

## CHAPTER XIII.

## FEBRUARY.

Change of colour in Stoats—Affection of Otters for their young  
—Roe-hunting—Attachment of Birds to their Mates—Food  
of Fieldfares during Snow—Widgeon—Wild-fowl shooting  
at Spynie—Incidents in shooting—Winged Swan—Cats—  
Food of Wild-geese—Brent Goose.

*February 2d.*—FEBRUARY is always with us the most snowy month of the year. I find that, in my journal for the first week of this month, during several years, it is generally marked down that the country is clothed in snow. The quantity of floating snow and ice which comes down the river fills the bay, and sends the wild-fowl to some less dreary part of the country. Occasionally a golden eye or long-tailed duck pitches in some clear spot of the river, but is almost immediately driven out again by the floating ice. In some places the course of the river is quite altered, being choked up by the accumulation of ice on the shallows, and the water takes some new run. What becomes of the fish during this kind of weather?

The rooks dig deep into the snow, and plough

up the young wheat in great quantities with their strong bills. The stoats are now pure white in almost every instance, although I shot one on the 3d of this month who had only very partially acquired his winter colour. My rabbit beagles ran him for a long time full cry on some rough ground. Whenever the stoat went into a rabbit-hole I turned him out again with a ferret, in this way running him till I killed him.

While the river is in this state of confusion with ice, etc., I see that the otters take themselves to the unfrozen ditches and springs to hunt for eels and flounders, which fish they feed on apparently with great perseverance, if one can judge by the distance they hunt for them in the snow. The otter, judging from the ground he goes over, must commence moving as soon as it is dark, and continue his hunting till nearly daylight.

Notwithstanding the shyness of the otter, this animal is very determined in the defence of its young ones, and boldly confronts a person who takes one of them up. My keeper tells me that he has seen an old otter feeding her young with fish : the two young ones were sitting on a flat stone at the edge of the burn when their parent brought them a good-sized trout. They immediately both seized the fish, pulling and tearing at it like two

bull-dog puppies. At last they came to a pitched battle with each other, biting, squealing, and tugging, and leaving the trout to its fate. On this the old one interfered, and making them quiet, gave the trout to one of them as his own. The other young one, on seeing the parent do this, no longer interfered, but sat quietly looking on, till the old otter (who in the meantime had renewed her fishing) came back with a large trout for it also.

When she brings a fish to the shore for her young ones, she calls them by a kind of loud whistling cry. Altogether this is a most interesting animal, graceful in its movements, and in salmon rivers not nearly so destructive and injurious as he is supposed to be, feeding on eels, flounders, and trout far more than on salmon: in such situations he is most unjustly persecuted.

The roe now are in perfect condition, and I find the snow does not in the least spoil the scent in hunting them with beagles. It is a very amusing kind of shooting where the woods are sufficiently broken and interspersed with open ground, so as to enable one to see both roe and hounds pretty often. In drawing the large woods I am often annoyed by the hounds going off after a fox, who generally leads them straight away for several miles, tires the little beagles out, and finally escapes into his earth with-

out getting shot : but occasionally he pays for his depredations, notwithstanding his cunning.

Soon after throwing off in one of the large covers near the sea, the hounds begin to find the cold scent of roe, and gradually working up to the thickets, often start the animal in view. Away they then go, making the woods echo again with their deep tones, the younger dogs taking the lead. The roe at first tries to avoid leaving the first division of wood in which he is found, but on the hounds sticking to him, he crosses some wide open heather and swamp to the higher grounds. Here the trees are older, with little underwood ; so after a rattling run through all this, I can reckon on their crossing the swamps again to the thickets, where the buck was first found. He comes to the head of the brae and stands listening to the hounds, carefully examining the wide flats of heath, wood, and swamp below him. The hounds come nearer and nearer, and still the buck seems unwilling to cross the open ground. At last the dogs are close to him, and then only he descends the bank, springing over the juniper, which is frequently six feet high, the staunch little pack threading their way through it. Across they go, and over the swamps, the buck springing from hillock to hillock wherever he can find footing. The beagles make their way

