

CHAPTER XIX.

AUGUST.

Golden Plover—Ring-dottrel—Migratory Birds—Butterflies—
Crabs; their manner of casting their shells—The Sea Angler
—The Deal Fish—Habits of Woodcocks—A pet Roe—
Grouse-shootings and Grouse—Wild-fowl.

DURING the first part of this month the mountain-bred birds, such as golden plover, dottrel, curlew, etc., are daily seen to collect more and more in flocks on the sea-shore or other places which suit their habits. In the lower parts of the country the dottrel is now a very rare bird, and it is seldom that many of them are killed, although they are so tame and easy of approach as to have obtained for themselves the local name of the "foolish dottrel." It is one of the peculiarities of this bird that one pair only breeds on the same hill or mountain. Whilst you may see thousands of golden plovers on a hill-side during the breeding season, you will never find above one pair of dottrel on each ridge. The ring-dottrel and other shore birds become at this season more numerous day by day. Many insectivorous birds, also, such as the whitethroat, redstart, etc., seem to draw gradually towards the eastern coasts

of the kingdom, as if in readiness to depart. The wheatears almost entirely leave the wild rocky mountains of the North, where they breed, and are during this month caught in great numbers on the south downs of Sussex.

The regularity of the appearance and disappearance of birds in different districts is one of the most striking and interesting parts of their history, and is a subject worthy of more attention than it has hitherto received. It is well known to many sportsmen that woodcocks appear in certain woods, and even under certain holly bushes, or other favourite spots, on the same day of the same month, year after year; and in like manner and with equal punctuality do numberless smaller birds, of less notoriety and of less consequence to the sportsman, make their annual flittings northwards or southwards. On referring to notes which I have made during several years, I find that I have seen many migratory birds for the first time in each year, on either the very same day of the month or within one day of it.

Even in the insect world the same punctuality in their change of abode is kept up, and an observant "*out-of-door*" entomologist will tell almost to a day when any particular moth or butterfly will first appear. The exclusiveness of some butterflies as

to their locality is a very striking peculiarity of this insect. You may, year after year, find a certain kind in great numbers within a space of a hundred yards, but you may search in vain for a single specimen over the whole surrounding country; although both as to plants and soil it may seem as favourable for their production as the spot to which they confine themselves. I was told by a clever entomologist that I should find any number of specimens of a particular butterfly, which I wanted to procure, in a certain stone quarry, or rather where a quarry had *once* been, during the first and second week in August, but at no other time and in no other situation. My friend was perfectly right. Then and there, and then and there only, could I find this particular butterfly. There are few districts of the kingdom where a man of leisure would not find plenty to interest and amuse him were he to direct his attention to the peculiar habits and instincts of living animals from the highest to the lowest, from the eagle to the insect which he treads unconsciously under his feet every step he takes. People little know by how many natural objects of beauty and interest they are everywhere surrounded. How true is a French saying that "L'oisiveté est la mère de toutes les vices;" and how many cares and troubles would thousands

avoid did they employ their leisure hours in such pursuits instead of letting idleness lead them into numberless evil habits! It is for this reason that I always like to see the study of natural history encouraged in children.

At the beginning of August I frequently find the crabs (which frequent the rocks left exposed at low water) either just about to change their shell, or just after having changed it. Nothing can be more curious than the manner in which they contrive to draw their legs and claws out of their last year's covering, casting their entire shell perfectly whole and unbroken. A tough skin seems to form over the flesh, under the shell, and of the same colour, which apparently hardens rapidly by exposure (when it is uncovered), and this skin forms the new shell.

The poor animals are quite helpless till this hardens, and are at the mercy of their numerous enemies. The fishermen say that whilst the female crab is in this weak state the male constantly attends on and protects her. I have myself often seen a crab in her still unhardened shell, closely accompanied by a larger crab, whose shell was perfectly hard, and who offered battle most valiantly when he and his spouse were approached.

