

CHAPTER XV.

APRIL.

Field-mice—Brent Geese—Arrival of Migratory Birds—Instinct of Crows in Feeding—Instinct of Thrushes—Disappointments in Shooting Wild-geese—Death of White-fronted Geese—Shetland Pony—Heronry—Anecdote of Roebuck—Wild-duck's Nest.

THE wild-geese which came a few days ago have now entirely disappeared, either in consequence of finding no oats sown, or from some impending change of weather on the higher grounds.

The field-mice on the approach of cold and wet shut up the mouths of their holes. There are a great many of these little animals in some of the fields near the house, notwithstanding the quantity killed by the owls, who come down from the large woods every night, and hunt in the cultivated grounds.

Immense numbers of brent geese float with every tide into the bays formed by the bar. As the tide recedes they land on the grass and feed in closely-packed flocks. On the land they are light active birds, walking quickly, and with a graceful carriage. On any alarm, before rising, they run together as close as they can; thus affording a good chance to

the shooter, who may be concealed near enough, of making his shot tell among their heads and necks. All geese and swans have this habit of crowding together when first alarmed.

April is an interesting month to the ornithologist, as it is then that most of the migratory birds change their quarters, some leaving us, and others arriving. The regularity of their going and coming is very surprising. Unless change of weather or very severe winds interfere, the arrival and departure of most birds may be calculated nearly to a day.

For the last two years I have first seen the martins on the 25th of April, and the common chimney swallow on the 27th. The terns also come at the same time. Indeed in both years I have seen them on the same day, *i.e.* the 27th. On the 30th the fieldfares still remain, but not in the same numbers as they were a few days ago. On the 28th large flocks both of fieldfares and redwings passed by us on their way to the northward. A few pairs of these birds breed, I am told, in the large woods near the Spey. And this year (1848) I was shown a nest and eggs, brought from that district by a brother of Mr. Dunbar. He described it as having been placed near the ground.

Mr. Hancock tells me that in Norway, where he has seen them breeding, the fieldfares make their

nests in very large companies, a great many being placed on each tree, and for the most part at a considerable height from the ground.

The last jack-snipe that I killed this year was on the 18th of April. Indeed I do not remember ever killing one after that time. I shot a greenshank on the same day. The latter bird breeds commonly in Sutherlandshire. But I have never ascertained that the jack-snipe's nest was seen, or indeed that the bird is known to breed, in that county. The widgeons begin to decrease in numbers. I do not understand the moulting of these birds: for at the very time when they leave us, many of the male birds have not attained their full plumage. Those who frequent the salt water are more backward in this respect than such as feed in the fresh waters; nor are the former ever in such good condition, or so well flavoured, as the latter.

There are very large flocks of the oyster-catcher, the curlew, and the knot, on the sand-banks, etc. Whenever these birds want to alight on any spot, if the wind is at all high they invariably pitch with their heads straight to windward; if they come down the wind to their resting-place, they first fly past it, and then turning back against the wind, alight with their heads in that direction.

At this season salmon and trout frequent those

parts of the river where the stream is the slowest, or lie in dead water, apparently not having the strength, which, in the warm weather, enables them to lie perfectly at their ease in the strongest rapid.

Amongst the curious instincts which birds display in providing themselves with food, one most resembling reason is that which teaches the common crow, on finding on the shore a shell containing fish, to fly with it to a height in the air, and then to let it drop in order to break the shell sufficiently to get at the fish enclosed in it. When the shell does not break the first time that the crow drops it, she darts down, picks it up, and ascends still higher, till she perceives that the height is sufficient for her purpose. Sometimes another crow darts in to carry off the booty, upon which a battle ensues in the air. Cunning as the crow is, she seldom finds any prize without letting all the neighbourhood know of it by her cries and gestures. With perfect truth the ancient poet said—

“ Tacitus pasci, si posset corvus, haberet
Plus dapis, et rixæ multo minus invidiæque.”

The crows collect great numbers of sea-shells on particular favourite hillocks, which are often at some distance from the sea. I have frequently observed in this country great collections of this kind, and from the state of the shells it would

appear that they bring them to the same place for many successive years.

In some of the woods the thrushes and blackbirds carry the land-shells to certain fixed stones, against which they break them, in order to get at the snails. In a wood of "Brodie" where the round yellow and black-striped shell (*Helix nemoralis*) is abundant, owing I conclude to the rocks under the surface being limestone, I watched two thrushes bring several of these shells in a very short space of time; they knocked them against the stone, and if that did not do, they struck the shell in a crevice and hammered away at it until they extracted the snail, with which they then flew away, probably to feed their young. Whenever I passed through the wood I always visited the thrushes' stone, and found an increasing heap of broken shells. Most birds, if carefully watched, would be found to have recourse to various most surprising expedients in order to obtain food for themselves and their young.

In this country April is the best month for the Bean-geese, yet many weary and often fruitless miles I have walked in pursuit of them. There is something in the wildness and wariness of this fine bird that makes it a peculiarly attractive object of pursuit; but wild-geese shooting is

"Omnium rerum incertissima."

