



Loch near Rhiconnich.

CHAPTER VII.

Another Osprey's Nest ; Variety of Eggs—Golden Eagle ;
Manner of Hunting ; decrease of—Egg Collectors—Mr.
Hancock's Collection—Nests of Eagles ; Animals killed by—
The Mountain Hare—Fishing of Osprey.

Two miles from Scowrie, on the Rhiconnich road or near it, is a loch where the ospreys build, and where, in May, I shot the old hen, taking at the same time two eggs. Mr. Dunbar, with his usual perseverance, went to this nest immediately on our return from Handa, and found that the male bird had got another mate, and that she was already busily employed in sitting on a single egg.

It is very difficult to describe correctly the eggs of many birds : for instance, the two eggs which I took from this nest were beautifully marked with fine rich red spots, while the egg now taken by Dunbar was of a dirty white colour, marked at one end only by a splash of brown, and was also smaller than the others. In another nest, again, the eggs were considerably larger than either of these, and differently marked both as to colour and shape of spots. In the same manner one reads the description of the size of birds as being measured to inches

and sixteenths of an inch, but the authors forget or are not aware of the constant difference of size in birds of the same species.

We also examined the nest that we had seen in May last near the ferry of Glendha, or Kyleska as it is also called. On looking at it with a glass, we saw one old bird sitting, not *standing*, on the nest, and yet on Dunbar's swimming out to it he found no egg in the nest, which was exactly in the same state as when we left it three or four weeks ago: both birds, too, continued sailing and screaming over our heads as if they had eggs or young ones to defend. This nest, like the last three that we had seen, was built on the same kind of conical rock, standing out of the waters of the lake; indeed, on all the lakes where this singularly-shaped rock was to be seen, there also was the osprey's nest, and there it had apparently been for many a long year, as was clearly shown by one of the lochs being known by the old people only under the name of the loch of the "Eagle Fisher." The ospreys, on their arrival in this country, seem to seek out these rocks in the wild solitudes, and on these and these alone do they build. Trusting to their isolated and lonely situation for safety, these interesting birds hold undisputed sway over their watery kingdom. I could not help being reminded

of a couple of lines which I fell in with, that seem *à propos* to this instinct of the osprey which leads her to find out and take possession of all the rocks of this particular shape that are to be found in the lochs of Sutherland :—

“ Ni fallat fatum *Scoti* quocunq̄ue locatum
Invenient Lapidem, regnare tenentur ibidem.”

I cannot remember whom I quote from.

We drove again through the magnificently wild country which intervenes between Kyleska and Inchnadamph. Above the shoulder of the mountain, which stands conspicuously in front of the inn, a golden eagle was hunting. The distance at which this bird can see her prey has often been talked of, but I never saw her power in this respect so fully displayed as on this occasion. The eagle was hovering so high in the air that she looked like a speck, when suddenly she distinguished a grouse on the heather, even at that immense distance. The height was too great to make a direct swoop, so the noble bird, instead of coming down straight at the grouse, almost closed her wings, and wheeled with rapid circles downwards from her first height, till she was within a more moderate distance from the ground. The grouse seemed then to have hidden itself, for the eagle remained hovering for a few minutes, turning

her head in every direction, as if she had lost sight of her victim; when, suddenly catching a glimpse of the poor bird, down she came with extended legs, and without seeming more than to touch the heather with her talons, she caught the grouse, and the next moment was flying rapidly away towards the highest cliffs of the mountain with her prey.

Notwithstanding the incessant war waged against these noble birds, there are still some few eagles left in certain districts; but where there is much grouse-shooting, and where, in consequence, there are many keepers, they are quite extirpated. The shepherds seem too indolent to take much trouble about killing the old birds; though the mania for collecting birds' eggs bids fair, I fear, to prevent any number of young eagles being hatched, as the eggs have become in such demand that they fetch from a pound to five-and-twenty shillings each from the numerous collectors, who, by-the-by, are constantly imposed upon most grossly in their collections.

