

A

SHORT TOUR IN SUTHERLAND.

FIELD-NOTES FOR THE YEAR—CONTINUED.

CHAPTER XXI.

OCTOBER.—PART I.

Migration of Birds—Quails—Arrival of Wild-geese—White-fronted Goose—Arrival of Wild-swans ; decrease of—Feastings of our Ancestors—Food of Ducks, etc.—Field-mice—Roe feeding—Hawks—Peregrine and Wild-duck—Training of Hawks—Migration of Eagles.

OCTOBER is, in this country, one of the finest months of the whole year. The cold cutting winds of November are frequently preceded by bright, clear, sunshiny weather, most enjoyable and invigorating to all whose avocations and amusements keep them much in the open air. The birds, both migratory and stationary, begin now to establish themselves in their winter quarters ; and scarcely a day passes which is not marked by the arrival or departure, or the winter preparations of some of the feathered races in this country.

On the 4th of October, during the mild season of 1847, I found a pair of young wood-pigeons in a nest near the house. A few days afterwards they were both dead, either from the old birds having been killed, or from the coldness of one or two of the succeeding days. The latest landrail that I killed was on the 6th, and a fatter bird of any description I never saw.

Three or four quails were killed at the beginning of October in the eastern part of the county. During the month of May I constantly heard the call of the old birds close to my house; and we saw them several times basking in the sun on one of the gravel walks.

On the 11th and 12th large flocks of wild-geese passed to the south. There was at the time a considerable sprinkling of snow on the Ross-shire and Sutherlandshire mountains. None of the gray or bean-geese seemed to alight anywhere in this neighbourhood during the autumn; but a flock of that very beautiful species the white-fronted goose took up their quarters about the fresh-water lakes. Being anxious to procure one of these birds, I went the following day to look for them. It is a long, tedious walk through the wild desolate country which bounds the sandhills to the westward, and separates them from the lochs and swamps which the swans

and geese frequent when in this region. After a long search for the birds a sudden gleam of sunshine showed us their yellow bills and white foreheads conspicuously above the rough grass and herbage of the swamp in which they were feeding. They did not appear to have taken any alarm at us ; so putting myself under the guidance of my old keeper, who seemed to have a perfect knowledge of every ditch and hollow of the ground by which an approach could be made, I crawled and wormed myself along to within sixty or seventy yards of five of the birds. To get any nearer, unseen, was impossible ; raising my head, and trusting to Eley's cartridges and No. 3 shot, I fired and killed a brace of these very beautiful birds ; a third fell, but rose again, and recovered himself.

The white-fronted geese remained in or near the same district, with only occasional absences, during the whole winter, and until the month of April ; their habits in this respect being very unlike those of the bean-geese, who in this region are never stationary for above a few days. The white-fronted goose is the handsomest species, both as to form and plumage, that we ever see in Scotland. The full-grown birds are distinctly and beautifully marked with black bands on the breast, and have a pure white spot on the front of their head. They

are of a compact, firm shape, and walk with great activity and lightness while feeding. Unlike the bean-goose, they frequently feed in pools and swamps where some favourite plant grows ; and in situations which the sportsman can easily approach, sometimes close to furze or other cover. The other kinds of geese never by any chance commit themselves in the same manner, but always feed and rest in the most open situations, where it is almost impossible to approach them unseen. The white-fronted goose has much more the form and appearance of the common tame goose than the bean-goose. In this respect, as well as in the peculiar shape of the head and bill, it exactly resembles the gray lag.

