

CHAPTER VIII.

County of Sutherland ; Variety of Climate and Soil—List of Birds ; of Hawks ; Owls ; of the smaller Land Birds ; of the Crow Tribe ; Pigeons, etc.

THERE is no county in Britain with a greater variety of soil and climate than Sutherlandshire, changing gradually from the rich and highly cultivated farms on the Dornoch Firth to the gray rocks and mountains of Assynt and Scowrie. The living productions are also as varied and numerous as can be found in any district of our island. There are few British birds or quadrupeds that are not to be found in this county ; the vegetable productions, cultivated and uncultivated, are as numerous and varied.

The first agriculturists in England would delight in the fine farms near Dunrobin, and might perhaps take a lesson or gain a hint from the tenant's management of cattle and wheat, most of which is destined ultimately for the London market. Though no farmer myself, I pulled in my horse for some time to admire the numerous and beautifully kept cattle and crops of Mr. Craig of Kirkton, one of the Duke

of Sutherland's most skilful and enterprising tenants. His cows would have gladdened the eyes of any Devonshire or Cheshire dairywoman, as they did mine, a simple admirer as I am of beauty in any living animal, from a milk-cow to a field-mouse.

There is an air of well-doing and comfort about the farms on the Duke of Sutherland's property which is delightful to the passer-by, and must be doubly so to the kind and liberal landlord. Very striking, too, is the different appearance of the tenantry on some neighbouring properties, where, to keep up a forced and contemptible show, the proprietor *rack-rents* his tenants to the very utmost pitch of endurance.

I will endeavour to give, for the use of the naturalist, a list of the wild-birds of the county; which he must take, however, *exceptis excipiendis*, as a list of an unscientific observer of nature.

To begin with the finest of our indigenous birds:—

1. The *Golden Eagle* is still to be found tolerably numerous, but gradually decreasing, in the north and north-west part of the county, though likely to be soon extirpated, owing to game-preserving and sheep-farming. To the latter the eagle is far more destructive than to the former.

2. The *Cinereous* or *White-tailed Eagle* is perhaps more numerous than the Golden Eagle ; living, as it does, principally in the lofty cliffs of the sea-coast, and feeding more on dead fish and food found on the shore, it does not so often fall in the way of the trapper or fox-hunter : it breeds, sometimes, amongst the inland mountains. The White-tailed Eagle, though larger than the Golden, is not so handsome nor finely formed and coloured a bird. All other varieties of the eagle found in the Highlands are merely these birds in different states of plumage, owing to sex or age, as there are only these two distinct kinds of eagle in Britain.

3. The *Osprey* is more rare and local than either kind of eagle. Though not a very heavy bird, its breadth of wing nearly equals that of the Golden Eagle. The habitat of the Osprey is confined to the north-west part of the county, where the numerous lochs, well supplied with trout, afford this bird both refuge and food. The principal, if not the only places in which it breeds, are Loch Assynt ; a loch two or three miles north of the ferry of Kyleska ; a loch three miles eastward of Scowrie ; two of the fresh-water lakes near Loch Inchard, at the head of which is the inn of Rhiconnich ; and, again, on Loch Maddie, the Osprey occasionally frequents a nest built on an old birch-tree in an island.

4. The *Peregrine Falcon* comes next to the Osprey. There are few ranges of lofty and precipitous rock where this bird does not breed. The nest is difficult of access, and the old birds shy and wary; nor are they easily trapped, as they do not condescend to feed on any game which they have not killed themselves: grouse, plovers, and wild-fowl seem to be their principal food.

5, 6. The *Hobby* or *Goshawk* I never saw in this county, though I have no doubt of their being frequent visitors here, particularly the former. The Goshawk seems very rare everywhere in Scotland.

7. The *Merlin*, the smallest of our British falcons, is not uncommon; it builds in the long heather, and preys on small birds, snipes, etc. Bold and courageous, it will sometimes attack birds much larger than itself. Owing to its high spirit and daring the Merlin is not difficult to train for hunting, and this beautiful little bird seems to have been in former days the peculiar hawk used by ladies:—

“ A merlin sat upon her wrist,
Held by a leash of silken twist.”

Its light weight would weary no lady's arm.

8. The *Kestrel* is common everywhere, from north to south of the county; building in every cliff and rocky burn. Though ignorant game-

keepers destroy it, the Kestrel, preying principally on mice, does far more good than harm.