During the herring-fishing it frequently happens that some strange and rarely seen monster of the

sea gets either entangled in the nets or is cast upon the shore during his pursuit of the shoals of smaller fish. Among others I have more than once seen a most hideous large-headed brute of a fish, whom the country people call sometimes "the sea-devil," sometimes "the sea-angel," but whose more regular cognomen is, I believe, "the sea-angler." The first name he owes to his excessive and wicked-looking ugliness; the second must have been given him ironically; whilst the third is derived from his reputed habit of attracting fish to their destruction by a very wily ruse. He buries himself, it is said, in the sands by scraping a hole with his two most unseemly and deformed-looking "hands," which are placed below what may be called his chin. Being in this way quite concealed, he allows some long, worm-like appendages, which grow from the top of his head, to wave and float above the surface of the sand: fish taking these for some kind of food are attracted to the spot, when the concealed monster by a sudden spring manages to engulf his victims in the fearfully-wide cavity of his mouth, which is armed with hundreds of teeth sloping inwards, and as hard and sharp as needles, so that nothing which has once entered it can escape. So runs the tale, the exact truth of which I am not prepared to vouch for.

A rare and singularly formed fish was once brought to me during the month of August by the fishermen. It is called the "Deal-fish," or, locally, the "Saw-fish." The latter name is very expressive of its shape and proportions, the fish being flat *vertically* instead of, like a sole or flounder, *horizontally*. The following is the description of the fish which I set down at the time :

Length, 3 feet 6 inches.

Depth, 7 inches.

Greatest thickness, between half and three quarters of an inch.

Colour, bright silver, with one very thin crimson fin running the whole length of its back.

The tail very transparent, fan-shaped, and of a bright crimson.

A large flat eye ;

And a small mouth, which the fish had a peculiar power of elongating to a considerable extent.

It had managed to get hooked through the back by a common haddock-hook. I wished to have preserved the skin, as I believe that there are not above one or two perfect specimens extant ; but, unluckily, through a mistake the fish was destroyed.

August 4th.—We caught a young woodcock full grown in one of the woods near here. A dog disturbed it in the cover ; and it flew fluttering into the road, where it allowed itself to be caught by the hand, although it was quite as large as an old bird, and its wings apparently fully feathered.

The woodcock breeds every season in the north of Scotland, not only in the large fir plantations, but also in the smaller patches of birch, etc., which fringe the shores of many of the most northern lakes. That those bred in the country migrate I have no doubt, as they all invariably disappear for two or three months between summer and the first frosts of winter. As I have seen their nests at all times from March to August, it is natural to suppose that the woodcock breeds more than once in the season.

I have again, this year, seen the old woodcocks carrying their young down to the soft marshy places to feed. Unfitted as their feet appear to be for grasping anything, the old birds must have no slight labour in carrying their whole family (generally consisting of four) every evening to the marshes, and back again in the morning. They always return before sunrise.

Occasionally I have come upon a brood of young woodcocks in a dark, quiet, swampy part of the woods, near which they had probably been bred. In a case of this kind we may suppose that the old birds are saved the trouble of conveying their young to a distant feeding-place; but as the young birds are frequently hatched in long heather, in dry situations, and far from any marshes, they would in-

evitably perish in the nest were they not daily carried backwards and forwards by their parents. The quantity of worms required to sustain one of these birds would astonish those town-bred naturalists who gravely assert that the woodcock "*lives on suction.*"

Whilst walking in a wood I was surprised at seeing a roe standing within a little distance of me, with a silver bell hung round its neck. Having taken a good look at me, the beautiful little animal bounded off into the recesses of the wood, ringing its bell, to the astonishment of the rabbits who were feeding about the openings of the cover. This roe belonged to the ladies at Darnaway; and, with the usual wilfulness of such pets, had wandered away from its proper home, where it lived in security and plenty, petted by all, and had taken up its abode in the wood, which was several miles from Darnaway, and where it ran the risk of being worried by colley dogs or shot while feeding in the neighbouring corn-fields. Once or twice afterwards, when I was shooting in this wood, the beagles started and ran the roe some distance before I could stop them. As long as he continued ringing his bell through this cover I seldom saw any other roe in it, although at other times it was a favourite resort of these beautiful creatures. Once it followed, for some

distance towards Darnaway, a servant who had been accustomed to feed and pet it, but taking alarm at some people at work in a field it turned back again. I do not know what was the end of the pretty animal, but towards the winter it disappeared, and I fear it was shot by some poaching fellow whilst feeding in the fields where it was often seen. Its silver bell made it both an easier and a more valuable victim.