When I have concealed myself in one of my hiding-places in a newly-sown field of oats or peas, the geese, after keeping me perhaps a long time waiting, may arrive at last; and alighting on the field, may commence feeding without any suspicion of danger till they come nearly within shot. But although concealed from the geese, I may be visible in a different direction, when a couple of villainous large black-backed gulls—as happened to-day—came by, and seeing me lying in wait in a suspicious manner, immediately commenced screaming and wheeling over my head. The geese, who are all dispersed in the field, no sooner hear the gulls than they run rapidly together away from me, for they know by the direction in which the gulls are looking where the danger is; they then rise and betake themselves straight to the sea, leaving me without the chance of a shot, after all the trouble I have had in preparing an ambushade.

One day this month, too, after endeavouring for some time to approach unseen some white-fronted geese, one of which I was very anxious to procure for a friend, I saw the birds go to a pool where I knew I could get within shot of them without the least trouble. So making a considerable circuit, I arrived at a part of the ground from which my approaching the geese was perfectly easy. But just

then some peewits saw me as I was advancing in a crouching attitude up to the birds. Had I been walking upright, these peewits would not have taken any notice of me; but the moment that they saw me stooping to conceal myself, they attacked me with screams and cries of alarm sufficient to warn all the country. The geese of course took wing, and left me to return as I came.

To stalk a flock of wild-geese when feeding is as difficult, if not more so, as to stalk a stag. From the nature of the ground which they feed on, and their unwearied vigilance, unless you have concealed yourself beforehand within reach of their feeding-place, it is nearly impossible to approach them. Even if some half-dry ditch or drain passes through the field, and is of sufficient depth to hide the sportsman, supposing he has strength enough of back and of resolution to walk in a stooping position up to his knees in cold water for some hundreds of yards, still the birds are most unwilling to approach any such line of ditch, or indeed any other place which can possibly conceal an enemy.

One of my boys, however, succeeded in getting at this same flock of white-fronted geese in a place where a man could never have done so. He was out for a walk with a gentleman who was staying with me, to whom he was acting as cicerone or

guide to the lochs, as I was unable for some reason to go out with him myself. The little boy took the telescope, which their attendant carried, and having looked along the shores of the lakes and through all the likely parts of the ground, which he knew as well as I did, from having frequently ridden that way to join me, he shut up the glass with the exclamation characteristic of a deer-stalker—"There they are!" My friend's question of course was—"Who are there?" And on being told it was a flock of geese, he at once understood why he had been led on from point to point under different excuses; for he had good-naturedly followed passively wherever he was told to go. Having been shown the geese, he sat down with the glass and allowed the child to attempt the task of stalking them, but without having the slightest expectation of his success.

Having watched him for some time till he became invisible, having apparently sunk into the ground amongst the rushes and long grass, his attention was next attracted by seeing the geese suddenly rise, and almost immediately perceiving that one fell to the ground. The next instant he heard the double report of the boy's gun. Another goose left the flock and fell at some distance, but it was unnoticed by him and the servant, as their

attention was taken up by the young sportsman, who went dashing through water and swamp to seize the first bird that fell: it was nearly as big as himself, and he brought it up to them in triumph, a successful right and left at wild-geese being rather an era in the sporting adventures of a boy ten years old. The well-earned game was then slung across his pony in company with sundry rabbits, etc., and was brought home with no small exultation.

The Shetland pony, than which I never saw a more perfect one, is of great use in many ways. After the hours devoted to Latin, etc., are over, one of the boys, when the weather is tolerable, generally rides out to meet me, if I am in ground which I cannot drive to; and having anchored his pony to a weight sufficient to keep him from wandering far, but not too heavy to prevent his feeding about the rough grass, furze, etc., he joins me, and the pony has all the hares and rabbits slung across his back to save the shoulders of the old keeper. Standing fire perfectly, the little Shetlander seems rather to enjoy the shooting, and to take an interest in what we kill. With proper treatment and due care these Shetland ponies become the most docile and fine-tempered animals in the world; but if once they are badly used they soon become as

full of tricks and as vicious as a monkey. The only bad habit of which I could never break ours was opening every gate which hindered his getting out. There was scarcely any common fastening which he would not undo with his teeth, and if he found a weak place in railings he would push against it till he broke it, and then gallop away for an hour or two where he chose. He also had a peculiar knack of finding out and opening the oat-chest in any stable. When out on a marauding excursion of this kind he knew perfectly that he was doing wrong, and would not allow me to catch him, although at home he would follow me anywhere, putting his nose into my hand to ask for apples or bread. At all times, however, he allowed any one of the children, particularly my little girl, to catch him, and when caught always came back as quietly as possible. There was a great deal of fun and conscious roguery in the little fellow's style of mischief which one could never help laughing at. When idle in his field nothing seemed to please him so much as a game of romps with any dog who would play with him.

When I lived close to Nairn, as soon as ever he heard the horn of the mail-coach, which was blown on its arrival at the inn, he invariably ran to an elevated part of the field, from which he could see

over the wall, and waited there for the mail to pass. As soon as it came opposite his station off he set, galloping round and round the field with his heels generally higher than his head, and his long mane and tail streaming out, evidently showing himself off to obtain the applause of the passengers, to whom he seemed to afford daily amusement, as every head was turned back to see him as long as they possibly could.

