



Osprey's Nest.

CHAPTER III.

Inn at Scowrie—Another Osprey's Nest—The old Ospreys ; Eggs of—The River Laxford—Inn of Rhiconnich—Drive to Durness—Beauty of Scenery—Drive round Loch Erriboll—Glenmore—Loch Maddie—Crows—Gray Geese ; time of breeding—Old Nest of Osprey—Stag in the Loch—Foxhound—Black-throated Divers—Aultnaharrow—Loch Laighal—Squall of Wind.

WE were loth to leave our comfortable hostel at Scowrie, particularly without visiting the island of Handa, a great breeding-place of sea-fowl ; but being rather pressed for time, we got again under weigh for Durness. Our landlord at Scowrie having told us that he had heard that the osprey was building on an island in a loch about a mile from our road, we left the horse and boat under charge of a bare-legged and bare-headed boy at the place he mentioned (a small bridge about three miles from Scowrie), and went to a point of rock, from which we could command a view of the loch in question. We immediately through a glass discovered the nest of the osprey, built in exactly a similar situation to the last ; that is, on the summit of a rock about eight feet high, shaped like a truncated cone, and standing exposed and alone in the

loch. On coming nearer we could distinguish the white head of the female osprey on the nest. The male bird was not in view. It was determined that I should remain concealed near the loch, while my two companions went for the boat. This plan was adopted for the double reason that I might be at hand to shoot any hooded crow who might attempt to take the eggs while the osprey was off, she having left the nest on our approach, and also that I might have a chance of shooting the old osprey herself in case she came within shot. I must say that I would rather she had escaped this fate; but as her skin was wanted, I agreed to try to kill her.

For some time after the departure of my companions she flew round and round at a great height, occasionally drifting away with the high wind, and then returning to the loch. She passed two or three times not very far from me before I shot at her. But at last I fired, and the poor bird, after wheeling blindly about for a few moments, fell far to leeward of me, and down amongst the most precipitous and rocky part of the mountain, quite dead. She was scarcely down behind the cliffs when I heard the cry of an osprey in quite a different direction, and on looking that way I saw the male bird flying up from a great distance. As he came nearer I could distinguish plainly with my glass that he

was carrying a fish in his claws. On approaching he redoubled his cries, probably expecting the well-known answer or signal of gratitude from his mate; but not hearing her, he flew on till he came immediately over the nest. I could plainly see him turning his head to the right and left, as if looking for her, and as if in astonishment at her unwonted absence. He came lower and lower still, holding the fish in his feet, which were stretched out at full length from his body. Not seeing her, he again ascended and flew to the other end of the lake, the rocks echoing his shrill cry. The poor bird, after making one or two circuits of the lake, then flew away far out of sight, still keeping possession of the fish. He probably went to look for the female at some known and frequented haunt, as he flew rapidly off in a direct line. He soon, however, came over the lake again and continued his flight to and fro and his loud cries for above an hour, still keeping the fish ready for his mate. I at length heard the voices of my friends, and we soon launched the boat. The osprey became much agitated as we neared the rock where the nest was, and dropped the fish he held into the water. We found two beautiful eggs in the nest, of a roundish shape; the colour white, with numerous spots and marks of a fine rich red

brown. As we came away we still observed the male bird unceasingly calling and seeking for his hen. I was really sorry that I had shot her.

This excursion to the lake hindered us so long that, after resting our horse at Rhiconnich, we did not reach Durness till late at night.

