, whose strong wings enable them to pass over miles of country with little exertion. Even birds of prey are more inclined to take up their abode near the outskirts of a wood than in its densest solitudes.

In winter large flocks of the long-tailed titmouse, the golden-crested wren, and other birds of similar insect-searching habits, flit from tree to tree, passing in an unbroken multitude for hours together, hanging in every possible attitude from the branches while searching for their minute prey, and enlivening the solitude with their bright wings, and with their merry chirp, so expressive of pleasure, as they flutter from tree to tree. I believe that all wild birds live in a state of constant enjoyment when unmolested by animals of prey, biped or quadruped, and even then their terror or pain is but of short duration, having no anticipation of the coming evil, or much remembrance of it if fortunately they escape. The snows of winter sometimes indeed shut up their sources of food, but it is rare, at least in this country, that plenty of open ground is not left for the wants of all the wild animals.

The falcon at earliest daybreak, after enjoying

for a short time the morning sun, shakes her feathers once or twice, plumes her wings, and then launching herself into the air, passes with straight and direct flight to the most favourable hunting-ground. Some unfortunate grouse or plover is soon struck down. The first act of a falcon on striking and catching a bird is, if any life remains, to dislocate its neck ; and thus its pain is immediately over. Oftener, however, the falcon strikes her chace while in the air, killing it perfectly dead instantaneously. Indeed all the long-winged hawks prefer striking their prey in the air, seldom dashing, with the same confidence, at a bird on the ground. Having well filled her crop, the falcon flies back to some favourite stone, or projection of rock on the cliffs, and there sits in a state of quiet satisfaction for the rest of the day, perched in a situation where no danger can approach her unperceived.

There must be great enjoyment too in the flight of the eagle and buzzard, as they soar and float for hours together at a height that makes them appear no bigger than a lark. The latter bird too seems the very personification of happiness, as, uttering its merry and sweet song, it mounts higher and higher till lost to sight.

But no birds seem to enjoy life more than water-fowl ; floating without exertion in perfect security

in the midst of a calm lake, or riding, as buoyant as a cork, on the waves of the sea.

When looking at wild fowl on the water, it is generally easy to distinguish what kind they are, even from a great distance. Scarcely any two species swim or float in the same manner, and at the same elevation above the surface of the water. Coots and sea-gulls float like bladders, with scarcely any of their body immersed: so much so that it is almost impossible to mistake one of the former at any distance at which a bird can be distinguished. The divers, such as the cormorant, the black-throated diver and others of the same kind, swim very flat in the water, showing scarcely any part except the top of their back, and their head and neck, which all these birds carry straight and erect, seldom or never bending and arching their throat like ducks or geese. In consequence of their swimming so low in the water it is difficult to kill any of these diving birds, unless you can get at them from a rock or height above them. Widgeon swim rather flat and low in the water. Mallards and teal keep more of their bodies above it, and are in consequence easier to kill while swimming. Pochards, scaup ducks, and others of that kind swim higher still, but are very strong swimmers and difficult to catch when only winged, diving incessantly, and going out to the

middle of the lake or pond, unlike the teal or mallard, who invariably, when winged or otherwise wounded, make for the land, if the sportsman keeps out of sight, and endeavour to hide themselves in the grass at the water's edge. Geese when winged dive with far greater quickness and facility than would be expected, and I have had very great trouble in catching a wild goose on a lake, after I had knocked her down, although I was rowing in a light and easily-managed boat. Careful observation of the different manner of swimming adopted by the several kinds of wild fowl when wounded is of the greatest use to the sportsman, saving him and his retriever many a weary and often useless wetting. Even with the best water-dog it is frequently of no avail to attempt to catch winged ducks of any kind. In cold weather, when the water is rough and the birds get a good start in an open lake, it is not only loss of time but is cruel to urge your dog to follow them too long. I have often succeeded in bagging winged ducks, widgeon, and teal by walking round the edge of the lochs an hour or two after I had shot them, as the birds when left to themselves, the rest of the flock having gone away, either leave the water and hide in the grass or else come close to the edge.

