



CHAPTER XIV.

MARCH.

Wild-swans—Loch of Spynie ; Wild-fowl on it—Pochard—
Carrion Crows—Death of Wild-swan—Domestication of
Wild-fowl ; flavour of—Arrival of Geese.

EVERY day now shows the approach of spring. The mallards are in pairs in all the pools near the lakes, taking to the larger sheets of water only during the daytime. My boys catch plenty of sea-trout in the river; these fish rise better in the month of March than at any other time. I have seen for some time six wild-swans on one of the lakes; they appear to be of two different kinds, three of them being much larger than the others. The larger birds, too, are much more wary and wild than the smaller; at the head of them all is the largest swan I ever saw.

The swans frequent one particular lake, seldom alighting on any other piece of water. This lake is peculiarly open, and very difficult of approach, which is doubtless one reason for their fixing on it; another is, that in many places it is so shallow that they can reach with their long necks the grassy

plants growing at the bottom, on the roots of which plants they feed. Whenever I go that way there are these swans surrounded by numbers of ducks, widgeon, teal, etc., who are feeding with them and looking out for the scraps and remnants of the plants which they pull up.

Day by day, at the beginning of March, the brent geese seem to increase in numbers: they feed on the grassy banks on the shores of the neck of land called the "Bar."

I drove over to Gordonston to shoot ducks on Spynie. Although the lochs were crowded with birds the day was too fine and calm to enable me to kill many. However, I managed to shoot a few mallards and teal by rowing along and quietly in and out the tall reeds which grow in patches on the lake. The teal are now very lively, flying constantly in small companies and keeping up a perpetual whistling. The coots are always conspicuous amongst the other wild-fowl, swimming high in the water and moving quickly about. On the islands I found several otter seats in the rushes, where they appear to make forms like hares.

The keeper caught a beautiful male pochard which had been wounded somewhere in the body, but apparently was not much hurt, although disabled from flying. I took it home with me alive,

and turned it into a small enclosure, where it amused us much by its tameness and confidence, beginning to eat worms and porridge immediately, and seeming to enjoy itself in this new situation as much as if it had been always accustomed to it.

There are no enemies so destructive to the wild-fowl as the carrion or rather the hooded crow, which is the kind we have here. Eggs and young birds all come alike to these robbers, but the keeper at Spynie manages to kill great numbers of them by poison; he uses strychnia, a very small quantity of which kills the crow on the spot.

The badgers hunt more and more every day at this season if the weather is open, and apparently they wander several miles from their home.

On the 2d of March I see the rooks building. There is much snow on the mountains, but the low country is quite clear.

The principal wild-fowl on Loch Spynie, Loch Lee, etc., just now, are mallards, sheldrakes, widgeons, teals, pintails, scaup ducks, pochards, golden eyes, a few swans, bald coots and waterhens, besides an infinity of gulls, redshanks, plovers, peewits, curlews, etc. They all keep up a constant calling and noise, in the morning and evening particularly. All the ducks, though collected in flocks, still keep in pairs, so that when a large flock is on

wing, it seems to consist wholly of different pairs of birds.

I have tried two or three days to get at the largest wild-swan on Loch Lee, but without success; my fruitless attempts I do not mark down—*Horas non numero nisi serenas*. However, on the 6th, a fine sunny day, as I passed at some distance from the lake where the swans were feeding, they rose and alighted on the largest of the pieces of water; seeing this, and that they were not inclined to take to the sea immediately, I sent the boy who was with me round the lake where they were, while I made my preparations for receiving them at their feeding lake, supposing that they would return to it if allowed to rest for an hour or so and then quietly moved; even if they did not alight, I knew that I was pretty sure of their line of flight to the sea, and they seldom flew very high. I waded across part of the loch to an island, where I determined to await them, and set to work to make up a hiding-place of long heather, etc. This done, I loaded my gun with large shot and cartridges, and established myself behind my barricade. With my glass I saw the boy and retriever go round towards them; the appearance of the swans floating quietly on the water was most picturesque, their white forms being clearly defined on