9. The *Sparrow-hawk* usually frequents the more woody parts of the county. Bold and courageous, it strikes and bears away a common pigeon with apparent ease.

10. The *Kite* being a large, greedy bird, and easily caught in traps, is very rare now—common as it was a few years ago. In the wooded districts it is still, though but seldom, seen soaring with graceful flight high in the air. By repute the Kite is a great chicken stealer, and when she has young of her own to provide for, no bird destroys more grouse, young hares, etc.

11. The *Common Buzzard* a few years ago was very common, but now has been completely exterminated, excepting in the wilder districts. With its fine soaring flight the buzzard is a most interesting bird. In all its habits it appears to me to resemble the eagle more than any other kind of hawk.

12. The *Hen Harrier* is plentiful enough in the hilly districts, and, though very destructive to game, it compensates for this in some degree by occasionally preying upon rats, vipers, etc. The cock is distinguished from afar by his nearly white plumage; while the hen in her plain dress of brown is best known by the white ring on her tail, *unde*

derivatur her name of ring-tail. The young male has the same plumage as the female.

13. The *Ash-coloured Harrier* (*Falco cinereus*) breeds near Bonar Bridge. Mr. Dunbar has taken the nest and killed the old birds in that district.

I do not know for a certainty of any other hawks breeding in this county, but probably the *Marsh Harrier*, *Honey Buzzard*, etc., are occasionally met with.

14. The *Scops'-eared Owl* has been found to breed near the Oykel river, having her nest on the heather.¹

15. The *Long-eared Owl* breeds commonly in the fir plantations, or in ivy-covered rocks.

16. The *Short-eared Owl* migrates to this country in October, and, unlike other owls, is found constantly in turnip-fields, rough grass, etc. This kind hunts frequently in the daytime.

17. The *Common White Owl* lives, as in England, in old buildings, rocks, etc., and, as it preys almost wholly on mice, ought never to be destroyed.

18. The *Common Brown* or *Tawny Owl* lives principally in the woody districts, where it is very common. In the frosty clear nights of winter this bird is heard hooting and uttering strangely wild cries. In the spring it comes abroad at an earlier hour than any other owl; and sitting on the top-

¹ Query, Short-eared Owl. See Appendix, page 333.

most and leafless bough of some ash or larch tree, may be seen puffing out its neck and hooting loudly.

19. The *Snowy Owl* is not unfrequently driven over to the north and north-east coast after severe gales from that quarter.

20. A specimen of that beautiful little species called *Tengmalm's Owl* was killed in May 1847, by Mr. Dunbar, in an old ruined factory at Spinningdale, in Sutherlandshire. This and many other foreign birds may be, and most probably frequently are, driven over to the wild and solitary eastern shores of the county without being seen or heard of.

I must here put in a word for owls. They are most unjustly and ruthlessly persecuted. Most owls are not only harmless, but in fact they are of infinite service to mankind. Hunting chiefly by night, when almost all young birds are safe in their roosting-places, the owls prey principally, if not entirely, on mice and rats, which are then abroad in all directions plundering the farmer's produce. Where the owls have been much destroyed by pole-traps and other means, mice and rats increase to the most mischievous extent, not only destroying grain, but also doing immense mischief in young plantations, by barking and nibbling the shoots of the young trees sometimes to an almost inconceivable extent.

21. The *Spotted Flycatcher* is common enough.

Tame and familiar, it builds its well-concealed nest in the creepers and ivy that grow round a window or against the garden-wall. It arrives in May and departs early in autumn. Being dependent on flies for its subsistence, the first approach of cold drives this bird from the north to seek a warmer climate.

22. The *Water-Ousel* enlivens most of the mountain streams with its lively motions and merry note. In winter it comes nearer to the sea for unfrozen water, while in summer it is seen everywhere from Cape Wrath to Dunrobin.

23. The *Common Ring-Ousel* cheers the wanderer through all the wilder parts of the county, suddenly breaking out unexpectedly into loud song in places where the eagle or grouse would be more looked for than a singing bird.