wonderfully, often in view, but as often tumbling into the holes of water which they sometimes can scarcely get out of; however, I am generally at hand to help them, and once again on *terra firma*, off they go headed by old "Durwood," who begins now to think of killing. Straight through the thicket where we first found, across a wide tract of smaller and more open wood, they run without a moment's check, startling the blackcocks, who, rising as the hounds pass, perch on the summits of the fir-trees, looking down with wonder at what is going on. Away goes the roe, not fifty yards ahead of his persevering little followers, and they are now all in a wide tract of fir-wood, with the rankest heather in it that I ever saw: straight through this they go to the very sea-shore, putting up the curlews as they skirt the sands. But it is of no use; the beagles become more eager every moment, and after half an hour's hard running round this tract near the shore, the buck seems suddenly to change his mind, and turns directly inland again, at a sharp angle to his course. A short, but very short check ensues; the hounds are soon in full cry again, and after pressing him hard through the cover, he is driven to some sandy hillocks in the midst of the wilderness—and here comes the trial of the hounds. Up and down, and round and round every one of

these does the roe go at a foot's pace, but managing to keep always out of view ; by this he recovers wind ; and, going slowly over the dry sand, leaves as little scent as possible.

It won't do, however : the beagles, headed by the old dog, stick to his track, and wind in and out the hillocks after him, keeping the scent in a manner that is quite incredible. Away goes the buck again to try a new scheme. He suddenly dashes across a wide opening and gets to some high close furze : through this he winds his way, followed, however, by the relentless hounds, who, regardless of rabbits, etc., stick to his scent, although it is getting colder and colder. The evening is coming on, and the frost is becoming severer. The rabbits, too, help to put the dogs out. But the roe is viewed as he passes out of the furze, and we run him over some high hillocks which have great clumps of furze on them. Here again we suddenly come to a check ; but, after searching some time in vain for his track or scent, I unexpectedly find his footmark in a deep dry drain which divides the pasturage from the wooded wilderness. There is no mistaking it. So I call the dogs, who, tired and stiff as they are, come joyfully to the holloa. At first they only sniff in an uncertain manner up the drain ; but at last the youngest hound gives

tongue at a spot where some grass or heather had retained the scent longer than elsewhere, and they are all soon again in full cry. I still keep with the hounds to help and encourage them, when presently I hear a shot, and rightly guess that my friend, whom I had left shivering long ago in a pass, had killed the roe. He turned out to be a fine buck ; so after paunching him, and rewarding the dogs with blood and liver, etc. etc., which they wait patiently for, not attempting to tear the animal itself, we get it conveyed to the place where I had left my car.

Passing through a wood on our way, the old hound, who was not coupled, suddenly threw up his nose, and before I could prevent him was off in full cry into the cover. I managed to stop the rest of the dogs, not wishing them to have any more running, as they were all tired out, and went alone to get back Durwood. From his tone I soon knew that it was a fox he was after, as when hunting this animal his cry was always different from what it was when on the scent of a roe. I found it of no use going through the cover ; so I waited in the wide road towards which he seemed coming. Presently, quick as lightning, and without the slightest noise, a very large dog-fox sprang into the road. He snuffed the air right and left with an eager look,

but seemed not to observe me, for I was standing quite still close to the trunk of a birch-tree. He then listened to the hound; and finding that he was going eastward, the fox came trotting up the road directly towards me. When within about eighty yards he suddenly stopped, and seemed to suspect my presence. I had had my gun up to my shoulder for some time; and the moment he stopped I pulled the trigger, trusting to a B. B. cartridge, notwithstanding the distance. He immediately began tumbling about, dancing on his head, and springing into the air. I ran up to give him the contents of the other barrel, which was loaded with small shot, but he had disappeared; however, with the help of the hound, who had now come up, I found him within twenty yards of the road. He was shot in the chest, and was in the very act of giving up the ghost when we came to him. In this country all ways of killing foxes are considered fair, as hunting is out of the question; and if they are not kept down they destroy every kind of game, lambs, and poultry.

