

CHAPTER XVII.

JUNE.

Trout-fishing—Sea-trout in the Findhorn—Breeding-place of Black-headed Gulls—Salmon-fishing—Gray Crows—Hair Worms—Fishing—Cromarty—Goats—The Peregrine Falcon.

IN June the trout begin to feed more freely, and from most Highland streams the sportsman may reckon on a good basketful if the day is tolerable. There is a kind of trout in the Findhorn which frequent only the lower pools near the sea; higher up I never saw them; the fishermen call them "brown lugs." In appearance they are between a sea and a river trout: they seldom exceed a pound and a half in weight.

One day, about the 1st of June, when fishing in a clear pool near the mouth of the river, a large trout came out from under the bank, and darted over my fly without taking it. I changed the fly, and he did the same thing. I tried him with a dozen different sorts, and he invariably played the same trick, coming out from under the bank, dashing at the fly, then turning short round or rolling over it. At last a miniature black midge in my

book caught my eye, and I put it on: the moment I cast this fly over the trout he came straight at it in quite a different manner, taking it well into his wide mouth as if at last in earnest. He was well hooked, and then came the tug of war and the trial of patience. The fly was literally speaking a midge, made more as an experiment in fly-making than for any expected use, and it was tied on the finest gut. The trout, on finding that instead of catching a fly he was caught himself, immediately began to try every device that a trout ever imagined to get rid of his tiny enemy. Now he was down at the bottom rubbing his nose on the gravel: the next moment flying straight up into the air with the agility of a harlequin; sometimes with forty yards of line out, and sometimes right under my feet; then away he went as if about to run over the shallow at the end of the pool on his way to the sea, but changing his mind, darted like an arrow up to the deepest part of the pool, and there he lay like a stone at the bottom. After a little waiting I pelted him out of that mood, and beginning myself to grow eager and desperate (moreover having now more confidence in my midge, which had already passed through a trial which a larger hook might not have stood equally well), I turned his head down the stream, and began to take the game

into my own hands a little more—in fact to be the active instead of the passive agent. The trout, too, began to feel weary of the contest, and to allow himself to be led about : at last I brought him to the edge, but just as the landing-net was being delicately slipped under him, away he went again, and ran the line round a broken piece of bank on the opposite side. I am afraid something very like an imprecation escaped me ; and if it did, I am confident that Job himself could not blame me. Just as I had quite given all up, the trout most carefully and good-naturedly turned back the way he went, undoing the line again as neatly as possible. After a little more running to and fro he fairly gave in, and this time we got him safely into the landing-net, when I found that he was one of the aforesaid “brown lugs,” weighing nearly 5 lbs.—the largest trout that I ever killed on the Findhorn, and mastered too with a fly only fit for parr of the smallest size.

I have frequently found that when a large trout runs in that undecided manner at my fly, he will go in right earnest at a much smaller one. Salmon are more uncertain : it has happened to me that, even in clear water, a salmon has leaped over or refused a small salmon-fly, but has taken greedily a very large-sized one. But this is an exception ; and my experience would lead me, as a general

rule, always to offer a fish a smaller fly than the one he rises shily at ; and I believe that I should be borne out in this opinion by more experienced anglers than myself.

I never saw so many black-headed gulls collected together as on the Loch of Belivat, on the property of Lethen : at one end of the loch there are a great many rushes and water-plants ; these are, literally speaking, FULL of nests, formed of interwoven rushes, weeds, etc. ; and on the islands in the lake you can scarcely land without putting your foot on eggs, which are very slightly protected by anything in the shape of a nest. On this island are a few stunted and bent willows ; every branch and every fork of a branch where a nest can possibly be placed is occupied : this is the only instance I ever met with of gulls building on bushes. The stench on the island is almost insupportable ; indeed it was so strong that I hurried off again as quickly as possible : the day was hot, and it actually seemed pestilential. The old birds looked like a shower of drifting snow over our heads, and were as noisy as a dozen village schools broken loose. This was on the 2d of June, and there were numbers of young gulls recently hatched—curiously marked little tortoiseshell-coloured things who tottered about the rushes, etc., without the least fear of us.

All other birds seemed to be kept away from the lake by the gulls, excepting a few mallards, who were swimming about in a state of bachelorhood, their wives and families being probably in some more quiet and solitary pool in the neighbouring peat-mosses. When the mallards rose they were so completely puzzled and "*bebothered*" by the thousands of gulls who were darting and screaming about them, that they gave up attempting to fly away, and came plump down again into the water.

Although the gulls may know each its own nest, it is difficult to understand how they can recognise their young ones amongst the thousands of little downy things which, towards the end of the hatching season, are floating about upon the water. There is another nesting-place of the black-headed gulls in the forest of Darnaway, where they have taken possession of a small loch surrounded by trees. They usually, however, like all other water-fowl, prefer establishing their breeding-place on a loch situated in the open country, where they can have a good view all around so as to descry the approach of any enemy; but undisturbed possession and quiet have induced them to remain on the Darnaway loch, although it is shut in by trees.