24. The *Missel Thrush* is common, breeding very early. I saw it as far northward as Tongue.

25. The *Common Song Thrush* is to be seen wherever there is wood.

26. The *Blackbird*, though not quite so common, is plentiful also.

27. The *Fieldfare* and *Redwing* arrive in great numbers, and do not depart till some time in April.

28. The *Hedge Sparrow* breeds in every hedge in all the cultivated parts of the country.

29. The *Robin*, with its usual sociability, frequents the habitations of man, as in other countries.

30. The *Redstart* breeds commonly about the woody glens and gardens near Dunrobin; but, like most other insectivorous birds, departs for the south on the first approach of winter.

31. The *Sedge Warbler*, singing like the nightingale during all the hours of darkness, is common. I heard its sweet note constantly during the night-time: generally it sings about reedy lochs and swamps. The most northern spot at which I heard this bird was at Tongue, where its song was easily distinguished, and had a most pleasing effect amongst the harsher notes of the landrail, redshank, sea-gulls, etc.

32. The *Willow Wren* is also met with wherever there are hedges or plantations.

There may probably be many other birds of the same family, unobserved by me, in the extensive woods of the southern parts of Sutherlandshire.

33. The *Golden-crested Wren* is very numerous throughout the year.

34. The *Fire-crested Wren* (*Regulus ignicapillus*) is sometimes met with. Mr. Bantock, the Duke of Sutherland's gamekeeper, who has a collection of birds killed on the property, showed me one specimen. Being very like the golden-crested

wren, this bird may be much commoner than is supposed.

35. The *Pied Wagtail*; 36. The *Gray Wagtail*; and 37. The *Yellow Wagtail*, — are all numerous,¹ particularly the two former.

38. The *Titlark* abounds in every part of the open and high districts, frequenting the summits even of the highest mountains, where it feeds on the numerous insects to be found amongst the stones and plants.

39. The *Rock Pipit* is very similar to the last-named bird; it frequents the sea-shores.

40. The *Wheatear*, coming early in the spring, ranges over the whole county, and is very abundant along the roadside in all the mountainous districts. It departs in the winter.

41, 42. The *Whin Chat* and *Stone Chat* are to be seen in all the rough grounds where furze and broom are abundant.

43. The *Great Titmouse*; 44. The *Blue Titmouse*; 45. The *Cole Titmouse*; 46. The *Long-tailed Titmouse*, — all enliven the woods and plantations throughout the year. Although not exactly migratory birds, all the Titmice, as well as the Golden-crested Wren, seem nearly constantly on the move, passing from tree to tree, from hedge to hedge, from wood to wood, and in fact from dis-

¹ Doubtful statement. J. A. H.-B.

strict to district, to wherever the insects on which they prey are most numerous.

47. The *Bohemian Waxwing*, a very beautiful bird, though not a native, is occasionally killed in Sutherland; as are

48. The *Hoopoe*; and 49. The *Rose-coloured Starling*, and probably many other continental visitors.

50. The *Sky Lark* is seen everywhere, having few enemies excepting the merlin and other small hawks.

51. The variety of sky lark called the *Crested Lark* is also found about Assynt.¹

52. The *Snow Buntings* arrive in great numbers in October. As the frost and snow increase, the male birds daily become whiter. They appear to be never at rest, flitting to and fro along the seashore, or other places where they find their minute food.

53. The *Corn Bunting* haunts the cultivated regions: he is never far from the corn-fields.

54. The *Yellow Bunting*, on the contrary, seems far more independent of grain; and I saw it throughout the county wherever there were any bushes or trees.

55. The *Reed Bunting* is common also near rushy and reedy pools.

¹ Error. J. A. H.-B.

56. The *Chaffinch* ; 57. The *Greenfinch* ; 58. The *Bullfinch* ; 59. The *Goldfinch* ; 60. The *Linnæus*—all common and daily-seen English birds—are everywhere to be found ; excepting, indeed, the goldfinch, which bird is far more rare than the others, being seen only about some of the gardens and orchards in the south of the county.

61. The *Mountain-finch*, a bird not unlike the female snow-bunting in general appearance, is a frequent [?] visitor.

62. The common *House Sparrow*, as usual, frequents the habitations of men everywhere as far as Tongue.

63. The *Siskin* is in almost every wood during the spring and summer ; nevertheless its nest is but rarely found.

64. The *Redpole* is also common : it breeds in the little thickets of birch, etc., by the sides of many of the wild mountain lakes ; and in winter may be seen in large flocks feeding on the seeds of the alder and other trees.

65. The *Cross Bill* has of late years become numerous in the fir-woods, and will probably become far more so when the magnificent plantations of the Duke of Sutherland grow to a height suited to these amusing birds.

