

SHORT TOUR IN SUTHERLAND.

CHAPTER I.

Sutherlandshire ; its Wild-birds not sufficiently known—Our Start and Conveyance—Kyle of Sutherland—Woods of Rosehall ; old Keeper there ; his recollection of me—Oykel Inn—Altnagalcanach ; Origin of Name ; Fishing at—Conveying Boat to Loch Urigil—Wild Geese and Divers on the Loch—Large Trout of these Lakes—Drive to Inchnadamph—Value of rare Eggs—Heronry—Peregrine Falcon and Buzzards' Nests—Climbing over the Rocks.

AMONGST the thousands of scenery-hunters and tourists there are very few who have ever made an excursion through the county of Sutherland, although it is a district as interesting as any in Europe, both for its magnificent and varied scenery, including sea, mountain, valley, and lake, and also as containing many rare subjects interesting to the naturalist and botanist. There are many birds and plants to be found in the wilder parts of this county which are scarcely to be seen elsewhere in Britain. The naturalist may here observe

closely the eagle, the osprey, the wild-goose, and many other birds, whose habits are little known, but who in this region breed and rear their young in comparative security.

The wild-cat, marten cat, fox, etc., though seldom seen by daylight, are still tolerably numerous where the ground is not kept for grouse-shooting. In the latter case, however, traps and poison have pretty well destroyed these and all other carnivorous animals.

In the spring of 1848 I made an excursion through some part of the county of Sutherland, which I shall endeavour to describe, in the hope of inducing others to follow my example, being confident that whoever does so will find himself amply repaid for his trouble.

My object in making the journey was to enjoy the magnificent scenery of the north coast, to see and observe the breeding habits and localities of many of the rarer birds of Britain, and to ascertain the fact of some of these birds rearing their young in Scotland, which, from the contradictory and uncertain statements of many naturalists, seemed to be a matter of great doubt. Not being a collector of eggs or birds myself, I had no wish to destroy more of my feathered friends than sufficed to prove their identity, and to procure a few

specimens for a gentleman who is as great a lover of nature as myself, and a far more scientific one.

Our start from Bonar Bridge was a most amusing affair, not only to ourselves, but also to all the inhabitants of that small but beautifully situated village. The vehicle which we travelled in was a small and lightly built flat-bottomed boat, made of larch, and mounted on wheels. It was constructed to ship and unship in half a minute. By simply unscrewing two bolts, it could be taken off its wheels and launched into the water. Being on springs, it made a very easy carriage, and was large enough to hold four persons, with plenty of space for luggage. On the present occasion our party consisted of a friend of mine, Mr. J., who (although for many years a wanderer over Switzerland and many parts of Europe) had never been through the wilder and more mountainous regions of Scotland; Mr. Dunbar, whose assistance was of much use as a naturalist and interpreter amongst the shepherds and others who spoke more Gaelic than English; myself, and Leo, my retriever.

Having adjusted the harness, traces, etc., of the boat to my horse (a stout Highland "garron"), we started at an early hour, trusting to the chapter of accidents and the pace of our horse as to where we should sleep that night, but determined to make

out as many miles as we could, or in other words to advance as far as possible into the mountainous part of Sutherlandshire. Bonar Bridge is situated on what is called the Kyle of Sutherland, a narrow estuary formed by the confluence of the Shin, Oykel, Casselis, and Anak rivers, all of which streams, a short distance above Bonar Bridge, meet the salt water of the Dornoch Firth. In winter this water abounds with wild-fowl, but now (May 14) all these birds had gone to their breeding-places with the exception of a solitary godwit or two, who seemed to have been left behind the rest of their comrades, this bird not breeding in Scotland. The woods about Rosehall, or rather that portion of them which the axe has spared, used to abound in many kinds of interesting hawks, and also in marten and wild-cats, but keepers and trapping combined seem to have entirely swept all these animals away. I looked in vain for buzzards on a high rock which some few years back was invariably tenanted by them, but it seemed that they had long since been destroyed. As I passed through the remains of the woods too I caught a glimpse here and there of passes where different stags had fallen to my rifle, and many a happy day spent in the greenwood was recalled to my recollection, with all its accompanying incidents. I called on the old Highland