A single very large wild-swan appeared on the lakes on the 18th of October, and on the 20th he was joined by two more. The wild-swans, on their first arrival, almost always fly into the bay from the south, coming in flocks of one hundred to two hundred together. The only way I can account for this, knowing that they must of necessity have wended their way from the north, is, by supposing that they first alight on some of the mountain lakes between Findhorn and Strathspey. A large flight of these noble birds, as they circle round the fresh-water lakes on their first arrival, is one of the most beau-

tiful sights imaginable. There is, too, a wild harmony in their bugle-like cry, as they wheel round and round, now separating into small companies, as each family of five or six seems inclined to alight, and now all joining again in a long undulating line, waiting for the word of command from some old leader, whose long acquaintance with the country and its dangers constitutes him a swan of note among the common herd. At last this leader makes up his mind to alight, and in a few moments the whole flock are gradually sinking down on the calm loch. After a brief moment or two spent in looking round them, with straight and erect necks, they commence sipping the water, and turning their flexible necks into a thousand graceful curves and attitudes. They then break off into small companies, each apparently a separate family, and set to work, with seemingly a most excellent appetite, on the water-grasses and plants. I regret to say that the number of wild-swans seems to decrease every year. Fewer and fewer visit this country, scared away, probably, by the yearly alteration made in their favourite haunts and feeding-grounds by draining and other improvements, which substitute oats for rushes, and sheep for wild-fowl, an alteration by no means gladdening to the eyes of my old *garde-chasse*. The diminution in their

numbers does not result from the quantity killed, which, comparatively speaking, is inconsiderable.

On their first arrival the swans are much less shy and wary than they are after a few weeks' experience and knowledge of the dangers which surround them. On these lochs, which are tolerably quiet, a flock generally remains during the whole winter. The feeding is good, and when anything disturbs them the sands of the bay offer them a sure refuge. I seldom interfere with them, unless I happen to want one for any purpose; and in reward for this forbearance I have the pleasure of seeing them every day in nearly the same part of the water, either feeding on the plants or pluming themselves on the small banks and islands. Their favourite loch is, of course, the one least accessible to any enemy.

The flesh of the wild-swan, at least of those who feed inland, is perfectly free from all strong and unpleasant flavour, their food consisting almost wholly of a kind of water-grass which has a bulbous root. In these lochs there is a good supply of this plant, and the swans become very fat, so much so as to make it exceedingly difficult to preserve the skins, the only part of them which I put to any use. When the feathers are picked out, there remains on the skin a great thickness of very

beautiful snow-white down, which, when properly dressed by a London furrier, makes boas and other articles of ladies' dress of unrivalled beauty.

Our omnivorous ancestors appear to have been great eaters of swans. Amongst other dishes at a feast in the reign of Edward IV., mention is made of "*four hundred swans.*" Those said ancestors must have had marvellous capacious stomachs; for at the same feast there was the like number of herons, besides endless other little delicacies, such as "two thousand pigs;" the last entrées mentioned being "twelve porpoises and seals," these probably being reserved to the last as a *bonne-bouche*. Truly, the tables must have groaned, *literally*, not *figuratively*, under the burden of the good things laid upon them.

The wild-swans, on their first arrival, as I before remarked, are not nearly so wild as subsequent ill-treatment renders them, and I never found much difficulty in procuring a brace, or more, early in the season. Awaiting their arrival at a feeding-place is generally the surest way of getting a shot, or by waylaying them in their passage from one loch to another. On a windy day I have got at them, where the situation has been favourable, by dint of creeping up through bog and ditch. In rough weather they are not so ready to take wing, and

with good management may be driven from one end of a loch to the other without quitting the water.

October is the month when the greatest number of widgeon arrive in the bay; and the mallards, also, keep up a constant quacking and calling on the sands. Every evening at sunset, or soon afterwards, the latter birds fly to the stubble-fields, preferring those where there is the least quantity of grass to cover the scattered grains. The water-ousels now come down to the burns near the sea; and these merry little birds resort to the very same stones year after year. They appear to be regular attendants on the small streams and burns where the trout spawn.

Immediately on the retiring of a flood in the river, great numbers of snipes are seen on the mud and refuse left by the water, feeding busily. Where they come from is difficult to say, as at this season, except on these occasions, we have no great abundance of these birds. Redshanks, in considerable flocks, follow their example. On the 16th I see redwings in the hedges; fieldfares do not appear until ten days afterwards. The wood-pigeons now fly considerable distances to feed on acorns. In the south of England I have killed wild-ducks with their crops nearly bursting with the quantity of

acorns they had swallowed. They collect them from the single oak-trees standing in grass-fields.