66. The *Common Starling* is widely distributed.

The greatest number that I saw in any one place was on the island of Handa.

67. The *Goatsucker*, an insectivorous bird, although not very frequently seen, is easily recognised by the humming noise it utters, which resembles somewhat the low buzzing of a spinning-wheel.

68. The *Cornish Chough*, or *Red-legged Crow*, is rare. It fixes upon the most lofty and steep precipices for its abode. I saw it near Durness.¹

69. The *Raven* manages, notwithstanding the constant war waged against him, to keep his ground, and to continue tolerably numerous. I constantly see a pair or more of them playing grotesque antics, and uttering varied and strange cries upon some isolated rock on the mountain side, from which they can have a good view of any approaching enemy. Their chief location is, however, along the sea-shore, and about the rocky islands, where they can get a good supply of dead fish, seals, etc.

70. The *Carrion Crow* is rare ; but,

71. The *Hooded Crow* is numerous everywhere, in spite of traps and guns. Wary and strong, they manage to evade all attempts at their extirpation, and to keep up their indiscriminate and wholesale destruction of eggs of every kind. I consider the hooded crow to be the greatest enemy to game, and indeed to all other birds, that we have. I

¹ See Appendix, page 345.

have seen a black crow and hooded crow nesting together.

72. The *Rook* is as common in Sutherland as in any other part of the kingdom, repaying by its destruction of grubs and noxious insects the mischief it does to grain.

73. The *Jackdaw* is numerous, building both in rocks and chimneys, as its convenience or fancy happens to lead it.

74. The *Maggie* is a common inhabitant of all the woody districts.

75. That singular little bird the *Wrynneck* has been killed but rarely in Sutherlandshire.

76. The *Common Tree-creeper* is everywhere in abundance where there is wood.

77. The *Cuckoo* is in great abundance during the spring and summer, more particularly in the rocky and wild hill-sides, where there are frequent patches of birch and other underwood. I heard it at Tongue, and everywhere to the south of that place.

78. The *Kingfisher* is a rare but occasional visitor: it does not breed in Sutherlandshire.

79. The *Chimney Swallow* is common.

80. The *Swift*, according to its universal habit, wheels and screams as diligently round Dornoch Cathedral and other lofty buildings in Sutherland,

as it does round the spire of a village church in England.

81. The *Sand Martin* is numerous wherever the ground suits its habits; and the *Common House Martin* is also everywhere: it breeds, too, in many of the rocky cliffs and caves of the coast. I particularly observed it in the cave of Smoo, near Durness.¹

82. The *Wood-Pigeon* is numerous wherever woods and cultivation united afford it food and shelter. In my opinion the good it does the farmer, in feeding for many months of the year on the seeds of the wild mustard, ragweed, etc. etc., is a fair equivalent for all the grain it consumes. As far north as Tongue I heard and saw this bird.

83. The *Rock Dove*, a beautiful and interesting little bird, frequents most of the rocky shores of the north coast. Inhabiting the crevices and caverns formed by the constant beating of the waves, and fearless of the surf and swell dashing constantly into its dwelling-places, this bird lives and multiplies; seldom killed by man, but probably affording a great source of food to the peregrine falcons who build in its neighbourhood.

I never saw any kind of woodpecker in Sutherlandshire, though it is most probable that the spotted woodpecker does exist in the old woods near

¹ See Appendix, page 345.

Dunrobin and elsewhere. Indeed I have heard that it has been seen there; but I would rather run the chance of leaving out birds that *do* occur than insert the name of any bird as being indigenous, unless I had seen it myself, or had heard of its being seen by persons whose authority I could not doubt, either as to their truthfulness or their skill.

I write these pages wholly for the amusement and information of my reader, and take down the names of birds out of my note-book, in which I have inserted them in almost every instance after having seen them myself; and the very few which I have not seen living in Sutherlandshire, Mr. Dunbar has procured in that county, and has them now preserved in his collection.

I must apologise to the scientific ornithologist for any mistakes I may have made in naming the several birds, as I am more of an out-door than an in-door naturalist; and if my notes are of any value, it will be for their truth, and because they are the result of personal observation and acquaintance with the birds. I will only request, in the words of Horace—

Si quid novisti rectius istis,
Candidus imperti : si non, his utere mecum.