

## CHAPTER XVI.

## MAY.

Nests of Birds—Cross-bills, etc.—Lateness of Season—Bean-Geese—Partridge's Nest—Northern Diver—Coot's Nest—Teal and her Young—Wren's Nest—Badgers; cunning of; anecdote of—Aurora Borealis; sound made by.

IN this region May is invariably ushered in by the croak of the landrail. Generally this bird is heard on the 1st. If, however, the grass and wheat fields are backward, it is not heard till the 2d or 3d, but never later than the 3d.

On the 1st of May we found in an old crows' nest, placed in a tall Scotch fir-tree, the nest of a horned owl, with one young bird, half-grown, and a rotten egg. The owls hoot now very much, and though none breed very near the house, I hear them every night in the ash-trees.

The young thrushes, blackbirds, robins, and hedge-sparrows will soon be hatched; but the greenfinches, chaffinches, etc., although their nests are nearly completed, have not yet laid any eggs; the insectivorous birds being the first to build.

Swallows, martins, swifts, and wheatears become

numerous about the first week in May, and the landrail's call is heard from every patch of clover. The movements of the landrail are very peculiar and amusing: at one moment threading the clover with its head bent to the ground, and looking more like a weasel than a bird; the next, standing perfectly erect, and uttering its hoarse cry with a voice of brass. I saw one to-day standing upright between the legs of a cow, and crying boldly, as if perfectly aware that the cow was not an enemy.

Whilst fishing in the upper part of the river I saw numbers of crossbills and siskins in the beautiful woods of Dulsie. The nests of these two birds are scarcely ever found, although they certainly breed plentifully in this country. The siskin conceals its small nest with great care at some distance from the ground, generally near the summit of a spruce fir; while the crossbill places its nest, which it assimilates as much as possible to the colour and texture of the moss, on some good-sized horizontal branch of a fir-tree, so that it is nearly invisible from below.

When the season is late the fish are also late in taking the fly. The natural fly does not come to maturity this year as early as usual, in consequence of the herbage not having come up; and the want of flies on the water keeps the fish from coming

out to the streams and pools of the river, where the angler expects them.

There is much snow on the Monaghleahd mountains this year (1847); and in consequence of this melting gradually from the heat of the noonday sun, the water rises at a certain hour daily; here, at Dulsie, the rise takes place about three or four in the morning. Having risen for an hour or two, it again falls to its usual level.

May 6.—The salmon-fry begin to appear.

May 7.—I observe a flock of bean-geese in the bay, probably the last I shall see this year, as it is time for them to be nesting in the far north. On this day, also, the spotted fly-catcher appeared in the garden, where it builds every year in one of the apricot trees.

During this month the oyster-catchers remain in larger flocks than at any other time of the year, although many are breeding far inland on the stony banks of the Findhorn, Spey, and other rivers.

The partridge covers its nest and eggs with perhaps greater cunning than any other bird, entirely concealing not only the nest itself, but so disposing the surrounding grass that no vestiges of its track to and fro can be seen: they commence laying here about the 10th of May. The land-rails are about a week later.

I have often observed that the black-headed gull eats a great deal of corn in the newly sown fields; and I now find that the lesser black-backed gull does the same, as I shot one which had a handful of corn (oats and barley) in its crop, mixed up with worms, grubs, etc.

The fishermen at Nairn found, on the 26th of this month, a very fine northern diver, drowned in the stake-nets set for salmon. They tell me that it is not a solitary instance, as every year they get one or two at this season. This is another proof that this bird must breed somewhere on the Scotch coast, although I never heard of its eggs being found.

The coots and dabchicks have already commenced making their large platform of a nest. I found one on the loch which the bird had fastened on a floating tree that had grounded in a shallow; but which, having again got adrift, owing to a rise in the loch, had been driven by the wind until it stuck fast close to the shore, where the old bird was still at work. One bird seems to remain in the nest while its mate brings it rushes, which the stationary bird disposes of by adding them to the already large structure, till it seems sufficiently high above the water and solid enough to resist wind and weather. The whole nest is firm enough to bear a much greater weight than is ever imposed on it.

Everywhere on the lakes are broods of young wild-ducks, either swimming in close order behind their mothers, or all huddled together in a heap on some little island or projecting point of land.

As we were out driving the other day, a teal came fluttering out of the dry ditch by the roadside, and for above a hundred yards continued flying and running almost under the horse's feet. I found that she had a number of young ones unable to get over the wall, so we helped them into the adjoining wood. They were a long distance from the water, and had very rough ground to pass over to reach it. I remember exactly a similar circumstance happening to me in Ross-shire, when I also saved the lives of a young brood of teal by lending them a helping hand. These instances prove that, notwithstanding the instinct of birds, which generally enables them to keep their young out of harm's way, they occasionally get them into a situation not only of difficulty, but where any dog or mischievous boy coming along might destroy the whole brood. At every ebb tide now, the terns fish with great perseverance for the sand-eels, on which they almost entirely feed.

The month of May this year appears to have quite changed its character; instead of being warm and genial, we have nothing but cold and cutting east winds; and the mountains have lost but very

little of their winter covering of snow ; indeed, on the higher inland mountains their white dresses extend down very nearly as low as in the winter. But notwithstanding the bad weather there is much to amuse and interest one in the sheltered parts of the low country. Every plant and flower is bursting into beauty, in spite of the cold blasts ; and the small birds are in full activity and seem at the height of their happiness. It is also a constant source of amusement to us to watch the various ways of building and the different nests of the small birds. Each nest has its own character, and each bird its own place of concealment. The little willow wren forms one of the most interesting nests, which it places either under a bush in the flower-garden, or in a rough grass-field, where it forms a kind of dome-shaped nest, made to assimilate completely with the surface of the surrounding ground.