Riding by the heronry on the Findhorn I saw the keeper at Altyre searching in all the jackdaws' nests that he could reach for the remains of the herons' eggs. These active little marauders live in great numbers in the rocks immediately opposite the herons, and keep up a constant warfare with them during the breeding season, stealing an immense number of their eggs, which they carry over to the holes and crevices of the opposite rocks and eat them, out of reach of the herons. The keeper took handfuls of the shells of the herons' eggs out of some of the jackdaws' holes: the injury to the heronry from this cause must be very great, as the plundering seems to be incessantly going on.

I see that the peregrine falcon still breeds near the heronry: a pair only remain in the rock, as every season they drive away their young ones to find a resting-place elsewhere. The barn owl also

breeds in the rocks of the Findhorn : not having towers or ruins to breed in, they adapt themselves to their situation and take to the rocks.

The male of all hawks, I believe, feeds his mate while she is sitting on her eggs. Whilst I was fishing in the Findhorn, at a place where a great many kestrels breed, one of these birds came flying up the course of the river with a small bird in his claws. When he came opposite the rock where the nest was, he rose in the air and began to call loudly and shrilly for his mate, who soon came out from the rocks, and taking the bird in her talons flew back with it ; the male bird, after uttering a few cries expressive of pleasure, flew off to renew his hunting.

The time at which roe lose the velvet from their horns seems to depend on the lateness or earliness of the season. This year (1848) is backward, and as late as the 15th of this month I see that the horns of the bucks are still covered with the velvet. In early seasons their horns are quite clean by the 4th or 5th of the month. When the larch and other trees become green, the roe wander very much, taking to the smaller woods and grassy plantations in search of some favourite foliage or herbage. A fine buck came to an untimely end at Darnaway. Mr. Stuart on his way to fish, was going along a

narrow footpath on the top of the rocks which overhang the river, when his dogs, running into the cover, started a buck, who, taking a sudden spring into the footpath, found himself unexpectedly within a few inches of Mr. Stuart, in fact almost touching him. Without pausing for an instant the frightened animal with another spring went right over the high rocks into the deep black pools of the river below. Mr. Stuart got down to the water and managed to pull the roebuck out, but the poor animal was quite dead, killed by the shock of jumping from so great a height, although his fall must have been much broken by the water.

When a crow leaves her nest on being disturbed, her quiet, sneaking manner of threading her way through the trees tells that she has young or eggs in the thicket as plainly as if she uttered cries of alarm. These birds are early breeders: I found a hooded crow's nest with eggs nearly hatched on the 16th April.

The common wild-duck often builds her nest in a situation from which one would suppose it would be very difficult for the young, when first hatched, to make their way to the water. My retriever put up a wild-duck on the 16th in some very high and close heather at some distance from any water. I found that she had her nest in the very centre of

the heather and in the densest part of it. The nest was very beautifully formed; it was perfectly round, and looked like a mass of the finest down, with just sufficient coating of small sticks, etc., outside to keep the down together. There were thirteen eggs in it, which we took home and put under a bantam hen: they were hatched in a few days, and I allowed them to go at liberty with their foster mother in the kitchen garden, where they soon became perfectly tame. When the gardener digs any part of the ground the little fellows immediately flock about his spade, so that it is difficult for him to avoid hurting them, as they tumble about on the newly-turned up earth, darting at the worms which come into view; whenever they see him take his spade they run after him as if they thought that his only object in digging up the ground was to find them food. One tiny fellow, who is weaker than the rest, and who consequently gets pushed out of the way by his stronger brethren, waits quietly to be lifted up on the flat of the spade, where the gardener allows him to stop out of the reach of the others, while the little glutton swallows a worm nearly as big as himself. The moment the spade is laid flat on the ground he knows that his turn has come, and running on it looks out for the expected worm, and is quite

fearless although raised on the spade several feet from the ground.

There are few wild-birds or other animals which could not be tamed and made useful to us if, instead of constantly persecuting them, we treated them with hospitality and allowed them to live in peace and plenty. All wild-fowl are susceptible of domestication, and there are very few kinds which would not breed in a tame state.

Most wild-fowl require very little extent of water as long as they have grass-fields to walk about and to feed in. No more water is necessary than is sufficient for them to wash and take an occasional swim in.

Our brent goose seems to eat scarcely anything but grass, and any snails and worms it may find in the field. He is a far more graceful bird on land than the pochard, for quick and active as the latter is in the water, his great flat feet, placed far behind, are of little service to him in walking.

The eye of the pochard is of a most wonderfully clear bright red colour, something between crimson and scarlet, and is quite unlike that of any other water-fowl that I am acquainted with.

April, if the weather is fine and genial enough to bring out many flies, is about the best month for trout-fishing on the Findhorn. Large river-trout,

which are seldom seen at any other time of the year, make their appearance in this month and rise freely; the sea-trout fishing, lower down near the sea, is equally good, the fish being numerous and eager to take the fly.

