

CHAPTER XXIII.

NOVEMBER.

The Snow Bunting—Regularity of appearance—Tomtit and Thrushes; worthy of protection—The Water Ousel—Trout—Otters; their defence of their young—Otter-hunting—Habits of Otters—Seals; power of remaining under water; habits of; decrease of—Wild-swans—Plovers, etc.—Dun Divers—Hares.

NOVEMBER, month though it be of cold winds and sleet, is generally ushered in by flocks of that beautiful little bird the snow bunting. For three successive years I have first seen this winter visitor on the first of November, which is another instance of the regularity of birds in their migrations. Scarcely any two of the snow buntings are quite alike. In the first flocks that come there are only a few which are light-coloured, but as the snow and frost increase the white birds become more numerous. I do not know whether they arrive during the night, but I have constantly heard their note after it has been quite dark, the birds being at the time on wing; and this sometimes occurs several hours after nightfall.

A beautiful little blue tomtit has taken up his

abode voluntarily in the drawing-room. It would seem that at first he was attracted by the few house flies who at this season crawl slowly about the windows. These he was most active in searching for and catching, inserting his little bill into every corner and crevice, and detecting every fly which had escaped the brush of the housemaid. He soon, however, with increased boldness, came down to pick up crumbs, which the children placed for him close to me on the table. From his activity and perseverance in exterminating flies, this bird appears well worthy of protection.

The thrushes, and blackbirds too, earn the favour of the gardener by their constant destruction of snails, in search of which, at this season, they are all day busily employed in turning over the dead leaves under the garden walls, and at the bottom of the hedges. My experience convinces me that there are few of the common birds whose perseverance in destroying grubs, caterpillars, etc., for at least nine months of the year, does not amply repay the mischief done by them in eating cherries and seeds during the remaining three. It is difficult, however, to persuade the farmer to look on rooks and wood-pigeons as his friends, when he sees them in flocks on the nearly ripe wheat-field, on the produce of which he mainly depends for paying

his rent. Nevertheless, were he to examine the crops of any of these wild-birds, and see what they were filled with during three-fourths of the year, he would find that they fully recompense him for all the grain they devour. Undoubtedly a considerable quantity of newly-sown wheat is eaten by different birds. Sea-gulls, amongst others, seem to swallow the grain indiscriminately with the grubs and worms turned up by the harrows; and large flocks of greenfinches and buntings are busily occupied in searching for whatever corn is not well covered over. The wild-ducks, too, come at night to shovel up what remains in the furrows.

This is the season at which partridges migrate from the high grounds to the cultivated fields. Fresh unbroken coveys frequently appear near the lower part of the river: sometimes they come in flocks of twenty or thirty. In damp weather these birds seek the dry and warm ground on the sandy places about the lower islands, and appear entirely to desert the fields excepting at feeding time.

The water-ousel enlivens the burn by its low but sweet note, uttered either while perched on its accustomed stone in the midst of a rapid, or whilst floating with open wings on the surface of a quiet pool—a method of proceeding quite peculiar to this interesting little bird. The salmon-fishers wage

war to the knife with the water-ousel ; and, indeed, I have no doubt that it is not a little destructive to the spawning beds, although I am inclined to think that it attacks the trout spawn more frequently than that of the salmon. If so, this bird also does fully as much good as harm ; the most deadly enemy to salmon being the larger burn trout, whose favourite food is, undoubtedly, the ova of the salmon.

The trout now betake themselves to every running stream, working their way up the narrowest rills, in order to place their spawn.

At this time of year the otters are constant visitors at the lower parts of the river, searching for flounders, eels, etc. There are certain small hillocks which every otter as he passes appears to examine in order to find the trace of any chance stranger of his own species. There are now two old ones and two young ones hunting the lower part of the Findhorn ; their presence is always easily detected by their tracks on the sandy banks, as they constantly leave the water on their return up the stream to the quiet hiding-places where they pass the day.

When accompanied by her young the female otter throws aside her usual shyness, and is ready to do stout battle in their behalf. A Highlander

of my acquaintance happened to find a couple of young otters in a hollow bank, and having made prisoners of them, was carrying them home in triumph in his plaid. The old otter, however, attracted by their cries, left the river, and so determinedly opposed his carrying them away, by placing herself directly in his path, and blowing and hissing like a cat at him, with tail and bristles erect, that the man, although as stout a fellow as ever trod on heather, was glad to give up one of the young ones, and make his escape with the other while the mother was occupied in assuring herself of the safe condition of the one she had rescued.