From Scowrie to Durness, particularly about Rhiconnich, the road winds through a constant succession of the most rocky, rugged, and wild glens that it is possible to imagine, with here and there beautiful sheets of water, deep, and darkly shaded by the overhanging rocks, and occasionally by small birch-woods. Winding round near the mouth of the Laxford river, we saw an osprey fishing in, or rather over, the pools near the bay. I am told that the Laxford is one of the best, if not quite the best, sea-trout stream in the North. There are gloriously wild and rocky mountains rising from the landward side of the road, with the most fantastic and picturesque outlines. The bay at Rhiconnich, too, is very beautiful. The whole road, indeed, commands one constant and endless succession of scenery equally magnificent and wild; nor does the traveller drive a mile throughout this journey without some new and most interesting view—varied, too, as it is by rock, water, and mountain, by the rich brown of the heather, the vivid green of the birch-

woods, and the grassy banks of some of the streams, and also by the deep blue of the lochs. The eye never wearies of being kept constantly occupied in admiring the surrounding objects. I shall not forget, however, one part of our drive between Rhiconnich and Durness, where the road passes over a wild and dreary hill-side, at a considerable height above the valley below us. Here for some miles we were exposed to the coldest and most driving and wettest mist that ever disgraced a May day. Nothing could be seen twenty yards from the road excepting the drifting clouds. Luckily the wind was behind us, as it would have been almost impossible to have faced it. It cleared off again, however; and before we reached Durness the night was as calm and bright as the morning had been. We did not arrive at Durness till eleven at night, and then we found no one up; indeed we had great difficulty in finding the inn, as there was nothing to distinguish it from any other house in the scattered village, excepting that it was considerably larger than its neighbours. After some time, however, we did find one person awake, and got comfortably housed in this very excellent inn.

Nothing can exceed the sea view from Durness, as you look along the varied line of abrupt rocks to the cliff called "Far-out Head," which is very

nearly if not quite as northerly a point as Cape Wrath.

Having passed the end of Loch Erriboll, and having procured a feed of corn for our horse from Mr. Clark (the tenant of the sheep farm here), we worked a zigzag course up the largest and steepest hill we had to contend with throughout our whole journey. Then descending, we passed the face of a hill, cut and intersected by numberless small streams of the most pure and transparent water that I ever saw, which take their rise from the limestone rocks above.

Loch Erriboll is one of the numerous creeks reaching into the mainland from the North Sea, and often serving for a refuge to shipping, which otherwise must inevitably perish in every violent north and north-east wind on this iron-bound coast. On our way from this loch we passed the head of a fine fresh-water lake, Loch Hope, and up a magnificent glen called Glenmore (I believe), the sides of which, woody and precipitous, abound in the wilder *feræ naturæ* of the island. Wild and marten cats live here in peace, and we frequently saw eagles sailing about the higher cliffs, and sometimes perched on some pinnacle of rock. We found out by chance a very perfect echo, repeating every word, and even sentences, with the greatest exactness, and

passing from one side of the valley to the other till the sounds died away in an indistinct murmur.

- After emerging from this splendid strath we arrived at the edge of a wide loch with many green islands on it, called Loch Maddie. Here again we put our boat afloat, and leaving our luggage, etc., under charge of Leo, while J—— fished, Mr. Dunbar and I went to search the islands in order to discover what birds were breeding there. We found several hooded crows' nests in the birch-trees on the islands, where they had hitherto lived and plundered in perfect security. However, we destroyed their eggs and young without mercy, and shot the birds themselves whenever and wherever we could.

The hooded crow is the only bird against whom I wage constant and unpitying warfare ; I have so constantly detected them destroying my most favourite birds and their eggs, that I have no pity on them. We also found in these islands many nests of the Gray lag goose. To make sure of the species I shot some of the old birds, it having been rather a disputed question amongst several of my friends whether the goose breeding in this country is the Gray lag (*Anser ferus*) or the Bean goose (*Anser segetum*). All the geese on Loch Maddie were the Gray lag ; indeed I never saw any of the Bean

geese breeding in Sutherland, excepting on the islands of Loch Shin,¹ where a few still breed annually in spite of the constant and cruel warfare waged against them. The number of eggs in each nest was from four to seven, and they had all been apparently sat upon for some time: indeed we found one brood of young birds at least four or five days old. This being on the 18th of May, proves that this bird arrives at its breeding-place very early. A goose sits a month, so that supposing these young birds were four days old, it carries back the time when the old bird commenced sitting to the 14th of April; and then allowing ten days for the bird to prepare her nest and lay her eggs, the Gray lag goose cannot arrive at the breeding-places later than the 1st or 2d of April. The Bean goose arrives in Morayshire and that part of Scotland from the south as nearly as possible in the third week of March, their arrival a few days earlier or later depending on the state of the weather; and the flocks do not leave that country till the 29th or 30th of April, some few even remaining several days afterwards. This fact shows a great distinction in the habits of the two kinds of geese; for while the Bean goose (*Anser segetum*) is still