August 12th.—On this (to so many people) *dies memorabilis*, whilst shooting with a friend in Inverness-shire, I found a few old grouse lying dead, killed by the prevailing disease, which of late years has committed such havoc amongst these birds in certain districts; some which we killed were already attacked by it. Whenever this was the case we invariably observed that the plumage of the bird was much altered, having a rusty red appearance instead of the fine rich colour characteristic of the grouse. The feathers, too, had an unnatural kind of dryness about them, which gave the bird a bleached, unhealthy, look. In those grouse which I opened myself the presence of the disease was indicated by the liver being apparently rotten.

Whatever is the cause of this mortality, it is a matter of some consequence to the proprietors of those districts where the grouse-shootings let for as

high or a higher rent than the sheep pasturage; for it can scarcely be expected that Englishmen will continue paying at the rate they do for the right of shooting over tracts of ground where the grouse are becoming almost extinct, as is the case in several places. Instead of sparing the birds where they are attacked by this epidemic, I should be much more inclined to shoot down every grouse in the infected part of the hills; and I would continue to do this as long as any appearance of the disease remained. I would then give them a year or two of rest, according to the numbers and appearance of the birds. This seems to me the most likely way to check the destruction caused by what the keepers call the "grouse disease." In some parts of the Highlands there were scarcely any young birds seen in August, and the old grouse were picked up in dozens, dead on the heather.

I observed one peculiarity in the habits of the grouse in 1847, which was new to me. They were collected in large flocks on the 12th of August in the fields of oats in the elevated districts, which were at that time perfectly unripe and green. In every field near the moors there were large flocks of the old birds busy in the midst of the corn; but they always took the precaution to leave some sentries outside, who, perched on a piece of rock or an

old wall, stood with their necks stretched to their utmost height, on the look-out for any approaching enemy. When the corn is ripe, and especially after it is cut and in sheaves on the fields, the grouse are very fond of it, and fill their crops daily with oats, like so many chickens, but before this season I never saw them attack the green and empty oats. There was at this time a very unusual deficiency in the growth and bloom of the heather, causing a great scarcity of the tender shoots which form the principal food of grouse; and this may have driven them to the new kind of food, to which they appeared to take very kindly.

It is in the oat-fields belonging to the small farmers and others living near the grouse hills where the greatest havoc is committed amongst grouse by the poachers, for there they can be caught with the greatest facility, in any number that may be required for the market; and it is more difficult for keepers to prevent this kind of poaching than any other, as it may be carried on by girls or children late in the evening and early in the morning, the snares being removed during the daytime, or on the appearance of a keeper, whose approach in this kind of open country may be perceived from a sufficient distance to enable the poacher to remove all traces of his proceedings.

Thousands of grouse are killed in this manner for the London and other markets.

This year, 1848, on the very first day of the shooting, I happened to be in a poulterer's shop in a large town in Northumberland, when a servant came in to buy a brace or two of "*well-kept grouse, fit for immediate use,*" for his master: and a brace was instantly handed to him from amongst a great number, which looked as if they had been killed a week or ten days; at any rate they were nearly putrid, and according to my taste fit only to be flung away. If this system commences so long before the birds are legally saleable, we may easily imagine what an immense number of grouse are illegally destroyed during the whole season, in spite of all the expenses incurred to preserve them.

In my opinion this wholesale system of poaching might easily be put a stop to by the *proprietors* of the land, who, by stringent agreements with their sheep-tenants and cotters, might prevent all trespassing on the hills, much more easily than the tenants of shootings can do; and, really, considering the great profit in many ways that this bird is to the Highland landowners, it seems both their interest and duty to protect and assist sportsmen in every possible manner in preserving the game:

whereas, let the matter be glossed over as it may, every lessee of grouse-shootings knows how very little assistance and encouragement he receives from nine proprietors out of ten, notwithstanding the liberal and sometimes exorbitant rents which are paid. There are, however, many exceptions to this state of things; and landlords are yet to be found who identify the interest of their tenant with their own.

