

## CHAPTER XX.

## SEPTEMBER.

The 1st of September—Partridge-shooting—Migratory Birds—Grouse-shooting in September—Widgeon—Jack-snipes; Breeding places of—Landrail—White variety of the Eagle—Sea-trout fisher—Stag's horns—Deer-stalking—Cunning of Deer—Disappointed in getting a Shot.

THE 1st of September is by no means so marked a day with sportsmen in the north as it is with those in the southern parts of the kingdom. I well remember the eager haste with which, when a boy, I used to sally forth at the earliest dawn to wage war on the partridges. The birds, however, at that hour, are restless and on the alert, the ground is wet, and the sport unsatisfactory; and in fact no one, I believe, who can number more than sixteen summers ever got up at three o'clock to shoot partridges without repenting his undue activity before mid-day.

In this country very little of the corn is cut at the commencement of September, and I never attempt to shoot more partridges than I may happen to want for the larder. As long as the fields are covered with standing corn the only way is to hunt

quietly round the hedgerows, and banks exposed to the sun, or in dry soiled turnip-fields, during the middle of the day, when the birds come to bask and scratch. Both partridges and hares stick close to standing corn as long as an acre of it remains.

In this country, however, the wild-fowl and other birds which frequent the shores and rocks always afford me as amusing sport as the best partridge-shooting; and at this season there is always a constant and endless variety of migratory birds collecting previous to their departure.

There is one very numerous class of birds, the sandpipers and others of the same kind, which are very little known. Even the best and most quoted authors of works on natural history are constantly in error with regard to the names and classification of these birds, and although I do not pretend to be acquainted with *all*, or *nearly* all, the varieties, I know enough of them to perceive that the numerous changes of plumage which each species goes through, according to their age, sex, and the season of the year, have completely misled most naturalists. Indeed to know these birds perfectly requires much greater attention and more minute examination than has yet been expended upon them. Such also is the case as regards sea-gulls, and some kinds of hawks, though with these the difficulty is not so great.

I always find that the grouse are wilder in September than in any other month. They are well scared and driven about by the August shooting, and are not yet tamed down by the autumnal frosts and cold.

In this part of Scotland we have much wild and stormy weather in September; and many an English sportsman towards the end of the month, when located in some small shooting-lodge, in the wild and distant glens of the inland mountains, begins to think of turning his way southwards. The incessant rain, driving pitilessly down the glen where his confined and badly-built cottage is placed, rivers turned into torrents, burns changed into rivers, and the grouse unapproachably wild—all combine to drive away many a southern sportsman before the end of this month; and yet October and November often are better months for grouse-shooting than the latter part of September.

Here, in Morayshire, we have a more favourable climate, and it is very rarely that there is any long continuance of bad weather in the lower parts of the county. Many a storm passes harmlessly over our heads, to fall on the high grounds a few miles from the coast. These storms of rain or snow, although they pass over us, have always the effect of lowering the quicksilver in the weather-glass, as

certainly as if they fell here, instead of only threatening to do so.

The earliest day on which I ever killed or saw widgeon in Morayshire was on the 8th of September, on which day I shot a brace, late in the evening, as they flew over my head on their way from the bay to some inland lake. They were both young birds. The flock altogether consisted of eight or nine. In the same year I killed a jack-snipe on the 16th, which is far earlier than these birds are usually seen (I have never yet ascertained that they breed in Britain), and during the next ten days I killed four others in nearly the same place, some of which were undoubtedly young birds. It may, therefore, be supposed that a chance pair may occasionally breed in the North, as it does not seem likely that those which I killed had been bred out of the kingdom. In no other year have I ever seen a jack-snipe before the 8th of October; even that is very early. I have made much inquiry on this subject in Sutherlandshire and in other likely localities; but have invariably found that where the jack-snipe has been supposed to have been seen during the breeding-season it has turned out to be the dunlin, or the common snipe. Neither their eggs nor young have ever been found, nor has the old bird been seen, for a certainty, in Britain

during the summer season, excepting in the case of a single disabled bird.

The landrail is seldom seen here after the corn is cut, notwithstanding the great numbers which breed in the neighbourhood. It is peculiarly a summer bird; and although its cry is hoarse and inharmonious, I never hear it without pleasure, associated as it has become in my mind with the fine light nights of June and May. A fearless little bird it is, too, when caught uninjured. I have seen it immediately after being made a prisoner, and while held in the hand, peck at and catch with wonderful rapidity and precision any flies that might pitch within its reach. Its manner of departure from this country would appear to be still unexplained, as it is never seen *en route* either by landsmen or sailors. When this and other insectivorous birds leave us, winter visitors arrive. The turnstone, a bird that breeds in Norway, arrives in this country at the first commencement of the month, but appears only to make it a temporary resting-place on its way to the south.