June is generally the best month of the year for angling in Scotland: the loch trout are by this time

in good condition, and rise freely at the fly. The grilse also are now in most of the rivers, and afford better angling than any other fish, rising well, and being strong and active when hooked. There appears of late years to be a great diminishing in the number of salmon in all the Scotch rivers: the fish are more protected from the angler, but are caught and destroyed in so many other ways—by constant netting in the streams, by innumerable stake-nets, bag-nets, etc., all along the coasts—that they have but little chance of keeping up their numbers. From one end of Scotland to the other along the whole extent of the coast, these destructive nets are fixed at every convenient place. Near the mouth of every stream, large or small, they are to be seen, and immense must be the number of fish taken to repay the expense of keeping them up, and renewing the stakes, netting, etc., every spring, and frequently also after severe storms. Near the little stream of Nairn there are no less than three of these nets, and as many more between that point and the Findhorn, all of which are exposed to a heavy sea, which must make the expense of keeping them in repair very great.

On the bar, which is a kind of island, there is a solitary hut, where two or three fishermen pass the spring and summer. In the latter end of winter,

when I have been wild-fowl shooting in that direction, I have often gone in to screen myself from the cold. During the absence of the fishermen the hut is tenanted by rabbits, who make themselves quite at home, digging holes in the turf walls, etc. The life of the fishermen in this place must be like that of a lighthouse-keeper. During high tides they are quite cut off from the mainland, and although at low water their place of abode is no longer an island, yet that part of the shore opposite the bar is a kind of wilderness little frequented by any one, being at a long distance from any road or path, with an extensive tract of rough and all but impassable country extending in every direction. It is, however, a favourite resort of mine, being the undisturbed abode of many wild animals. The roebuck and blackcock live in tolerable security there, and would increase to a very great extent were their young ones not killed by foxes and other vermin, who prowl about without danger of trap or poison.

I had heard that the lochs here called Loch Lee had no fish in them of any kind; but seeing the numerous tracks of otters, and also the cormorants frequently fishing in them, I determined to ascertain what these animals came for; being pretty sure that some kind of fish must be the attraction. Accordingly, having made up a long "*set line*," *i.e.*

some two hundred yards of line with strong hooks at intervals of four or five yards, I set it, as far as it would reach, across one part of the largest lake, baiting the hooks with small trout and worms. The next morning on examining the line I found a great number of large eels on the hooks, several of them weighing above four pounds each. Although I frequently afterwards put in the line, I never caught any fish excepting eels, but of these a vast number. This proves how favourite a food of the otter eels must be, as these animals appear to live constantly at the loch, where they could have found nothing else to prey upon. A highland loch without trout is, however, a rare thing, as they are almost invariably well stocked with them.

There are one or two grassy hillocks near these lakes to which those mischievous robbers, the hooded crows, bring the eggs which they have pilfered in order to eat them at their leisure; and until I administered a dose of strychnia, I never passed these places without finding the fresh remains of eggs: partridges, plovers, snipes, redshanks, wood-pigeon, ducks, and teal, all seemed to have contributed to support these ravenous birds. There was a nest of a teal with eight eggs in a small thicket of heather, in a situation apparently secure from all risk of being discovered. I only knew of it in con-

sequence of my retriever having put up the old bird. Frequently, afterwards, I saw her on her downy nest, but one day both teal and eggs were gone; and when I went to the grassy hillock which the crows used for a dining-table, there were the remains of all the eight eggs.

Poisoning with strychnia is by far the most effectual way of destroying crows. If you put a piece of carrion in a tree well seasoned with this powerful drug, the ground below it will soon be strewed with the bodies of most of the crows in the neighbourhood, so instantaneous is their death on swallowing any of it. It seems almost immediately to paralyze them, and they fall down on the spot.

In the stagnant pools near the river Nairn there are great numbers of that singular worm called by the country people the hair-worm, from its exact resemblance to a horsehair. In these pools there are thousands of them twisting and turning about like living hairs. The most singular thing regarding them is, that if they are put for weeks in a drawer or elsewhere, till they become as dry and brittle as it is possible for anything to be, and to all appearance perfectly dead and shrivelled up, yet on being put into water they gradually come to life again, and are as pliable and active as ever. The country people are firmly of opinion that they are

nothing but actual horsehair turned into living things by being immersed for a long time in water of a certain quality. All water does not produce them alike. To the naked eye both extremities are quite the same in appearance.