keeper who was then my attendant, and found him exactly on the same spot where I had seen him twelve years ago, winking at the morning sun in a manner peculiar to owls and inhabitants of cottages full of peat smoke. I doubted his recognising me after so many years, but was much gratified at the pleasure and readiness with which he did so, and at the vivid recollection which he had of the corrie in which "my honour" had shot my first stag under his guidance and tuition—his tender inquiry too after my rifle, "the likes of which never put down a deer in the country." I returned the compliment by begging to be shown my old acquaintance, "the double-barrel," a most venerable flint gun, with singularly eccentric and unreachable triggers, which no forefinger but his own could ever pull. This ancient gun, however, in *his* hands had laid low many an antlered head. Though he affected to despise all new inventions, I had a recollection of his always preferring a shot with one of my percussion guns to the uncertain chance of his own flint and steel. Many an old story connected with stag and corrie, shealing and whisky bottle, the old fellow called to my recollection; and I really saw with regret the last of his weather-beaten face, as he bowed and gesticulated to me as long as we continued in sight. I

am afraid that my companions must have thought me a bore for a few miles, as I pointed out, with an interest which they could scarcely feel, rock and glen, the scenes of former chases of deer, or even of the death of otter or wild-cat.

At Oykel Inn, some twenty miles from our starting-place, we stopped for an hour or two to rest our horse, and to try a cast in the river; but bright and clear as it was, with very little water in the stream, we had no success. At certain times of the fishing season there is no better river than the Oykel. May, however, is rather too early.

Eleven miles farther on we came to a small inn, at a place called Altnagalcanach,—a most difficult and unpronounceable Gaelic name, and one which I cannot be sure of spelling right. The meaning of it is the “Burn of the Deceiver.” The origin of the name, as it was told me, is amusing and characteristic enough. The place is situated in a part of Ross-shire which intrudes into the adjoining county of Sutherland in a very unceremonious manner, the cause of which was as follows:—In a dispute between the respective proprietors of that part of Ross-shire and Sutherlandshire, the marches were to be determined by reference to an old inhabitant, who, being either by clanship or bribery in the interest of the Ross-shire laird, came

to this spot to decide the question with the soles of his shoes filled with earth from the interior of Ross-shire, the wily old fellow by this means saving himself all scruples of conscience when he swore most positively that he stood on Ross-shire ground. Standing on Ross-shire ground in this manner, he pointed out a boundary most convenient to his employer, the Ross-shire laird. So ran the tale as it was told me; and *unde derivatur* the name of Altnagalcanach, which it still holds.

Close to the door of the inn is a fine loch, in which are great numbers of small trout and char, and also plenty of the large lake-trout, or *Salmo ferox*. We fished for an hour or two, and caught a good dish of trout and one char; a very unusual occurrence, as the char rarely rises to the fly, excepting in one or two favoured localities. Indeed I have caught hundreds of trout with the fly in lochs swarming with char without ever catching one of the latter. Though not much accustomed to travellers, the good wife of the inn *put us up* comfortably enough. We had clean beds, and good tea, eggs, and cream, which, with the excellent trout that we had taken, made us quite comfortable. The only thing wanting was hay (corn they had in plenty); but I soon remedied that want by shackling the horse's fore-legs with a

couple of dog-straps, and turning him loose in the short sweet grass by the edge of the lake.

On the following morning, at the instigation of one of our party, who was very anxious to procure some eggs of the black-throated diver (*Colymbus arcticus*), we started for Loch Urigil, a lake about two miles from the inn. Our first step was to launch our boat in the lake, close to the door; and having crossed this piece of water, we dragged the boat out again, and, mounting it on our shoulders, carried it across the hill to the other lake. Little, however, had we reckoned on the distance we had to go.

“How far is the lake from here?” was our inquiry on leaving the water-side.

“Oh, just over yonder brae,” was the answer of the innkeeper, as he pointed to a height a few hundred yards off.

“How far do you say?”

“Just a wee bit.”

But that weary “wee bit” of the innkeeper’s! Many an anathema was poured on the head of our guide before we had got the boat fairly afloat in Loch Urigil. Once there, however, our cares were soon forgotten. My friend put his fishing-rod together; while I, accompanied by Mr. Dunbar, went off in the boat to the islands on the lake, in





View from Loch Urigil.

order to see what birds were breeding there. We first made for a small island covered with the brightest green foliage that I ever saw, which, however, turned out to be nothing but the wild leek. The nature of the plant was most unpleasantly forced upon my observation by the very strong scent the leaves produced when trodden upon.