It occasionally happens in a small pool that a

winged wild duck goes under and never appears again, having become entangled in the weeds, &c., at the bottom.

Wild fowl seldom live any length of time after they are winged, as they generally fall a prey to foxes and other vermin, all of whom have a habit of hunting round lakes and swamps during the night, when the wounded birds quit the deep water to feed in the shallows or marshy places.

That beautiful bird the pintail is also a very quick diver and strong swimmer when wounded. It is a good rule in wild fowl shooting always to endeavour to get shots at the birds either when they are on dry land or when it is probable that they will fall upon it. In the first place, no bird is so easy to kill whilst swimming as whilst standing or walking, as then all the body is exposed ; and in the second place so much time is lost, and so much disturbance caused by pursuing the wounded birds, and even by getting the dead ones out of the water. Besides it is almost a matter of certainty that when they are shot over the water some of the killed birds will be lost ; and however good a water-dog your retriever may be, and however hardy, the less swimming and wetting he gets the better. Nothing is so ill-judged and useless as sending a dog into the water without good reason for it ; doing so is



always taking something, more or less, from his strength and injuring his constitution. When standing waiting for ducks in cold weather the poor animal has no means of drying or warming himself, and lies shivering at your feet, and laying up the foundation of rheumatism and other maladies.

A dog who has much water-work to do should always be kept in good condition, and, if possible, even fat. It is a mistake to suppose that allowing him to come into the house and warm himself before the fire makes him less hardy; on the contrary, I consider that getting warm and comfortable before the kitchen fire on coming home gives the retriever a better chance of keeping up his strength, health, and energy when much exposed to cold and wet during the day; a far better chance, indeed, than if, on returning, he is put into a cold kennel, where, however well supplied with straw, hours must elapse before he is thoroughly warm and dry. Most rough dogs stand cold well enough as long as they are tolerably dry, but frequent wetting is certain to cause disease and rheumatism. I am sure too, with regard to water dogs, that a good covering of fat is a far more efficacious means of keeping them warm than the roughest coat of hair that dog ever wore. In wild animals, such as otters, seals, &c., which are much exposed

to wet in cold countries, we always find that their chief defence against the cold consists in a thick coating of fat, and that their hair is short and close. In like manner dogs who are in good condition can better sustain the intense cold of the water than those whose only defence consists in a shaggy hide. Short-coated dogs are also the most active and powerful swimmers, and get dry sooner than those who are too rough-coated.

The imperviousness to wet of the plumage of wild fowl is evidently not caused by any power which the birds have of supplying grease or oil to their feathers. The feathers have a certain degree of oiliness no doubt, but from frequent observation I am convinced that it is the manner in which the feathers are placed which is the cause of the water running off them as it does.

As long as a wild duck of any kind is alive, his skin remains perfectly dry whilst he is in the water, although from the situation in which he may be placed—being pursued, for instance—it is quite impossible for him to find time to “oil his plumage,” as some authors assert he does, “in order to keep out the wet;” but the moment a duck or water fowl is dead the water penetrates through the feathers, wetting the animal completely. If one wing is broken, the feathers of that wing imme-

diately become soaked with wet, the bird not having the power of keeping the feathers of the broken part in the proper position to resist the entry of the water. We all know that birds are able to elevate, depress, and in fact to move their feathers in any direction by a muscular contraction of the skin. When this power ceases they hang loosely in every direction, and the wet enters to the skin.

The otter's skin never appears to be wet, however long the animal may remain in the water; but, like the plumage of birds, soon becomes soaked through when the animal is dead. Whilst he is alive the water runs off his hair exactly as it does from the back of a bird during a shower. When we find any bird or animal with its feathers or hair wet and clinging together, it is a sure sign that the poor creature is either diseased or is suffering from some wound or accident.

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