

FIELD-NOTES FOR THE YEAR



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CHAPTER XII.

JANUARY.

Wood-pigeons—Feeding of Widgeon and Mallards—Wild-fowl
—Water-rail—Wild-duck shooting—Change of colour in
Trout.

DURING the month of January the wood-pigeons commence feeding greedily on the turnips. They do not, in my opinion, dig into the roots with their bills, unless rabbits or rooks have been before them to break the skin of the turnip. In fact the wood-pigeon's bill is not at all adapted for cutting into a frozen and unbroken turnip. The crops of those which I kill at this season are full of the leaf of the turnip; and in feeding on these, they appear not to attack the centre or heart of the green leaf, but to eat wholly the thin part of it. The wood-pigeon feeds more particularly on the leaf of the Swedish turnip, as being more succulent.

In the garden I see the titmice searching for, and

feeding on, the nests and eggs of the common garden spider. The little blue tomtit is of great service to gardeners, as a destroyer of many kinds of insects which would increase to a most injurious extent without the aid of these prying little fellows.

The thrushes begin to sing, and the corn-bunting and yellow-hammer to utter their spring note.

In shooting along the bay and the streams, etc., which run into it, I have been astonished this year (1846) by the numbers of a new visitor to this country, the little auk. This bird, though so rarely seen here, appears to have been driven over this season in great flocks; they are everywhere, and so tame as to be easily knocked down with sticks and stones.

The widgeon and teal have now nearly acquired their full plumage; occasionally I bring home a drake-widgeon in his perfect beauty of feather, but very few of them have entirely put off their sober brown. The mallard has for some time been in high beauty, and is most valuable to the dresser of salmon-flies.

I see the widgeon come regularly now at the ebb of the tide, to feed on the grassy banks which are left uncovered by the receding of the water. They first feed as they swim, round the edges of the small islands and banks; but when the tide begins

to recede, the birds come out on the banks and graze like geese.

This season the wild-ducks have found out a new kind of food—the remains of the diseased potatoes which have been left in the fields. My attention was first called to their feeding on them by observing that my domesticated wild-ducks had managed to dig well into a heap of half-rotten potatoes, which had been put partly under ground, and then covered over with a good thickness of earth, as being unfit for pigs or any other animal. However, the wild-ducks had scented them out, and, although well supplied with food, they had dug into the heap in all directions, feeding greedily on the rotten potatoes; in fact, leaving their corn for them. I then found that the wild-ducks from the bay flew every evening to the potato-fields to feed on the roots which had been left; and so fond were they of them, that I often saw the ducks rise from the fields in the middle of the day—in the evening it was always a sure place to get a brace or two. The mallard is very omnivorous at this season: in the crop of one killed were oats, small seed, shrimps, and potatoes, all the produce of his researches during the preceding night.

We find the remains of the little auk everywhere; some I have seen amongst the furze bushes, etc., at the distance of fully four miles from the sea.

They appeared to have been driven there by the wind, and to have died entangled in such unaccustomed ground. The remains which I found did not appear to have been brought by crows, or any animal of prey.

During the present severe frost I am much amused with the long-tail ducks, who at every flow of the tide swim into the bay, and often some way up the river, uttering their most musical and singular cry, which at a distance resembles the bugle-like note of the wild-swan more than anything else.

As long as there is no collection of floating ice, the bay is very full of birds, and the shores are enlivened with the large flocks of oyster-catchers, red-shanks, and an infinite variety of other waders. The red-shank begins now to utter the peculiar whistle which indicates the return of spring: early as it is, too, the jack-snipes, red-wings, fieldfares, etc., seem to return northwards, as I see great numbers of these and other birds, which had for the last month or two disappeared, having, probably, then gone southwards.

The little water-rail seems to be a great wanderer. I find its track, and the bird itself, in the most unlikely places; for instance, I put up one in a dry furze field, and my retriever caught another in a hedge, at some distance from the water: I took the

latter bird home alive to show to my children. When I took him out of my pocket, in which most unaccustomed situation he had been for two hours, this strange little creature looked about him with the greatest nonchalance possible, showing fight at everything that came near him ; and when, after having gratified the curiosity of the children, we turned him loose in a ditch of running water, he went away jerking up his tail, and not seeming to hurry himself, or to be in the least disconcerted.

In hard frosts during this month I get a great number of wild-ducks by waiting for an hour (the last hour of light) near some open place in the lochs, or streams, where they come to feed. On my way home from shooting, when I have been in the direction of the swamps, I often do this, and generally succeed in filling my bag with mallards and widgeon.

