

GAME-DEALERS.



CHAPTER XXXVI.

Poulterers' Shops—Supply of Game—Red-deer—Deer killed in the Fields—Roe—Grouse and Black Game; calling of—Shooting Hares by night—Pheasants—Advantages attending the sale of Game by the fair Sportsman and the Landed Proprietor—American Game—Wild-fowl in Shops—Bird-dealers in Leadenhall Market—Norway Game—Manner of collecting—Hybrids—Introduction of new species of Game into Britain—Prolific Birds—Sea-fowl; their breeding-places—Solon Geese—Migration of Fish.

IN these railroad-days, when carriage is so cheap and expeditious, the poulterers' and game-dealers' shops in most of the large towns of England and Scotland are supplied with game of every description in quantities that are quite astonishing. Red-deer and roebucks are to be bought everywhere, and, I am sorry to say, at nearly all seasons. Having easy communication, and constant dealings and interchanges with each other, the poulterers are able to supply to their customers almost any kind of game which may be asked for.

A red-deer, killed in Perthshire or Argyleshire, by the assistance of railway or steamboat, is in Liverpool or Manchester long before he has been sufficiently kept to suit the palate of a civic epicure; and the poacher has such facilities in getting rid of his killed game that half the risk of his occupation is gone. The stag is scarcely cold before it is whisked off two counties away.

Considerable numbers of red-deer are killed in the neighbourhood of preserved places and forests during the winter season. When his natural grazing becomes scarce, a stag, if there be a turnip-field within half a dozen miles of his haunts, is sure to find it out, and pay it nightly visits; at first, coming alone, but soon accompanied by a herd of followers, who do great damage to the farmer by trampling down and eating the turnips. The owner of the field, if he has so little of a Highlander about him as to be able to resist having a shot at the deer himself, is sure to have some hanger-on or acquaintance who will take the trouble off his hands: accordingly, when the moon is of a good age, a hole is dug in the middle of the field during the day-time, while the nightly marauders are miles away. Towards twilight the poacher conceals himself in this rough hiding-place; if there is snow on the ground he puts on a white cap

and shirt over his other dress, and waits patiently till he hears the tread of the deer. Having fed with impunity more than once in the place, they come boldly and without hesitation into the midst of the field, scooping out the turnips with their teeth and breaking them to pieces with their sharp hoofs as they pass to and fro through the crop, playing and frequently fighting with each other. If the wind—that bugbear to deer-stalkers and deer-poachers—does not betray the presence of their enemy, it is more than probable that before many minutes are over some unfortunate stag comes close to the place of ambuscade, when he receives either a couple of bullets or a handful of slugs in his shoulder. Startled by the report, and not at the first moment knowing whence it comes, the rest of the deer are likely enough before they make off to collect in a group in the middle of the field, perhaps within a few yards of their hidden enemy. If so, another of the herd is probably killed, and the remainder rush off and do not return to the same tempting spot for some little time. Before daylight the hole is refilled, the dead game is taken away, and no traces remain of what has happened. Roe are constantly killed in the same manner, and are even caught in snares made of strong small rope.

Black game and grouse are obtained by the poachers in great numbers late in the season, by means, not only of tame call-birds of both sexes, but also by a call-pipe. However wild they may be and inaccessible to the fair sportsman, these birds can always be brought within shot by some means. A cock grouse on hearing the well-imitated call of the female immediately answers it, and, approaching by repeated short flights, stopping every now and then to crow as if in defiance of any rivals, or to give warning of his coming, is soon killed. The female grouse is attracted in the same manner by an imitation of the call of the male.

So pugnacious a bird as a blackcock is very easy to call till he comes within shot of the concealed shooter: and indeed partridges, and all other birds, are attracted by those experienced in imitating their different notes, in a manner and with a facility which is quite surprising to the uninitiated.

I am told that some poachers can even allure a hare within shot during a moonlight night by imitating the cry of one of its own species: this, however, is a fact for which I cannot vouch; but many poachers, from constant watching and following in silence these animals, acquire such a perfect know-

ledge of their habits, manner of calling to each other, etc., that I by no means deem it impossible.

Hares, like deer, travel considerable distances to obtain their favourite food, and are therefore easily killed by the nightly poacher, either by being snared or shot en route. Practice and natural keenness enable some of these fellows to get the animal to the summit of some rising ground, so that the clear sky shall be behind it, and they can thus shoot a hare on nights when there is no moonlight, and when an unpractised pair of eyes would be scarcely able to distinguish a house from a tree.

Pheasants are killed by snare and gun as easily as barn-door fowls would be : so that the unprincipled dealer in game has not the slightest difficulty in keeping his shop full enough to supply the demands of all customers at all seasons.