There were three of these beautiful birds (the black-throated diver) on the loch, but no eggs. On some of the other islands were a number of wild-geese (*Anser ferus*), the original kind from which our common domestic goose is derived. They had two or three nests on one island, but we found no eggs. Their nests were large and quite exposed, consisting of a large mass of down, kept together by coarse grass and herbage. The old birds, when disturbed, flew off the island, some of them alighting on the loch, and others on the short green grass about the edge of the water, where they commenced grazing after the manner of tame geese. Having procured one or two specimens of the black-throated diver, I landed, and sat down to enjoy the magnificent scenery and all its accompaniments. The peewit, redshank, curlew, and golden plover kept up a constant warfare of clamour against me for some time, till, finding that I did not molest them, they gradually returned to their domestic

occupations. All these birds had probably eggs near the spot. After a short time they ran and walked about fearlessly, quite regardless of my being so near them ; while the lively and restless little dunlin ran almost over my feet without fear, as I sat near the edge of the loch.

The mountains of Corgach and Assynt, some of which I could see from Loch Urigil, are of a very striking and peculiar form, standing out boldly and independently from the lower hills that surrounded them. Occasionally a curlew would come wheeling over my head, uttering its loud cry of alarm and warning, something between a whistle and a scream ; but he soon sailed back to his mate on the sloping moss that covered the hill-side near the lake. A beautiful cock grouse came down within a few yards of me, and picked about amongst the stones at the edge of the water, occasionally stopping as if to exhibit himself as he stood erect with his bright-red comb raised to its utmost height. When at last he saw me, instead of seeming alarmed, he rose and alighted again on a small hillock only a few feet farther off, and stood there some minutes watching me closely, and then flew off, crowing a short distance up the heather. The gray geese seemed in constant motion, sometimes feeding and sometimes flying after each other in pairs with loud cries.

After waiting some time about the edge of the loch I rejoined my companions, and we again renewed our portage of the boat over that weary hill. I had left a line with several hooks baited with small trout in the lake near the inn, and on returning found a *salmo ferox* which weighed something above two pounds on it. While taking in the line a monster trout ran at the fish already caught, and, notwithstanding its size, nearly swallowed it, leaving the marks of his teeth in the shape of deep cuts across the middle of the two-pound trout. I should like to have seen the fish at closer quarters who made an attack on such a goodly-sized bait, as he must have been a perfect fresh-water shark. There can be no doubt that in some of these lakes, where the water is deep and the food plentiful, these trout must grow to a size not yet ascertained. None of these lakes have ever been properly fished. A few days' trolling can never be depended on as a proof of the size of the fish in them, more particularly as we all know that the larger a trout is the less inclined is he to take any bait. I will leave it for others to judge of the size of a trout that could nearly swallow one of his own species weighing considerably above two pounds.

During our drive to Inchnadamph in the afternoon we had a fine view of Benmore of Assynt, and

numerous other magnificent mountains, gray and dreary, and with but little vegetation of any kind, although along the edges of the lakes and streams there is always a certain width of bright green herbage, where the sheep at this season find plenty of good grazing. The long ranges of cliff-like rocks near Inchnadamph are very splendid in their height and shape, and are frequented by buzzards, ravens, gray crows, and a pair of peregrine falcons. Notwithstanding all these enemies the ring-ousel sings from every green corner of the rocks, while wheat-ears (safer perhaps from their smaller size and their habit of dodging under the stones) are extremely numerous everywhere along the road side. At Inchnadamph we arrived late in the evening, and found a comfortable, clean inn, an obliging landlord, and all the accompaniments that one could wish to refresh both mind and body (I am afraid that the former is sadly dependent on the latter), at the end of rather a hard and long day's work, for we had been actively employed from daylight.

The black-throated diver (*Colymbus arcticus*) is a peculiarly beautiful and singularly marked bird. Though generally rare, in certain localities which happen to be adapted to its habits this bird is not unfrequently to be found during the breeding season. It invariably breeds on some small, flat