Like many other birds, the eagle sometimes exhibits great changes in the colour of his plumage. This year during the month of September I saw a freshly killed sea-eagle, whose colour was a fine silvery white, without the slightest mixture of

brown. The bird was killed in Sutherlandshire; and I was informed that another eagle had been seen in its company with the same unusual plumage. The bird had quite arrived at maturity, but did not appear to be a very old one. Partridges, pheasants, grouse, and many small birds occasionally appear in a snow-white dress; but the birds of prey seldom change their colour. A black swan we read of as an example of a "rara avis;" what must then a white crow have been thought of by the augurs and omen-seekers among the ancients? Yet rooks and jackdaws, both parti-coloured and white, are by no means so uncommon with us as to be looked on as wonders.

This white eagle had been probably bred on some of the wild rocky headlands of the north coast of Sutherlandshire, where not even the value of the eggs can at all times induce the shepherds of the neighbourhood to attempt their capture. The sea-eagle is, in its habits, a sluggish, vulture-like bird, feeding chiefly on the dead fish and other animal substances which are cast up by the sea on these lonely and rugged shores, and seldom attacking the lambs of the farmer to the same extent as the golden eagle does. Although it is frequently seen, and its sharp bark-like cry is heard far inland, the usual hunting-ground of the sea-eagle is along the shore,

where it can feed on its foul prey, undisturbed and unseen by human eye for months together. Like the golden eagle, this bird sometimes so gorges itself with food as to become helpless, and if then met with, may be knocked down by a stick, or captured alive before it can rise from the ground—a sad and ignoble fate for the king of birds! After all, the eagle is but a sorry representative of royalty and kingly grandeur; for although his flight is noble and magnificent, and his strength and power astonishing, there is a cruelty and treachery about the disposition of the bird which render it unfit to be educated and trained like the peregrine and other falcons; nor does it ever become attached to its keeper.

On the 28th of September the last house-swallow took his departure from this neighbourhood, although the season was so fine that there were several nests of young greenfinches about the garden even so late as the 30th of the month, and a wood-pigeon was sitting on its eggs in an ash-tree close to the house.

During the latter weeks of the fishing season (which legally ends on the 15th of September in all the northern rivers), the lower pools of the Findhorn are full of an excellent small sea-trout, locally called the finnock. My opinion is that the

“finnock” is the grilse, or young of the common sea-trout, bearing exactly the same relation and affinity to that fish as the grilse does to the salmon; but the natural history of the inhabitants of another element is too uncertain and difficult a subject for a mere casual observer to enter upon. At any rate, the finnock is not only an excellent fish for the table, but affords capital sport, rising freely, and playing boldly when hooked; and has altogether strong attractions for those anglers who somewhat love their ease. I have been much amused by seeing an elderly, placid-looking London gentleman, who was staying at Forres for the purpose of fishing in the Findhorn. This old gentleman used to arrive at the river’s edge at a comfortable noon-day hour, accompanied by his lady, and a footman splendid in blue and red, who carried camp-stools, books, fishing-tackle, and last, though not least, a most voluminous luncheon. Daily did this party make their appearance at a certain pool; and while the old gentleman, seated at his ease on his camp-stool close to the water, with spectacles and broad-brimmed hat, fished away with the well-known perseverance and skill of a Thames angler, his lady read her book on one side, whilst on the other the red-legged footman either prepared the luncheon, or held in readiness the well-stocked fly-



book of his master. Very different would be the description given of our Scotch fishing by one who thus practised the gentle craft of angling on the level grassy banks of the lower pools of the Findhorn, to that of the sportsman who followed up the pursuit of the salmon over the rugged, and often dangerous, passes of the rocks which overhang the deep black pools and rushing torrents of the same river between Dulsie Bridge and the Heronry.

Most of the roebucks have, by the end of September, put on their winter covering of rich mouse-coloured hair; so different from the thin red coat they wear during the summer. Until they have quite changed colour the roe are not in sufficiently good condition to make them a fit object of pursuit for the sportsman. The stag is, however, in perfection both as to condition and beauty, during this month.

The size of the horns of the red-deer depends to a certain degree on the feeding which the animal gets in the spring and end of winter. If his food has been poor, and if he is much reduced, the horns do not acquire their full development and size. Fine heads of horns are now much rarer than they were a few years ago. The reason of this probably is, that the stag before it attains a mature age generally falls a victim to one of the numerous English

rifles, whose echoes are heard in almost every Highland corrie. Even where deer are most carefully preserved and most numerous, the finest antlers are generally laid low every season; so that there are few left whose heads are thought worthy of being kept as a trophy: yet small as they now comparatively are, the value of a stag seems to depend more on his horns than on his haunches.