¹ An error. The Bean goose breeds nowhere in Scotland.
J. A. H.-B.

fattening on the oat and pea fields, the Gray lag goose (*Anser ferus*) has already laid, and is nearly hatching her eggs, in the wilds of Sutherland. In one island, containing a few stunted birch-trees, we saw an old osprey's nest, not now tenanted; but I am told that the old birds were inhabiting it two years ago. The nest was most interesting: it was placed in a fork of the tree so low that we could see into it without climbing, and it consisted of a perfect cartload of sticks, varying from the size of a very stout walking-stick down to the twigs of birch and heather of which the inner part of the fabric was composed. I did not measure the nest, but as nearly as I could guess, it was not less than eight feet in length and nearly four in width; the depth, too, was very great; the inner lining was composed of a coarse kind of grass that grows in these islands. Although the nest must have weathered many a winter storm of wind, snow, and rain, and was quite bleached, it was still fixed firmly in the fork of the birch-tree. To have seen the ospreys building up this great and strong mass would have repaid one for a journey of many a long mile.

Wilson mentions that in America the osprey builds constantly in trees, but in this country it seldom does so, probably from the want of trees suitable for the purpose. I have been told, how-

ever, that a nest is still to be seen on a tree in one of the large pine-woods in Strathspey.

A very curious circumstance happened on the same island, which strongly indicated the habits of red deer during the season when their horns are soft and liable to injury. The island, which is scarcely a rifle-shot in length, and less in breadth, is very rough, and cut up like an old peat moss, but covered with very high heather and coarse grass, in which the wild goose forms her nest. While I was looking about quietly in the broken clefts and ground for these nests, a large stag suddenly rose at my very feet out of a deep hollow—that is, deep comparatively speaking, and just sufficiently so for a stag to lie in. The wind was high, and he either had not heard me or he remained quiet in hopes that I should pass without perceiving him; at any rate he did not move till I nearly stepped upon him. He then rose, and in two springs was in the water and swimming strongly and bravely for the opposite mountain. A stag swims with very great speed and ease: in a short time he reached the shore, which was a good half-mile from the island, and having shaken himself, I saw him through my glass take a long look back, and then he trotted slowly up the shoulder of the hill. In my numerous deer-stalking excursions I

certainly never was so near to an unwounded deer; he had evidently been living in solitary security for some time on the island, and feeding on the coarse grass and plants. He probably had been there ever since he had cast his horns, as the new ones were about five or six inches in length.

While on this island, too, another interesting incident took place. We heard the baying of a hound on the shore. At first I imagined that some fox-hunter's dog had strayed away in pursuit of and was still running a fox or deer; but on looking with my glass, I saw a fine fox-hound sitting on a point of land which reached into the lake, and howling in a manner which plainly showed he had lost his master; and having heard me fire at a crow, he imagined that I was the person he was in search of. After howling for a minute or two, till the hills around echoed with his deep voice, the gallant dog swam into the loch and made for an island on which I had fired at a gray crow. I saw him land and, with nose to the ground, take up our track; but after a little hesitation he found that the scent was not that of his master, nor of any one he knew, so plunging into the loch again he made for the mainland, and having reached it after a stout battle with the waves (the wind then being high), he continued his search round the shore of the lake,

taking, however, no further notice of us, although I fired one or two more shots within his hearing. The instinct and reasoning of the dog struck me as very great in his manner of trying if we belonged to the party who had been up to the high ground before daybreak in pursuit of a lamb-killing fox; for we afterwards heard that the fox-hunter of the district had been following his avocation on the heights of Ben Cleebriek that morning, and that some of his dogs had strayed away from him in pursuit, probably, of a deer, though he owned only to their having followed a fox.