While fishing in the river one day at the beginning of June, my attention was attracted by a terrier I had with me, who was busily employed in turning up the stones near the water's edge, evidently in search of some sort of food. On examining into his proceedings I found that under most of the stones were a number of very small eels: where the ground was quite dry the little fish were dead, and these the dog ate; where there was still any moisture left under the stone they were alive, and wriggled away rapidly towards the stream, seeming to know instinctively which way to go for safety. Trout have undoubtedly the same instinct; and when they drop off the hook by chance, they always wriggle *towards* the water, and never *away* from it. I saw a trout one day who had been left by the receding of the river in a shallow pool. When the water in his narrow place of refuge had got so low as scarcely to cover him he worked his way out of it, and I saw him go over the still wet stones straight to the river, which was about a yard from the pool. It is difficult, indeed almost impossible, to become

much acquainted with the habits of fish; but could we pry into their domestic circles, I have no doubt that we should find them possessed of a far higher degree of instinct and much greater cleverness in providing for their food and safety than we give them credit for. The instinct of fish in foretelling, or rather in foreknowing, the changes of weather is very remarkable; and the observant angler may almost prophesy to a certainty with regard to the approach of rain or storms by seeing in what mood for rising at his flies the trout may be. In certain states of the weather the angler may put away his tackle without trying to take a single trout; but this can only be learned by experience and close observation.

Sometimes, on a fine June evening, the sea-fish, such as gurnets and coal-fish, take a large white fly readily enough, and fight most powerfully when of any size.

I took a boat one day to cross over to the rocks of Cromarty, in order to shoot some rock-pigeons. The breeze was gentle, but sufficient to take us merrily over; and putting out a couple of lines with large white flies, we caught plenty of gurnet, etc. The fish darted suddenly and with true aim at the flies when close to the boat as readily as when at some distance. After coasting along the

rocks for some time, and shooting a few pigeons, at the risk occasionally of having the bottom of our boat stove in by the hidden rocks round which the large tangle floated gracefully in the passing waves, treacherously concealing the rocks from which they grew, we turned our boat's head homewards. By this time the wind had dropped entirely, and the tide running strong against us, we had to row for four hours in a heavy haddock boat to reach our destination. I had only one man and a boy with me, the latter of no use; so I took an oar myself and pulled steadily on, stopping only occasionally to haul in a gurnet or other fish.

Both goats and sheep were feeding about the rocks, and even the latter seemed to get easily to places which appeared to be reachable only by means of wings. The small patches of bright velvety-looking grass, which grew here and there on corners of ground formed by the débris of the cliffs, however difficult of access, were all tenanted by them.

On one bit of emerald-coloured grass, not larger than a good-sized tablecloth, a sheep and her young lamb were feeding at their ease. Although I stopped the boat and examined the place carefully, no way of access to this little bit of tableland could we discover. The well-contented

animals seemed shut out by perpendicular precipices from all the rest of the world.

As for the goats, no ledge or projection of the rocks near which grew any tempting bit of herbage seemed too small or too difficult of approach.

About three weeks ago our tame pochard had been carried away in a hurricane of wind. To my surprise, one day this month I saw this same pochard swimming about the loch alone, and apparently very tame. One of the children who was with me, and whose own especial property the bird had been, whistled to it in the same way in which he had been accustomed to call it, upon which, to his unbounded joy, it immediately came towards us, and for some time continued swimming within a few yards of where we stood, evidently recognising us, and seeming glad to see us again.

A few days afterwards we again saw him ; but he was now accompanied by a flock of fourteen or fifteen others. This was remarkable, both on account of the time of year, and because this kind of duck is very rare in this region, and has never been known to breed in the neighbourhood ; but all birds seem to have some means of calling and attracting those of the same species, in a way that we cannot understand.

My peregrine falcon, who still lives in the

garden, now utters a call which is different from her usual shrill complaining cry, and which occasionally attracts down to her some wandering hawk of her own kind. The peregrine falcon is well named, for it is found in all countries.

Our bird from good food, and having always had the run of a large garden, instead of being confined in a room or cage, has grown to a great size, and is in peculiarly fine plumage; with the dark slate colour of her upper feathers forming a beautiful contrast to the rich cream-coloured shade of her neck and breast.

There is scarcely any common animal too large for her to attack when she is hungry. She will fly at dog or cat as readily as at a rabbit or a rat. The latter animal she kills with great dexterity and quickness; and I have also found the remains of half-grown rabbits who, having feloniously made their way into the garden, have fallen a prey to her powerful talons.

On changing my residence some weeks ago I gave a tame peregrine falcon I then had to a friend in the neighbourhood, who keeps her in a walled garden, where she soon became quite at home, and learnt to know her new master as well as she had known me. She almost startled me one day as I was walking in his garden with a bunch of dark-

coloured grapes in my hand. The falcon, as I passed by her, mistaking the grapes for a bird or some other prey, made a sudden dash at them, and with such violence as in an instant to disperse the whole bunch on the ground, where she hopped about, examining grape after grape, and at last having found out her error, she left them in disgust.

It must be a strong bird that can withstand the rapid powerful swoop and fierce blow of a peregrine. I have seen one strike the head off a grouse or pigeon with one blow, which divided the neck as completely as if it had been cut off with a sharp knife.

Few birds of the same kind vary so much in size as peregrine falcons. Some killed in a wild state are almost as large as the noble ger falcon. Altogether the peregrine is the finest of our British falcons both in size, courage, and beauty. It possesses, too, the free courage and confidence which facilitate so greatly the process of training it to assist us in our field sports.