The most perfect arrangement of British eggs that I ever saw, and one that is quite to be relied on for the identity of every egg, belongs to my friend Mr. Hancock of Newcastle—a gentleman who combines with the most indefatigable and zealous love of nature in all her forms, a refined

taste and acute perception that no *trick of the trade* can impose upon.

Mr. Hancock's collection comprises very nearly every British bird's egg, and many varieties of each kind, which he has collected, from public-spirited motives, at an incalculable outlay of time and expense, aided by a perfect and intimate knowledge of every bird, both in its living state and habits, and in its anatomical structure and formation.

Notwithstanding, as I say, the prices given by London collectors, the sea-eagle, at any rate, is tolerably common on the northern coast and islands. From its habit of building principally on the most inaccessible rocks and cliffs of the sea-coast, its nest is more secure than that of the golden eagle, which, building farther inland, and frequently in more accessible places, is liable to be killed, or to have its nest taken by shepherds, keepers, etc.

The eggs of these two eagles are very similar to each other; but the different specimens of each sort vary considerably in size and colour. I have seen golden eagles' eggs of many different shades, from one of a pure white to one covered with light red spots; and the white-tailed eagle's eggs vary in the same manner. The eggs of both have a fine strong character about them, which is difficult to understand without seeing the egg. The nests of both

kinds are generally formed of sticks of an astonishing size, frequently as large in diameter as a man's arm—these, too, brought from a considerable distance; sometimes it is impossible to say *where* they can have procured them. The white-tailed eagle does not hesitate to use the coarse sea-ware and tangle for her nest. They build not only in the steepest possible cliff, but generally take advantage of some overhanging shelf, which, concealing the nest from above, makes it doubly secure; occasionally, however, I have known a golden eagle build in a place where an expert climber could reach the nest without the aid of ropes.

The remains of game of all kinds common in the mountains are found in great abundance about their nests when they have young; lambs also, and near the deer-forests young red-deer, are taken up to the nest. I cannot say whether they carry up the latter animals whole or not, but their remains always form part of the larder found at an eagle's abode, if it is in a situation where deer abound. The weight of a newly-born red-deer calf is not great, and, once in the air, the eagle would carry one easily enough. Instances have occurred of an eagle attacking a person when engaged in robbing her nest, but, generally speaking, they have a proper dread of man and fire-arms. Nevertheless I have known

some well-authenticated instances of this fear being entirely put aside ; indeed it could scarcely be otherwise with so powerful and fierce a bird as an eagle, when so weak and timid a bird as a partridge has been known to fly at and strike a man's legs like a gamecock on her young ones being too nearly approached. This I have seen happen, and therefore I can easily believe that an eagle may do the same in defence of her young.

The actual damage done to game by eagles is, in my opinion, comparatively small, the favourite food of these birds being the mountain hare, and every sportsman knows that the fewer of these animals he has on his ground the better : where they increase too rapidly (and no animal *does* increase more quickly) they become a perfect plague to grouse dogs, for however well broken your setters and pointers may be, the manner in which mountain hares run cannot fail to make the dogs fidgety and anxious, besides tainting the ground. Instead of running clear away when started, like the common lowland hare, this animal (*Lepus albus*) hops quietly from before the dog's nose, and stops to sit erect on the very first hillock she meets with, within a hundred yards of the dogs. When again approached she repeats the same trick, and frequently remains for a quarter of an hour going slowly in front of the

dogs, and sitting up on her hind legs in full view of them ; in this manner not only tainting the ground with her scent, but, as it were, challenging the dogs to a trial of speed. Notwithstanding the good training one would suppose these inhabitants of the mountain ought to be in, they are easily run down, even by a quick colley dog. I know of some grouse-shootings where these hares have increased to such an extent, owing to the destruction of vermin, that they have been killed by hundreds in a day, and are shot down at all seasons as a nuisance. A few eagles on such ground would be of great service.

When mountain hares are not to be had by the eagles, they feed more on carrion, such as dead sheep, than birds, a good-sized dead animal of this kind being far more suited to the ravenous appetite of a golden eagle than a small bird like a grouse ; and in the sheep districts there must be a constant supply, owing to accidents and disease.