the dark blue water, and their shadows almost as distinct as themselves. They all held their heads erect, watching the boy, who, as he had been instructed, walked to and fro opposite the birds and sufficiently near to put them up, but without appearing to be in pursuit of them. I hoped by this means to drive them over to the loch where I was concealed without frightening them so much as to make them take off to the sea; but they seemed so unwilling to rise, and so little afraid of the boy, whom they appeared to look at with curiosity rather than alarm, that I struck a light in order to smoke the pipe of patience and resignation, for, fine as the day was for March, my situation in a damp island and wet through above my knees began to be uncomfortable.

The latakia was not half puffed away when I heard the well-known warning cry of the swans, and immediately looking round saw them just flapping along the water preparatory to their flight. Cocking my gun, and holding the pipe tighter in my teeth, I waited anxiously to see in what direction they would fly. At first they made straight eastward, as if off for the bay of Findhorn, but after a short flight in that direction they turned, and I saw them coming three and three together, as usual, straight towards where I was concealed. In a few

minutes they were exactly over my head, at a good height, but still within shot, flying with their long necks stretched straight out and their black feet tucked up, but plainly visible as they passed over me. I stood up and took a deliberate aim at the largest of them as he ascended higher into the air at my unexpected appearance. The first barrel seemed to have little effect on him, though I distinctly heard the shot rattle on his strong quills; the second, however, which was loaded with larger shot, was more effective: whilst his two companions continued crying to each other, he remained silent. However, he kept up with the rest, and they all went off towards the bay. In the meantime three smaller swans came within twenty yards of me or less, trumpeting and calling loudly.

With the glass I watched the bird I had fired at, as I knew he was hard hit. He still, however, held his way with the rest, and they were gradually getting indistinct, when I suddenly saw him rise straight up into the air, his snowy plumage shining as it caught the rays of the sun. I saw him a second time rise perpendicularly to a great height; he then suddenly turned backwards in the air and tumbled headlong to the ground perfectly dead. He was above half a mile or more from me, in the direction of the bay, and the whole intervening

ground was covered with sandhills and bent, so that I could not see the exact spot where he fell, whether on the dry ground or in the sea. However, I marked the direction as well as I could, and set off after him.

Large as he was, I had a long and for some time a fruitless search amongst the broken sandhills. I scanned the bay with the glass in vain, and then came back towards the lochs. At last I hit upon him by finding a quantity of blood on the sand, and following the drops, which had fallen almost in a stream: in fact the track of blood, though falling from such a height, was as conspicuous as that of a wounded hare on snow. At length I came to the swan, who was lying stretched out on the sand, and a noble bird he was. I shouldered him as well as his great length would enable me to do, and carried him back to where the boy was waiting for me. I found him, too, no slight burden; he weighed above 27 lbs.; the breadth between his wings 8 feet, and his length 5 feet. Of all the swans I ever killed he was by far the largest, the usual weight being from 15 to 18 lbs.

The pochard which I brought home from Spynie remains quite contented and goes about with the other ducks. He will eat whatever they feed upon, but prefers worms to everything else, showing great

activity in diving for them when they are flung into the water. If they are given to him on land, he usually carries each worm to the water before eating it. Even when brought into the house he seems quite at home. Many kinds of wild-fowl might, with a little care, be perfectly domesticated, and I have no doubt would breed freely. Care must, however, be taken to prevent their flying away at the migrating seasons, and also to keep them at home when they begin to make their nests, as at that time they seem inclined to wander off in search of quiet and undisturbed places. I have no doubt that the sheldrake might be tamed in this way, and after a few generations of them had been bred at home, that these birds would become as useful for the table as our common ducks, and would be far more ornamental.

After two or three generations of any bird have been domesticated, the young ones lose all their wild inclinations, tameness becoming hereditary with them, as skill and the power of benefiting by education become hereditary in dogs to a very striking degree.