*Feb. 8.*—I shot a female pochard to-day, one out of a large flock: the rest, of course, all flew away. But presently a male bird, probably the mate of the one I had killed, came flying back from the lake to which the flock had gone, and after passing once or twice low over the place where I had shot her, he



pitched on the water and swam about, searching eagerly for his lost companion. He then went off to the flock again ; but soon returned a second time to look for the hen. Three times did he go and return in the same manner, till at last he seemed to give it up as hopeless.

I have observed the same attachment to their mates in common wild-ducks, teal, swans, etc., as well as in many other birds. I remember an instance of a hen grouse being caught by the leg in a common vermin trap which had been set for ravens. It happened that the trap was not looked at till late the following day, when we found that the cock grouse had brought and laid close to his unfortunate mate a quantity of young heather shoots : they were enough to have nearly filled a hat, and the poor bird must have been employed many hours in collecting them. I cannot express how grieved I was at the hen having been caught.

Great numbers of fieldfares come down during the snowy weather to the fields to feed on the turnips. They dig holes into the roots to an extent that astonished me. I shot two or three. They are very fat ; but smell and taste so very strongly of turnips that they are quite uneatable.

The widgeons leave the bay, which is nearly covered with ice, and feed on the clover-fields,

digging under the snow with their bills to get at the herbage. I never saw them do so before in this county; indeed it is very seldom that the snow in Morayshire remains long enough on the ground, at least in the district near the sea, to annoy the wild-fowl to any extent.

While the snow is soft and newly fallen, the rabbits seldom go fifty yards from their seat of the day before, and constantly return to the same bush.

About the middle of this month I was shooting, with Captain Cumming, at the Loch of Spynie, which I considered to be about the best loch in the North for wild-fowl shooting. Its situation is excellent; and being for the most part shallow, and covered with grass, rushes, and tall reeds, it is perfectly adapted in every way for sheltering and feeding all sorts of wild-fowl; they resort there in incredible numbers, and of every kind, from the swan to the teal. When, in the evening, we took up position near the old potato-fields, we generally killed several mallards, as they feed constantly on these roots.

The widgeon in this loch are remarkably fine, and seem to come early into good plumage. There would appear to be a great proportion of drakes in the flocks of these birds, as, out of ten widgeon killed there was only one duck. The flight of

widgeon in the evening, as they leave the deeper parts of the lake for the grassy margin, is very amusing. When they first rise, and before we can see them, we hear their peculiar whistle; and they almost immediately appear flying in small companies with great swiftness to their destination. This whistling sound, which they utter during their flight, is quite different from their cry while swimming and playing on the water. It requires a very quick eye and a good retriever to bag many birds in this twilight shooting; but Captain Cumming, alone, killed fourteen mallards and a widgeon one evening while I was there. This was excellent work, considering that it was only for a short time during the dusk that he could shoot, that they were all single shots, and that every bird had to be retrieved out of water overgrown with rushes, etc. The widgeon have already begun to fly in pairs.

In the middle of February the peewits begin to appear here. The exact day depends chiefly on the state of the weather: the first break up of the snow and ice generally brings them. About the same time I hear the coo of the wood-pigeons, who now come near the house for protection. This they do every year as the breeding season approaches.