In the month of May I saw the nest of an osprey on the very summit of the old castle built on a point of land (sometimes an island) in Loch Assynt. The nest was then tenantless, and had been so for two or three years. On my return in June, I was much pleased at seeing one osprey on the nest and another sailing over the loch.

Though the osprey is, generally speaking, so very

rare in Britain, it frequents this locality, which seems particularly to suit it. Large tracts of the country here are almost unseen by human beings from one end of the year to the other. Covered with gray rocks, and broken up into a succession of small hollows, in most of which there are lochs, all abounding in trout, this district is exactly suited for the osprey, while it is unfit for any other animal; the sheep remain more on the extensive and grassy slopes, where they not only find plenty of food, but are more under the eye and protection of mankind. A shepherd in the broken, rocky tracts of country can have no chance of finding or seeing his flock; while, at the same time, the pasturage is worth but little, consisting wholly of rank heather. Nor is the ground at all better adapted for the grouse shooter, as he would never keep sight of his dogs for two minutes together. For these reasons the osprey is but little disturbed, and lives unmolested for years. Even if a shepherd does pass the loch, the bird sits securely on her isolated rock, out of reach of all danger, as her nest can only be approached, in most instances, by swimming. I generally saw the osprey fishing about the lower pools of the rivers, near their mouths, and a beautiful sight it is. The long-winged bird hovers (as a kestrel does over a mouse)

at a considerable distance above the water, sometimes on perfectly motionless wing, and sometimes wheeling slowly in circles, turning her head and looking eagerly down at the water ; she sees a trout when at a great height, and suddenly closing her wings, drops like a shot bird into the water, often plunging completely under, and at other times appearing scarcely to touch the water ; but seldom failing to rise again with a good-sized fish in her talons. The feet of the osprey are extremely rough, and the toes placed in a peculiar manner, so as to give the best possible chance of holding her slippery prey. Sometimes, in the midst of her swoop, the osprey suddenly stops herself in the most abrupt manner, probably because the fish, having changed its position, is no longer within her range ; she then hovers again, stationary in the air, anxiously looking below for the reappearance of her prey. Having well examined one pool, she suddenly turns off, and with rapid flight takes herself to an adjoining part of the stream, where she again begins to hover and circle in the air. On making a pounce into the water, the osprey dashes the spray up far and wide, so as to be seen for a considerable distance.

The rapidity and certainty of stroke that a bird must possess to enable it to catch so quick a creature as the sea-trout can scarcely be understood. One

would naturally suppose that the trout, in its own element, would give a bird not the slightest chance of catching it, particularly as this can only be done at one dash, the osprey, of course, not being able to pursue a trout under the water like a cormorant. All fly-fishers must know the lightning-like rapidity with which a trout darts up from the depth of several feet, and with unerring aim seizes the fly almost before its wings touch the water ; and yet here is a large bird, hovering directly over, and in full view of the water, who manages to catch the rapid-darting trout with an almost certain swoop, although one would naturally suppose that the fish would be far off, in the depth of the pool, or behind some place of refuge, long before the bird could touch the water. In the same manner it has often puzzled me how the terns can with such certainty pounce upon and catch so quick a little fish as the sand-eel : the tern's feet not being at all suited for holding anything, these birds catch the sand-eel with their bills.

The osprey is not nearly so early as the eagle in breeding ; in fact the latter is far advanced towards hatching her eggs before the osprey arrives in Scotland. It is said the ospreys always arrive in pairs ; if so, however, it is not easy to understand how, when one out of a pair is killed, the re-

maining bird can find a mate, which it generally manages to do. There are, too, but very few in Britain at any time, their principal headquarters seeming to be in America; and though living in tolerable peace in the Highlands, they do not appear to increase nor to breed in any localities excepting where they find a situation for their nest similar to what I have already described. As they in no way interfere with the sportsman or others, it is a great pity that they should ever be destroyed.