The rage for grouse-shooting, at present so great, is not likely to change, like many other fashions. The fine air, the freedom, the scenery, and all the other *agrémens* accompanying this amusement, must always make it the most fascinating kind of sport in the way of shooting which the British isles or indeed almost any country can afford. The bird, too, in beauty and game-like appearance, is not to be equalled. In fact, as long as grouse and heather exist, and the nature of man is imbued with the same love for sport and manly exercise as it now is, grouse-shooting will be one of our favourite relaxations from the graver cares of life.

Although, like others, I am excessively fond of this sport, yet I care little for numbers of slain; and when following it, independently and alone, am not occupied solely by the anxiety of bagging so many brace. My usual plan when I set out is to

fix on some burn, some cool and grassy spring, or some hill summit which commands a fine view, as the extremity of my day's excursion. To this point then I walk, killing what birds come in my way, and after resting myself and dogs, I return by some other route. Undoubtedly the way to kill the greatest number of grouse is to hunt one certain tract of ground closely and determinedly; searching every spot as if you were looking for a lost needle, and not leaving a yard of heather untried. This is the most killing system, as every practised grouse-shooter knows; but to me it is far less attractive than a good stretch across a range of valley and mountain, though attended with fewer shots. I am also far more pleased by seeing a brace of good dogs do their work well, and exhibiting all their fine instinct and skill, than in toiling after twice the number when hunted by a keeper, whose only plan of breaking the poor animals in is to thrash them until they are actually afraid to use half the wonderful intellect which nature has given them.

Although the 20th of August is the day appointed for legal execution of the blackcock, yet in most seasons the 1st of September would be quite soon enough for the shooting to begin, as until the commencement of September the young birds have seldom acquired their strength or plumage, and can

be knocked down before the pointer's nose with a stick almost as easily as shot ; indeed I have frequently seen them caught in the hand. When in full vigour and plumage there is no handsomer bird than an old blackcock, and although his size makes him an easy mark, his cunning and strength are pretty good securities for his not falling too readily to the sportsman's gun. But in August even the old birds are not fit to shoot, being neither in perfect condition nor in full plumage. The blackcock is much more addicted to feeding in the corn-fields than the grouse is, and takes long flights for the purpose of reaching some favourite stubble-field.

Few stags have got the velvet off their horns during August, except in favoured situations, where good feeding in the spring and winter has enabled them to keep up their condition and the strength which is required for the production and growth of their weighty antlers.

I find that towards the end of August, when the hill lakes and swamps are much disturbed by grouse-shooters, the wild-ducks bring down their young broods in great numbers, both to the bay and to the lochs. Every evening I can make sure of killing a brace or two as they fly to the corn-fields regularly when the sun sets ; indeed they sometimes do considerable damage by trampling down

and eating the corn before it is cut. But some of the wild-ducks which are killed in the bogs and swamps have their crops full of the seeds of a coarse grass which grows in these places, and also of some of the wild-fruits, such as blackberries, etc. Indeed I fancy that a wild-duck is about as omnivorous a creature as can be found, almost as much so as the man who eats him : nothing which he can swallow comes amiss to him, whether fish, flesh, or grain. The teal, on the contrary, appears to be almost wholly insectivorous : at least these birds feed only in the swamps and shallow pools, never taking to the fields for grain or seeds, but living entirely on aquatic insects and some few small plants.

Although the widgeon breed in Sutherlandshire, and perhaps in other parts of Scotland, I never saw one in this part of the country during July or August. I believe that this bird feeds neither on grain nor insects, but on aquatic grasses; and when these are not to be had, he grazes readily on the grass-fields and banks near the sea.

The great art in getting at most wild-fowl is to discover their feeding-places; for to these they always resort at certain times either of the day or of the tide, some kinds being more dependent than others on the ebb and flow of the sea; whilst the

common mallard is almost wholly nocturnal in his feeding, and does not regulate his movements by the state of the tide.

The sheldrakes, who were so numerous a few weeks ago about the sandbanks and bar, have now nearly all disappeared, and their places are supplied by innumerable curlews and other waders, all of whom appear to find their food in the moist sands left by the ebb-tide, which in this country contain an endless supply of shellfish of different kinds, from the minutest species, fit only to feed the dunlin and sandpiper, to those which serve for food to the oyster-catcher, whose powerful bill is well adapted to breaking up the strongest cockles and mussels which are found in this district.