Though the flesh of the wild sheldrake is quite unfit to eat, being excessively rank and fishy, the birds, if domesticated and fed on proper food, would soon lose this strong flavour. The common

mallard, though so excellent a bird when feeding in the stubble-fields, is often rank and bad when driven by deep snows and frost to feed on seaweed, shellfish, etc. Widgeon and brent geese also, and in fact all wild-fowl, are good or bad eating according to where they feed, in the same way that the dog of the Chinese, which is fattened for the table, must be very unlike in flavour to a foxhound who has been fed on horseflesh.

The bernacle goose seldom pays us a visit, but I saw a few one day near the bar. I had one of my boys with me, who was anxious to get a shot at a wild-swan who was swimming about one of the lochs, and when we came back from an unsuccessful pursuit of him the geese had left the place. This bird is numerous only on the west coast.

About the 20th of March I see a few white-fronted geese feeding in the swamps near the lakes.

On the 22d the dabchicks come to their breeding places in the smaller lochs, where there are plenty of rushes, and the sheldrakes now come frequently inland. About the middle of March the black-backed gulls are very noisy in the bay.

As the old keeper saw some bean geese pass over the house, I took a long walk on the 12th to look for them in their usual feeding-places, but without success. The old man, a true "laudator temporis

acti," complains that the whole country is spoilt by "drainings and improvements," which banish the wild-fowl from their former haunts.

When the frogs begin to croak in the pools and ditches the mallards are sure to be found in these places every evening and morning.

23d.—*Nunc avis in ramo tecta laremque parat.*
The wood-pigeons are building in the shrubberies close to the window.

How beautifully the different birds are constructed for their different modes of feeding! The tender nerves at the end of the bills of the woodcock, snipe, and curlew, enable them to find their food under ground as correctly as if it were within full view. The oyster-catcher can detach from the rock and break up mussels and other shellfish. The oyster-catcher, by the by, can have little to do with oysters except in name, for strong as he is, he could scarcely manage to find his living if condemned to feed on oysters alone. The bill of the merganser and other birds of that kind is perfectly adapted, by means of its curved teeth, to hold their slippery prey, while the inward sloping plates in the wild-duck's bill are equally suited for retaining the small worms, etc., on which they feed. The carrion-feeding ravens and other birds of that class have a most perfect and powerful weapon in

their strong and sharp bills. The crossbill, too, shears off the fir-cones and extracts the seeds with his clumsy-looking bill with a facility that no other shaped tool would afford him. In short, go through the list of all birds, and you will find that each one is perfectly adapted in form and powers for procuring its peculiar food.

Whilst talking of the food of birds I cannot help adverting to the absurd idea of woodcocks and snipes living "by suction," which you see gravely affirmed as a fact; whereas a snipe or woodcock is as great an eater as any bird I know. Any one who has kept either of these birds in confinement well knows what difficulty he has had in supplying them with sufficient worms to satisfy their ravenous appetite. My friend Mr. Hancock tells me that he has succeeded in keeping many kinds of sandpipers, and even the common snipe, alive and in good health by feeding them principally on boiled liver minced small, which seems to approximate more closely to the usual food of insectivorous and worm-eating birds, than any other substance.

It is amusing to see the arrival of the larger flocks of geese about this time of year. A few small companies of pink-footed and white-fronted geese usually arrive early in the month, but about the 28th, and generally on some quiet evening, im-

mense flights of the bean goose arrive in the Findhorn Bay. They come in, just about sunset, in four or five large flocks, and an infinite quantity of gabbling and chattering takes place for several hours; but by daybreak they seem to have determined on their respective beats, and separating into smaller flocks disperse over the land, and do not collect again in very numerous flocks until they are about to leave that part of the country at the end of April or the beginning of May. The wild-geese decrease in number every year: the gray lag goose is a very rare visitor to the oat-fields here, although so many breed in Sutherlandshire.

The woodcocks are more numerous at this time of year in the larger woods than during any part of the winter: they pair early, and have probably before this time taken up their breeding quarters. Those which breed abroad do not leave this country till just before their time of laying. I am much inclined to think that most birds which migrate from us in the spring pair some time before they take their departure.