island in an inland lake ; it prefers, and indeed is seldom found except in, lakes which lie in a flat or open part of the country, and which have shallows and grassy creeks, as it feeds more on frogs, leeches, and similar productions of such places than on the trout that frequent the more stony and deeper parts of the lake. Apparently from the position of its legs and feet, this diver cannot walk on land, and therefore places her eggs within a very few feet of the water's edge on a flat island where it can reach them by a kind of waddling, seal-like motion. I never found above two eggs in a nest, and do not believe that they ever lay more, although I have been told of three having been procured. The egg is of a long and regular oval form, and large ; the colour is a fine rich brown green with darker spots. This bird appears to have great difficulty in rising from the water on a calm day, and sometimes nothing will induce it to fly, although when once on wing it flies strong and high. When two or more are in company I have never seen them rise ; they appear then to trust more to diving for safety ; but when a black-throated diver is alone he will frequently take to flight most unexpectedly and leave the loch altogether. Unluckily, the very great beauty of its plumage, and the rarity and difficulty of procuring it, make this interesting bird

an object of pursuit amongst bird-stuffers and collectors, and this, combined with the price offered for its eggs by egg collectors, will soon entirely extirpate it from all its present breeding-places.

The cry of this diver is loud, peculiar, and mournful, and it has acquired the local name of rain-goose among the Highlanders, owing to its habit of uttering its croaking call with great perseverance before rain or stormy weather. Its other local and Gaelic names signify the loch hen, and the great loch hen, in distinction to the red-throated diver, which is also frequently found in this county. The latter bird (*Colymbus septentrionalis*) is much commoner, and is neither so large nor handsome a bird as the former. It is also distinguished readily by the light brownish red neck. The red-throated diver breeds often near small pools and lochs, and lays its eggs more frequently on the shore of the mainland surrounding the loch than on an island. It is not so shy a bird as the black-throated diver, but not being so much valued by collectors, has, I hope, a chance of existing some time yet as an inhabitant of Britain during the breeding season.

I found that all the shepherds, gamekeepers, and others in this remote part of the kingdom had already ascertained the value of the eggs of this and other rare birds, and were as eager to search

for them, and as loth to part with them (excepting at a very high price), as love of gain could make them. Nor had they the least scruple in endeavouring to impose eggs under fictitious names on any person wishing to purchase such things. Indeed I am very sure that many of the eggs sold by London dealers are acquired in this way, and are not to be in the least depended on as to their identity.

I was told of a singular heronry situated on a lake between Oykel and the inn at Altnagalcanach, where the herons breed in great numbers on the ground in an island on the loch. The place being situated at some distance from the road, I had not time to look for it, much as I should have liked to have seen the heron building in such a situation; but as we drove along I saw several herons winging their heavy flight towards the place where I was told this lake was situated.

Before we started from Inchnadamph, wishing to procure some eggs of the peregrine falcon, who bred in the cliff near the inn, I procured the assistance of two or three people, one of whom, a young man, son of the innkeeper, volunteered to go over the face of the rock with a rope round his waist, we holding it from above. As it was not only rainy but extremely windy, I was not very

willing for him to do so. However, as he seemed quite confident in the steadiness of his own head and footing, we prepared to perform our share of the work. Having fastened the rope securely round his body below his arms, we lowered him gradually over the summit, immediately above the nest of the buzzard. He was provided also with two or three joints of a fishing-rod, and a kind of tin soup-ladle (bearing in this country the quaint name of a "kail-divider"), which was fixed into the small end of his rod. The use of this was to enable him to spoon the eggs out of the nest, in case it was placed, as the nests of these birds often are, so far under a shelf of rock as to be inaccessible without some such contrivance. Over he went then without the smallest hesitation or nervousness, notwithstanding the slippery state of the whole rock and the violence of the wind. We lowered yard by yard of the rope, till he looked like a spider hanging at the end of its thread. He then was quite lost to our view, having scrambled under some projecting rocks to reach the nest. After a few anxious moments he gave the agreed upon signal for being drawn up, and I must say that I was rejoiced when his head appeared again safe above the edge of the cliff, holding in his teeth his cap, in which he had deposited the eggs.

We found that the peregrine's nest would have been quite inaccessible even to our experienced and bold climber but for his long spoon.

All the time that we had been engaged at the buzzard's nest two pair of hawks were hovering about us, keeping certainly at a respectful distance. It was interesting to observe the different flights of the two kinds of hawk—the buzzards sailing to and fro with slow but powerful wing, and wheeling in large circles ; while the peregrines dashed about, turning with rapid and sudden swoops, sometimes below us and sometimes suddenly shooting high up into the mist, when we could only tell their exact situation by their shrill and angry cries. The buzzards uttered a kind of low complaining cry, of quite a different expression and note, as they floated to and fro below us.