The common wren, too, is very choice and careful in the structure of her nest, and sometimes builds in the most singular situations. I saw one this year which was built in a cactus that hung from the roof of a greenhouse. Every time the little bird wished to add a leaf, or a piece of moss, she had to squeeze and twist herself in through a small hole left for the entrance of a vine stem. Her perseverance and determination were extraordinary ; for in spite of all

difficulties she managed to form an immense nest in this singularly chosen and picturesque abode. It is difficult to imagine what could have put it into her head to come into the greenhouse at all, and through so awkward an entrance, surrounded, too, as she was by places far more suitable and easy of access.

The badgers live a life of great activity now. In this country they are seldom destroyed: at least, there is one large tract of very wild country, the soil of which is sandy and suitable for their digging propensities, where also they are not often trapped. The badger, when once he has been frightened by, or has escaped from a trap, is not easily caught again; but displays a cunning and perseverance in eluding all attempts at his capture which he is not generally supposed to possess.

I seldom declare war against these animals, not considering them very mischievous; but some time ago, wanting one for a friend, I set a strong trap with bait near one of their holes. A large badger got in, but managed to escape before I came to the trap. I set it again; and the next morning, on going to it, I saw from a distance a number of hooded crows, perched in a tree near the place, in a state of great excitement. On coming up, however, instead of the badger I found an immense gray cat, closely resembling a wild-cat, both in colour

and ferocity, and who flew straight at me on my approaching her. Having killed her, I left her near the place, covered over with sand; the badgers came and scratched her up, and nearly devoured her by the next morning; so I put traps about the remains of her body; but they managed to spring every trap without being caught, and for several days they escaped in the same way. The traps were always sprung; the badgers' tracks were all round them, and the baits invariably taken away. At last, determined not to be beat, I baited my trap with an apple, as something new and unexpected to them, and immediately caught what I wanted, a fine old badger.

My old keeper was sitting on a hillock about three o'clock one morning in the beginning of May, watching quietly a few wild-geese which he had discovered feeding in a field not very far off, but out of shot. In this hillock was a badger's hole. Presently he heard a grunt behind him, which he took for a pig; and looking round he saw, standing in a clover field close to him, an immensely large badger, whose object seemed to be to get into a hole on the hillock, to reach which he had no alternative but to pass within a yard of the man's legs. After they had looked at each other for some time in this way, the



badger at last uttering a most ill-natured kind of grunt, suddenly put his nose to the ground, and passing close to the keeper made a rush to the hole, with all his hair standing straight on end, and showing his teeth in so determined a manner as completely to take away all presence of mind from the old fellow; so much so, indeed, that he neither shot at him nor obstructed his free entrance to the hole in any way. He tells me that when he has been sitting quietly watching for geese, otters, etc., he has not unfrequently seen the badgers going about together in companies of three or four.

There was a heavy gale of wind at the beginning of this month. I was out late with the keeper, and just before it commenced we saw a very brilliant aurora borealis; or, as they term it here, "The Merry Dancers." He told me that when the aurora was very bright, and the flashes rapidly waving through the sky, he had frequently thought that he heard the merry dancers emit a faint rustling noise, like the "moving of dead leaves," but this was only when the night was quite calm, and there was no sound to disturb the perfect stillness. The idea came from him quite uncalled for by any remark of mine, and was entirely the result of his own actual observation. I was pleased to hear him say this, as I had more than once imagined

that the aurora, when peculiarly bright and rapid in its movements, DID actually make exactly the sound that he described; but never having heard it asserted by any one else, I had always been rather shy of advancing such a theory.

The aurora is seldom seen, or at least seldom attentively watched in this country, in situations where there is not some sound or other, such as voices, running water, or the rustling and moaning of trees, to break the perfect silence; but it has occasionally happened to me to be gazing at this beautiful illumination in places where no other sound could be heard, and then, and then only, have I fancied that the brightest flashes were accompanied by a light crackling or rustling noise, or, as my keeper expressed it very correctly, "the moving of dead leaves." Whether this is so or not I leave to others, more learned in the phenomena of the heavens, to decide, and only mention the circumstance as the passing remark of an unscientific observer.

In the northern mountains of Sutherland, where the aurora is frequently very bright and beautiful, there is a fascinating, nay, an awful attraction in the sight, which has kept me for hours from my bed, watching the waving and ever changing flashes dancing to and fro. I have watched this strange

sight where the dead silence of the mountains was only broken by the fancied rustling of the "*dresses*" of the "merry dancers," or by the sudden scream or howl of some wild inhabitant of the rocks; and I have done so until an undefinable feeling of superstitious awe has crept over my mind, which was not without difficulty shaken off.

The aurora, bright as it sometimes is in this country, must be far more wildly and vividly splendid in the more northern and Polar regions. Here it is almost invariably the forerunner of change of weather, or of rough winds and storm.

One night this spring the appearance of the aurora was very peculiar. All the flashes seemed to dart from a common bright centre in the heavens: this continued for some time, until, at length assuming its usual form, it remained comparatively stationary above the north-eastern horizon, and from that quarter there came the next day a severe storm of sleet and wind.

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