From the variety of food found in the crops of wild-ducks it is evident that these birds must wander far and near during the night, and often into places where no one would expect to find them. Though the peewits generally leave us early in October, a flock is sometimes seen at the end of the month. The golden plovers collect in great crowds on the banks of the river to enjoy the morning sun. They are now in excellent condition.

The proceedings of the common long-tailed field-mouse are amusing, and indicate the care with which these little animals provide against the cold and scarcity of the winter. They dig deep holes in the stubble-fields, in which they collect large stores of food, such as grain, acorns, nuts, and even cherry-stones. On the approach of cold winds or rain they shut themselves up in their underground habitations, closing the aperture completely. The quantity of earth which they dig out and leave at the mouth of their hole in a single night is quite astonishing. At the instigation of the gardener my boys wage war against these little animals. By pouring water into the holes the poor mouse is obliged, *nolens volens*, to bolt like a rabbit driven out by a ferret.

Late in the afternoon I constantly see the roe feeding on those clover-fields where there is sufficient second growth to attract them. Nothing can be more graceful than the light and agile movements of this animal while nibbling the tender shoots of the bushes or trees on which it feeds. The wild-rose and the bramble are amongst its favourite morsels; from the long twigs of these plants it nibbles off leaf by leaf in the most graceful manner imaginable. As the leaves fall from the birch and oak woods the roe quit them, and take to the fir plantations, where they have more quiet and shelter. The foresters accuse these animals of being very destructive to their young oak-trees; and fond as I am of them, I am afraid that I must admit the accusation is just, as they undoubtedly prefer the topmost shoot of a young oak-tree to almost any other food. Nevertheless, the mischief done to the woods by roe is but trifling when compared to that done by rabbits. Many an acre is obliged to be replanted owing to their destructive nibbling; and in some of the beautiful woods of Brodie I saw the fine holly-trees of many years' growth, with stems of six inches in diameter, perfectly killed by being barked by rabbits.

Most of the hill-bred hawks, such as hen-harriers, merlins, peregrines, etc., come down now to hunt

the fields, which are clear of corn, and also to feed on the plovers, etc., which frequent the shore. I sometimes see the peregrine in pursuit of wild-ducks ; and one day I observed a hawk of this kind give chase to an old mallard. The pursuit was rather curious, reversing the usual order of things, as the falcon's great object was to keep below the mallard instead of above him ; the latter endeavouring all he could to get to the water, in which case he knew, as the hawk did also, that his chance of escape would be the greatest. Once in the water, his own element, by diving and swimming he would soon have baffled his pursuer. I don't know what was the end of the chase ; the last I saw of them they were winging their rapid flight straight across the sea for the opposite coast of Ross-shire. Either the hawk was not willing to strike his prey while over the water, or the mallard had a vigour of wing which enabled him to keep ahead of his murderous enemy.

My tame peregrine, after some years spent in perfect friendship and alliance with our pet owl, ended in killing and eating her ; a piece of ungenerous barbarism which I should not have suspected so fine a bird would have committed. They seemed to have quarrelled over the remains of some bird that was given them. At any rate all that

remained of the poor owl was a leg or two and some of the longer feathers.

The country in its present enclosed state is not so well adapted to the sport of hawking as formerly; but, as far as relates to the training of the birds, the process is much more simple and easy than is generally supposed. Of course the trainer must take in hand a bird of the proper kind, such as a peregrine, a merlin, or an Iceland or ger falcon. A goshawk is tractable enough, but has not the same dash and rapid flight as any of the true long-winged falcons.

The first step is to accustom your bird to the hood, without which you can do nothing; but most hawks allow themselves to be hooded quietly enough, and are then to a great degree under your command, as when hooded you can carry her when and where you like on your hand, and familiarise her to your voice and to being handled.