As we were rowing back to the point where we launched the boat, we suddenly came upon no less than six of those beautiful birds, the black-throated diver. We pursued them immediately, and drove them up into a small bay of the lake: there after much trouble we managed to shoot one, the rest escaping by diving under the boat or round it, and getting off into the wide part of the loch. None of them attempted to take flight, although so hard pressed and hemmed up into a corner of the lake. When one was separated from the rest he generally began to croak in the voice peculiar to these birds. In consequence of their swimming so low in the water and their great strength, it is very difficult to shoot them, particularly as when they

are once alarmed they dive so suddenly that they are frequently too quick even for a percussion gun. When alone this bird takes wing readily enough, and flies off to some neighbouring lake with a quick and lofty flight.

We found our luggage safe under the care of the faithful dog, who had never left his charge, and before dark we arrived at the inn of Aultnaharrow, which is situated near one of the finest lakes in the country, Loch Naver. Like all the inns in Sutherland which are under the efficient and liberal management of the Duke's factors, Aultnaharrow is clean and comfortable.

The following day, leaving my friend to fish in Loch Naver, I drove off in the boat, accompanied by Dunbar and one of Lord Ellesmere's foresters who lives close to the inn, for a loch called Loch Laighal, or, as it is pronounced, Loch Loyal. This is another fine sheet of water several miles in length, with a few islands, the breeding-places of gray geese and numberless gulls. There were vast flocks of that magnificent bird the great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*), and also of the lesser black-backed gull (*Larus fuscus*). The former is a most splendid and beautiful bird, with its pure black and white plumage, and a stretch of wing little less than that of the golden eagle.

We had scarcely launched our boat on the water, leaving the forester on shore, as our tiny craft scarcely held three people comfortably, when a squall of wind came on, blowing down the side of Ben Loyal in a perfect hurricane right from the shore which we had just left. Short as the distance was, we could not row back against it, and had nothing left for it but to go before the wind right across the large loch, fully a mile and a half in width at that part. At the same time, owing to the lowness of the stern, our only chance of safety was to keep the head of the boat to windward, a matter of no small difficulty, as the wind blew in the most violent gusts and increased every moment. The slightest turn of the boat, which would bring her at all broadside to the wind, must have instantly swamped her, and with this pleasant prospect before us we went with fearful speed across the loch. The only thing I dreaded was that anything should give way about the oars, or the pins that they worked upon, as nothing could then have saved us. However, *Diis aliter visum*, and we landed safely, but wet enough, on the opposite shore, and right glad we both were when we looked back at the water, which was perfectly white with foam, to feel our feet once more on terra firma. I mention this incident as a warning

to any person who may fish or sail on any of these fresh-water lakes surrounded by mountains, to beware of sudden squalls of this kind; for in this instance nothing but a strong arm and good rowing saved us from certain drowning, which would nevertheless have been our fate had the least bolt or fastening given way about the oars, for once broaching to must have swamped us. The wind soon fell, the day became hot, and the beautiful lake with its green banks was again as smooth as glass. Few of the gulls had laid, but we found some more eggs of the Gray lag goose. One nest was in a very peculiar situation for a wild-goose, being in the midst of and overhung by a thicket of small birch-trees. The otter seems to live in undisturbed security in the islands on all these lakes, as the heather, etc., is full of their roads and marks.

On the stones near the lake I picked up a large adder. As I held her up by her throat it was curious to see the fierce expression of rage the creature put on, and also how its long teeth projected, as if eager to be fastened in my hand, while a drop of bright yellow liquid oozed out at the points of each of its venomous fangs. I knew that this was the poison, but had no idea that these reptiles could produce so large a quantity at once.

Loch Laighal, Loch Maddie, and Loch Naver all abound in the finest trout, and contain also plenty of the *Salmo ferox* or great lake trout, which is caught only by trolling, or by lines baited with small fish. In Loch Naver there are plenty of salmon: I am told that they rise freely and well when the wind is from the south-east, but seldom when it blows from any other quarter.