Just before sunset I take up my position in the midst of two or three furze bushes, within easy shot of where a small stream runs into one of the lakes, keeping the water constantly open. Having given my retriever the biscuit which I always carry for him on these cold days, I light my pipe (the great comfort of the patient wild-fowl shooter), and look out towards the bay for the mallards. The bay is nearly half a mile off,

but I can see the ducks between me and the sky almost as soon as they leave it. At first a solitary pair or two come, quietly and swiftly, probably making their way to some favourite spring farther inland. However, with the help of a cartridge, I bring down a brace from a great height as they pass over; sometimes tumbling on the ice of the loch behind me, they are nearly split in two; sometimes, when winged, they fall in the rushy stream, and give the retriever no small trouble and cold before he gets them; however, he always succeeds, and having brought the bird and received his reward of ship-biscuit, he lies down again, but with eyes and ears all intent on what is going on. The sea-gull or heron may pass, and he takes no notice of them; but the moment that a wild-duck's quack, or the whistle of his wings, is heard, the dog's ears erect themselves, and he watches my face with a look of most inquiring eagerness. I hear the wild-swans "trumpeting" on the sea, but know that they are not very likely to come where I am placed. Presently, however, a brace of teal pitch suddenly, and unexpectedly, within a few yards of me, having flitted in from behind.

I kill the drake, but cannot get a shot at the duck, as she flies low, and the smoke hanging heavily in the calm evening, prevents my seeing her. How-

ever, all at once the mallards begin to fly from the sea, and for half an hour or less I have to load and fire as fast as I can, as they fly over. I prefer shooting them on the wing, for if I let them pitch in the water, my dog has a swim every time I kill one, and gets half-dead with ice and frozen snow.

The mallards generally fly in from the sea rapidly, and at no great height; but it requires some practice to kill them, as their flight is much quicker than it appears, and they require a hard blow to kill them dead. If wounded only, they fly off, and dropping at some distance, I can seldom get them that night, owing to the approaching darkness. Sometimes my retriever marks the direction of a wounded duck and gets it, but generally they are lost, and serve only to feed the foxes, who seem to hunt for maimed birds regularly round the lakes.

Having killed ten mallards and a teal, it becomes too dark to shoot any more, although I still hear their wings as they fly over my head. Besides which, I have nearly three miles to walk; and my keeper, who has also killed two or three, had, before we commenced duck-shooting, sundry animals to carry, the produce of my day's wanderings. We have to walk home, too, there being no road near these lakes. So, after I have refilled my pipe, and the old fellow has recharged his nose with a spoon-

ful of snuff, we shoulder our game and set off. Eight or ten fat mallards, too, are no slight load over a rough track in the dark, so we keep the sands as far as possible, listening to the different cries of the sand-pipers, curlews, and numerous kinds of wild-fowl who feed on the shallows and sandbanks during the night-time. Occasionally in the moonlight we catch a glimpse of the mallards as they rise from some little stream or ditch which runs into the bay, or we see a rabbit hurrying up at our approach from the sea-weed, which he had been nibbling.

In this way, with very little trouble, and often much nearer home, I can generally reckon on getting some few brace of wild-ducks in the winter; shifting my place of ambush according to the weather, the wind, etc., changes in which cause the birds to take to different feeding-places.

Trout are not nearly so tender a fish as is generally supposed. At the farm-yard here they have two trout, about six inches or more in length, living in the wooden trough out of which the cart-horses drink. They were caught in the river in August, and throughout all the severe frost have lived, and apparently continued in good condition, although sometimes in passing I have seen the water in the trough so firmly frozen, and the ice apparently reaching so low, that the trout had scarcely room to

swim. When fresh water is put in they always come to the place where it is poured, and seem to look for any particles of food or any insects that may come in with it. They feed on worms which the boys often bring them, and which they take immediately, without fear. The change of colour in fish is very remarkable, and takes place with great rapidity. Put a living *black* burn trout into a *white* basin of water, and it becomes, within half an hour,¹ of a light colour. Keep the fish living in a white jar for some days, and it becomes absolutely white; but put it into a dark-coloured or black vessel, and although on first being placed there the white-coloured fish shows most conspicuously on the black ground, in a quarter of an hour it becomes as dark-coloured as the bottom of the jar, and consequently difficult to be seen. No doubt this facility of adapting its colour to the bottom of the water in which it lives is of the greatest service to the fish in protecting it from its numerous enemies. All anglers must have observed that in every stream the trout are very much of the same colour as the gravel or sand on which they live: whether this change of colour is a voluntary or involuntary act on the part of the fish I leave it for the scientific to determine.

¹ In the case of some fish the change is perceptible in five minutes.