The next step is to accustom the hawk to feed on the lure, and *only* on the lure, so as to fly directly to it whenever she sees it: indeed, the lure ought only to be shown when the bird is to feed.

These two points gained, you must proceed to flying the hawk in an open field, substituting a long silken string, or "creance," for the short leathern strap, the "leash," by which you always

hold her. By taking her out hungry, and by showing her, when mounted in the air, the lure with food attached to it, you will find that she will swoop at once down to her usual feeding-place, which, as I have said, should be the "lure" only.

After doing this two or three days, if the hawk appears tractable, and not at all shy or wild, take her out when very hungry and let her mount without any "creance;" and when she is well up in the air, toss down the lure, which until then should be concealed, and ten to one but the hawk will immediately come down upon it with the rapidity of an arrow; and a more beautiful sight than the swoop of a hawk from a great height I do not know.

To make her kill her game, you must at first let her fly at a pigeon, or other bird, with its wings partially cut, so as to ensure the hawk against failure at the commencement. After she has killed two or three birds in this way, she will probably kill any bird you may fly her at in a favourable country. But in this fine old sport the mere killing the game is almost a minor consideration. The flight, the soaring, and the rapid detection of, and descent upon, the lure, are in themselves most interesting and beautiful.

I am not sufficiently skilled in the science, even

if I had time and space, to attempt technically to describe or make others understand all that is required to constitute an accomplished falconer. The moulting of the falcons, their keeping, feeding, and training, must all be perfectly understood and carefully attended to; and although almost any person who has his time at his command may manage to keep a single hawk in good training and obedience, yet to carry out the amusement to any degree of perfection, a professed and skilful falconer must be engaged, whose sole and entire employment should be to attend to the health and education of the birds.

The training of falcons is much facilitated by the natural disposition of the bird, which is bold, confiding, and fearless; and these qualifications, assisted by the keen sense of hunger felt by all animals of prey, render their taming and education far more easy than would at first be supposed.

Next to the peregrine the merlin is the best hawk to train, being equally bold and fearless; and, although of so a small size, has courage enough to dash fearlessly when launched from the hand at whatever bird it may see on wing. A merlin belonging to a friend of mine would fiercely assail a blackcock. This hawk, too, is so beautiful and so finely formed, that a prettier pet cannot be found;

and when once a hawk is accustomed to the hood, the trouble of keeping her is very little.

The goshawk, although a fine handsome bird, has not the speed of any of the long-winged hawks, but she flies well at rabbits. I am told that the instantaneous manner in which this hawk kills a rabbit, by breaking its skull at a single blow, can only be understood by those who have seen it.

But I am wandering into a subject of which I know too little from personal experience to render my remarks of any value, and will only recommend those of my readers who possess time and energy to procure a peregrine falcon in good health and perfect plumage (the latter point is most important), and then, with some treatise on hawking in one hand, try if he cannot soon train the hawk which sits hooded on his other. With a fair share of temper, patience, and careful observation, he will be sure to succeed.

The goshawk is the most rare kind in this country. The only place where I know of its breeding regularly is the forest of Darnaway; but I am told that they also breed in the large fir-woods near the Spey. The bright piercing eye of the goshawk has a peculiarly savage and cruel expression, without the fine bold open look of the peregrine. At this season that singular hawk, the

osprey, is sometimes seen soaring, with its kestrel-like flight, along the course of the river. I occasionally see one hovering over the lower pools; but, in general, this bird is seen only *in transitu* from one side of the country to the other. The golden eagle, too, passes on his way at this season from north to south, frequently attended by a rabble rout of gray crows, who, when they have pursued the kingly bird for a certain distance, give up the chase, which is immediately taken up by a fresh band, who in their turn pass him over to new assailants. It would appear that each set follows him as long as he is within what seems their own especial district, like country constables passing on a sturdy vagrant from one parish to another.