Three otters are frequenting the mouth of the river, apparently fishing for the flounders left in

the pools near the sea. The keeper is pretty sure of catching them by putting traps at the places where they leave the water on their way up the stream after fishing. Whilst going *down* the otter seldom leaves the water at all; but uninterruptedly fishes his way to the sea: coming up, he takes the land at all the rapids and strong streams. Two rather singular and yet similar things happened to me one day whilst I was wild-fowl shooting. I shot at a mallard, a considerable distance from me, and evidently struck him, as, after flying some distance to the windward, he pitched in a grass field: but, on my approach, he rose again and went at a great height down wind towards the sea. I happened to keep my glass on him, and when he was about a quarter of a mile off I saw him turn over in the air and fall. On coming up to the place I found the bird quite alive, but with his wing broken close to the body. The shot must have struck the bone without breaking it. The singular part of the affair was that the bird could battle against strong wind for at least a quarter of a mile without the injured bone giving way. In the evening we went to wait at a pool for ducks. Just as it got dark a rushing noise was heard, and a pair of swans skimmed rapidly over the old keeper's head, and pitched in the water, making a monstrous wave.

They did not see us, and immediately began to feed. It was getting dark, and the old man, not wishing to lose a chance, got up from his hiding-place and ran quickly to the water's edge, firing both barrels at the largest bird as it flew away. His gun was only loaded with No. 3, and the distance, as we afterwards found, was above forty yards. Both the swans flew on for some distance, until we suddenly saw the wing of one give way, and down came the bird into the pool, which was of considerable size, although shallow. I had left my retriever at home to rest, and before I could stop him, in went the old man, and then began a chase which I have seldom seen equalled. Although the water was shallow, the bottom was uneven; and every minute down went Donald head foremost. I called to him to let me shoot the bird, and leave it to drift to the shore; but all in vain. On he went, tumbling over and over, and the swan swimming and struggling in the water close to him, making an immense splashing and noise. They got quite away from me; and I had nothing left but to sit down and watch the chase as well as I could through the approaching darkness. At last he hemmed the bird into a rushy corner of the loch, and caught her. But this was no sooner done, than the swan, by her flapping and struggling, tripped

him up ; and got away again, leaving her antagonist flat in the water. Then, and not till then, he began to load his gun, which he had to my great wonderment contrived to carry all the time high over his head ; but, of course, notwithstanding all his care, it had got quite wet and would not go off, and the conflict ended at last by a lucky blow from the barrels which stunned the swan. I was amused at the boyish eagerness of so old a stager ; particularly as we never lost a shot at ducks or anything else without his laying it to my fault. I "*had lifted my head too high,*" or done something else, showing my want of tact. The poor fellow was in a sad plight, being ducked to the skin all over with half frozen water. However, I made him walk quickly home, and he got no damage from his exploit. The swan weighed 18 lbs., and measured above seven feet from tip to tip. We found that many shots had struck the wing feathers without breaking them.

Towards the end of February, whenever the ground is soft, the badgers leave their holes, and wander far and near, digging up the ground like pigs, in the fields as well as in the woods.

The wild-cats are brindled gray, and I have observed that domestic cats of the same colour are more inclined to take to the woods and hunt for

themselves than any others. When they do so they invariably grow very large, and are most destructive to game of all kinds. A large cat, of this colour, found out some tame rabbits belonging to my boys, and killed several of them. At last we saw him come out of a hole where some white rabbits were breeding; and he was shot. The brute had evidently been living on them for some time.

At this season the bean goose and the pink-footed goose feed very much on a coarse red-coloured grass which grows in the peat-mosses. They pull it up and eat the root, which is somewhat bulbous shaped. While feeding on it they become very heavy and fat, and have no strong or disagreeable flavour.

Though these two kinds of geese both feed and fly together, still while on wing and while on the ground they keep somewhat apart. The bean geese are far the most numerous; but there is generally a small company of the pink-footed kind with them, and no one but a close observer would perceive that they do not associate as closely as if they all belonged to one family.

A wounded brent goose, which I brought home, very soon became tame, and fed fearlessly close to us; indeed, I have frequently observed the same inclination to tameness in this beautiful kind of goose.