I can imagine no better system for sportsmen to adopt than that of underselling the poacher as much as they possibly can. In Scotland, in particular, where the right to shoot game is bought, and very often at a high rate, I can see no reason whatever why the purchaser should not sell again what he has paid for. In recommending this to the renter of shooting-grounds, I only advocate his selling in a fair and liberal manner his overplus of game; not, of course, his hiring ground for the mere sake of

traffic and gain : but even when this is the case the landlord has seldom much cause of complaint. In the first place he, the landlord, makes a traffic of his game by letting it ; and in the second place the tenant, who in these commercial speculations is generally a permanent one, if he wishes to make money by the game, must take care to preserve and increase it proportionably.

The custom of selling game is, I am glad to see, becoming very general amongst the principal proprietors. To the careless observer it may at first appear an unjust proceeding for the landlord to sell game which feeds on the farms of his tenants ; but, practically, I scarcely know an instance where the latter are not most amply remunerated ; indeed the farmer can legally claim indemnification if his landlord is so unjust and unwise as to refuse it. It should be remembered also, that although rabbits, hares, and deer undoubtedly do much damage to crops, all flying game are assistants rather than enemies to the farmer.

In many of our larger towns the game-shops are even supplied with birds from America, which are brought by the steamers *viâ* Liverpool. The ruffed grouse, a very beautiful bird, and excellent for the table, a smaller species of grouse, and even the far-famed canvas-backed duck, find their way over in

these rapid vessels. The latter bird, however, does not seem likely to become a profitable article of commerce, as the price at which it is sold in America is greater than can be obtained for it in this country. Although the canvas-backed duck is a kind of pochard, yet, unlike our ducks of that species, it does not feed by diving, but almost wholly on the wild celery and other succulent plants; and this it is which gives its flesh the exquisite flavour so much praised by all who have eaten it. Excellent as our own mallards are when well fed in the corn-fields, the canvas-backed duck is undoubtedly far superior.

Besides the common eatable ducks, such as the mallard, the widgeon, and the teal, golden eyes, scaup ducks, scoters, and indeed every possible variety, are to be found in the large poulterers' shops: swans, geese of all kinds (the bernacle goose from Ireland principally, and the brent goose from almost all our coasts), are to be had in profusion: but these birds, and indeed all wild-fowl, are so variable in their flavour, according to the feeding-ground they come from, that the careful buyer should always endeavour to learn where they have been killed.

Strange as it may appear, mergansers, goosanders, and all the fish-eating and rank-tasted birds,

even including cormorants and sea-gulls, find consumers among the inhabitants of large towns, who are exceedingly omnivorous, and by no means over fastidious in their tastes ; and so wide is the range of ornithological traffic in which the poulterers engage, that the bird-stuffer and the collector of specimens cannot do better than make friends with them.

But beyond all other places, Leadenhall Market is the emporium to which the purchaser of rare birds and animals, living or dead, should betake himself. There is scarcely a quadruped, from a brown bear to a white mouse, or a bird, from a golden eagle to a long-tailed tomtit, which cannot be found there ; and not a few of the dealers in these articles are themselves curious specimens of the genus homo, accustomed to deal with every description of customer, from the nobleman who wishes to add to his menagerie or to the feathered tenants of his lake, to the organ-boy who wants to purchase a dormouse or monkey. They are as shrewd as Scotchmen, and as keen bargainers as a Yorkshire horse-dealer : but although somewhat over-suspicious in making their purchases, and sadly deficient in elegance of manner and language, they are on the whole by no means bad fellows to deal with, if care be taken not to “ rub them

against the grain." Singing-birds, hawks, cats with brass collars and chains, ready got up for tabby-loving spinsters, Blenheim spaniels, and wicked-looking bull-dogs, pigeons, bantams, gold-fish, in short every kind of bird or beast that was ever yet made a pet of is here to be bought, sold, and exchanged, and frequently the collector may obtain very rare and valuable specimens. Holland and Belgium supply great quantities of wild-fowl, canaries, carrier pigeons, etc.; and on a busy day the traffic in this division of Leadenhall Market is a most amusing sight.

One thing which especially surprises the visitor to this market is the total defiance of the game laws which all the dealers indulge in. There is scarcely a description of game which cannot be bought here at any season, legal or illegal; and it is difficult to understand how game laws and their penalties can be so openly and systematically infringed. Pheasants and pheasants' eggs, grouse and grouse eggs, etc. etc., are undisguisedly and unblushingly sold at all seasons, in defiance of informers and magistrates. On asking how it happens that the dealers can supply game of all sorts at all seasons, you are gravely told "that it is all foreign game." Scotch grouse are called Norwegian grouse, and good English partridges and