I am much inclined to think that the uncertainty of getting a shot at deer in wood is even greater than on the open mountain. The cunning of the animals, and dislike to being driven in any one direction, frequently render abortive the best arranged plans for beating a cover. Sometimes the deer are off at the first sound of a beater, at another time they will lie quietly without moving till all the men have passed them, and will then sneak quietly back in the contrary direction.

I was this very year particularly struck with an instance of deer escaping in this manner. I was placed with a friend on passes commanding the extremity of a long narrow patch of cover which grew on a steep brae overhanging a beautiful river in Ross-shire; and the beaters were to commence their work at the other extremity of the wood. We had taken our stations at a considerable height above the river, at the most likely pass for the deer

to leave the wood by ; there we waited some time without seeing anything excepting an occasional blackcock or gray hen, which, having been disturbed by the beaters at the other end of the cover, came skimming rapidly past us. Presently we perceived far below us four brown forms walking slowly through the high fern and herbage which grew amongst the birch-trees. As they emerged from the cover we saw that they were three hinds and a calf. With uncertain pace they went on, sometimes trotting in a line, and sometimes standing in a group on some hillock, from which they looked back earnestly and inquiringly into the wood. I was convinced by their manner that there were other deer, probably stags, still in the cover. As, however, the sound of the beaters came nearer, the four deer gradually mended their pace, and in a quiet canter followed the devious track which led them to the summit of a steep hill to our right hand. It was interesting to see how, having once made up their mind as to their route, they went steadily and rapidly on in single file, winding up the face of the hill, sometimes lost to our sight behind a cluster of rocks, or a birch-covered hillock, and again appearing as they kept deliberately on their way. At the very ridge of the hill they halted again, and after standing in a confused group with their heads

all together, and their long ears at full stretch, they at once disappeared from our sight.

The beaters came closer and closer to us, and in spite of my prognostications no more deer appeared. At last the men issued out of the wood, at the point nearest us; and one of them came up towards where we were, to call us down. A drizzly shower had commenced, and we had put the gun-covers on our rifles, when suddenly from under a single birch-tree, which was about fifty yards from us, and about the same distance from the beater, rose a magnificent stag, in the finest condition, and with "a head of ten." Before we could get out our rifles he was behind a rise in the ground which concealed him from us until he was too far for a ball to reach him; and then he again appeared galloping heavily off for the same point at which the hinds had crossed the hill. We were both of us dumb with surprise and vexation; but not so the Highlander below us, who, in the most frantic state of eagerness and rage, halloed and vociferated in Gaelic and English, for the stag passed, with broadside on, within forty yards of him. Without moving from our position we watched the animal for some time; then, returning our rifles to their waterproof cases, we, as if by a common impulse, lit the pipe of consolation in the shape of

a cigar. Whilst so employed, with our heads bent from the cold misty blast, we again heard the man below us shouting more frantically than before, and looking up we were just in time to see him fling his stick at another stag, who had risen from the same spot and had cantered away in a contrary direction, passing almost close to the beater. Like the first stag, too, he managed to keep his great body out of our view as long as within shot, although he almost ran round the man, as if perfectly understanding the difference between two double-barrelled rifles and one walking-stick. We afterwards ascertained that the two deer had been lying in a small hollow of the ground at the foot of a single birch-tree, which stood a little in advance of the main wood. They must have been lying with their heads close to the ground, hoping to escape being seen; and there they remained until they perceived that the beater as well as ourselves was walking directly towards them.

In taking up a position near a wood which the men are about to beat for deer and roe, the sportsman should go as cautiously and quietly as if he was stalking a deer on the open hill, as nothing will drive either stag or buck near a spot where he has discovered or suspected that any concealed danger is awaiting him: rather than do so, he will pass

within reach of the sticks of the beaters, having, like human beings, a far greater dread of an unknown danger than of one which he sees and knows the full extent of; and like many people taking "omne ignotum pro horribili."

Though red-deer seldom come down to the woods in this immediate neighbourhood, I have occasionally seen one who has probably wandered away from the Duke of Richmond's forest.

Instances, too, sometimes occur of a stag being found in the act of swimming narrow parts of the Moray Firth;—a solitary deer, who probably has been driven by dogs from his usual haunts, till, frightened and bewildered, he has wandered at random; and at last, coming to the shore, has swam boldly out, attracted by the appearance of the woods on the opposite side.

END OF VOL. I.