other game are libelled by being called Dutchmen or Frenchmen. It is certainly true that vast numbers of white grouse come from Norway. These birds, as well as the capercaillie, are caught or shot as opportunity offers during the winter, are subjected to the cold until they are thoroughly frozen, and are kept in that state until a full cargo is collected, or at least until a ship sails for London, Hull, or some British port. Although perhaps as many as eighty capercaillies may come over in one ship, it is not to be inferred that these birds are so numerous as to allow of this number being killed in the course of a short time in one place. They are generally obtained in very small numbers. Each peasant brings in one or two: these are all bought up and "frozen" by one general dealer, who periodically, or as opportunity offers, sends them to some poulterer in all-devouring England. The same system is carried on with regard to the Norwegian grouse or ptarmigan, the facility of freezing the birds enabling the dealers of that country to keep them until they have collected a sufficient number. A capercaillie killed in winter is to my taste scarcely eatable, owing to the strong flavour of turpentine which then pervades the flesh of the bird; I have, however, eaten one brought over early in the year, and it was almost as well-

tasted as any of our British game. It is to be hoped that in time we shall again see this noble kind of grouse tolerably common in the extensive plantations of fir and larch which are springing up on many of our Highland mountains which hitherto have been covered only by the heather.

Both in Scotland and Norway, wherever the capercaillie and blackcock inhabit the same district, hybrids between them are by no means uncommon. The difference of size between the male capercaillie and the gray-hen is very great; but the female of the former bird is much smaller than the male, being frequently very little larger than a full-grown blackcock. Both species, too, being polygamous, there is a greater chance of their breeding together than of hybrids between the blackcock and the grouse, those birds always pairing. The blackcock is a perfect Turk in his domestic establishment, taking to himself as many wives as he can collect together, and keeping them by force of arms against all rivals.

In the recent reintroduction into Scotland of the capercaillie a spirited example has been set us; and there is no doubt that many other species of grouse and game birds might be naturalised in Britain. The ruffed grouse, for instance, and several other species from America, and also pheas-

sants and other birds from the higher ranges of the Himalaya mountains, would not only be ornamental but valuable additions to our woods and hills ; nor can it be doubted that many of these beautiful birds would do well and increase in this climate, provided they were allowed for the first few years to breed and multiply undisturbed.

On considering the immense quantity of game and wild-fowl which is daily exposed in poulterers' shops throughout the entire kingdom, the question naturally suggests itself, " Will not these birds be soon extirpated ? " But, to all appearance, the supply continues amply to meet the demand year after year. By the beneficent arrangement of Providence all birds adapted for the food of man are far more prolific than the birds of prey, or than sea-gulls and those other birds the flesh of which cannot be eaten.

The nesting-places of sea-gulls and some other kinds of water-fowl are curious things to see. The constant going to and fro, the screaming, and wheeling about of the old birds and the apparent confusion are perfectly wonderful. The *confusion* is, however, *only* apparent. Each guillemot and each razor-bill amongst the countless thousands flies straight to her own single egg, regardless of the crowds of other birds, and undeceived by the

myriads of eggs which surround her. So, also, in the breeding-places of the black-headed and other gulls, every bird watches over and cares for her own nest—though the numbers are so great, and the tumult so excessive, that it is difficult to conceive how each gull can distinguish her own spotted eggs, placed in the midst of so many others exactly similar in size, shape, and colour; and when at length the young are hatched and are swimming about on the loch, or crowded together on some grassy point, the old birds, as they come home from a distance with food, fly rapidly amidst thousands of young ones, exactly similar to their own, without even looking at them, until they find their own offspring, who, recognising their parents amongst all the other birds, receive the morsel, without any of the other hungry little creatures around attempting to dispute the prize, each waiting patiently for its own parent, in perfect confidence that its turn will come in due season.

The breeding-rocks of the solan geese, the Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth, and Ailsa Craig on the west, will well repay the trouble of visiting them. Rows of the nests thickly cover the ground; and wild and wary as these birds are at other times, during the breeding-season they will not move from their nests until actually lifted off by the hand.

The eider-duck, peculiarly wild and shy as it is, is equally tame while sitting, allowing herself to be handled, and her nest to be robbed, not of its eggs, but of the valuable down of which it is composed, without attempting to move from it.

It is a singularly interesting sight to witness a number of the solan geese fishing on a calm day in the Firth of Forth. Following the shoals of herring, these handsome birds dash one after the other into the water with a force which is actually astonishing, coming up (and almost invariably with a herring in their bill) several yards from the place where they made the plunge. They do not rise to the surface gradually, like most divers, but suddenly, like a cork, or as if their buoyancy equalled that of a bladder. The peculiar manner in which the skin of this bird is attached to the body, leaving large intervals where the flesh and skin seem scarcely at all connected, may give it this peculiar lightness, which to the spectator is extremely striking.

During the severe winter season the solan geese disappear from the Bass Rock, going no one knows where; but even at that season two or three fine warm days bring them all back again. Their abiding places are probably regulated more by the supply of food than by the weather.

I am by no means of opinion that either herring,

salmon, or other so-called migratory fish, leave our coasts during those seasons when they disappear, or rather, I should say, when they are not caught. I am more inclined to think that they always continue in the same neighbourhood, retiring only to the depths of the ocean, where they rest quietly, safe from nets, instead of betaking themselves, as the general opinion is, to the other end of the world.