When caught young no animal is more easily tamed than the otter; and it will soon learn to fish for its master. In educating all wild animals, however, it is absolutely necessary that the pupil should live almost constantly with its teacher, so as to become perfectly familiarised with his voice and presence.

Even when young the otter is a most powerful and severe biter, closing its jaws with the strength of a vice on whatever it seizes. Every courageous dog who has once battled with an otter, retains ever afterwards the most eager and violent animosity against the animal. The scent of an otter renders my otherwise most tractable retriever quite uncon-

trollable. The remembrance of former bites and wounds seems to drive him frantic, and no sooner does he come across the fresh track of one than he immediately throws aside all control, and is off *ventre à terre* in pursuit.

It is not often that an otter commits himself so far as to be found during the daytime in any situation where he can be approached ; but one day in this month I was out for a quiet walk with my retriever, looking at some wide drains and small pools for wild-ducks, when suddenly the dog went off, nose to the ground, in so eager a manner that I knew nothing but a fox or an otter could have been the cause of his excitement ; and I soon found in a nearly dry open drain the quite recent track of a very large otter. For a long time he would not show himself, till suddenly the dog rushed into a thick juniper bush, and the next moment dog and otter were tumbling over each other into a deep black pool. The otter escaped from the dog in the water ; but the hole being only about six feet square, though deep, I took my retriever out by main force, and waited for the water to become clear again. When it did so, I looked for the otter for some time in vain, till at last, having stooped down close to the pool, I was startled by seeing his face within a few inches of

my own, his body being almost entirely concealed by the overhanging bank. I tried to make him leave his cover, but in vain; so I sent the dog in again, who soon found him; and after a short scuffle, the otter left the pool, and went off along a wide but shallow drain, and there the battle began again. The dog, although unable to master the otter, who was one of the largest size, managed to prevent his escape, and at last I contrived to end the contest by a well-applied blow from a piece of railing which I had picked up.

Otter skins, when well dressed by a skilful furrier, make a valuable addition to a lady's winter wardrobe, the under fur being peculiarly soft, silky, and of a rich brown colour.

I am daily more and more convinced that the otter is by no means so great an enemy to salmon as he is supposed to be; his general food being trout, eels, and flounders; although, of course, when a salmon comes in his way, he is sufficiently an epicure not to refuse taking it. An otter seldom kills a salmon without leaving enough of the fish to betray him, as most people who live near salmon rivers know full well; but the remains of the trout and eels which he kills are not so conspicuous. I am borne out in this opinion by Mr. Young, the manager of the Duke of Sutherland's salmon-fish-

ings, whose opportunities of observation, and acuteness in judging on all points connected with subjects of this kind, ought to make his favourable opinion of otters equivalent to a verdict of acquittal whenever they are accused of being great salmon destroyers.

The seal, on the contrary, is a constant and most annoying enemy to the salmon-fisher, breaking the stake-nets, and enabling the fish who are already enclosed to escape. Besides which a seal, hunting along the shore near the nets, drives the salmon out into the deeper water, beyond the reach of the fisherman. The seal is also a much more rapid swimmer than the otter, and I have no doubt that he can take a salmon by actual speed in the open sea, although he cunningly prefers catching his prey with the assistance of the stake-nets, when he has comparatively little trouble.

I have frequently been told that the seal cannot remain under water for more than a quarter of an hour without coming to the surface to breathe. I am, however, confident that this is not the case, and that he can continue for hours under the water when lying undisturbed and at rest. If caught and entangled in a net he is soon exhausted and drowned.

I was assured by a man who was constantly in

pursuit of seals, that one day, having found a very young one left by its mother on the rocks, near Lossiemouth, he put it into a deep round hole full of water left by the receding tide. For two hours, during which he waited, expecting to see the old female come in with the flow of the tide, the little animal remained, as he expressed it, "like a stone" at the bottom of the water, without moving or coming to the surface to breathe. He then took it out, and found it as well and lively as ever; and on turning it loose into the sea it at once began swimming about with some other young ones.

In a creek of the sea, where I sometimes watch for seals, I have seen two or three come in with the flow of the tide. After playing about for a short time they have disappeared under the water, and have not shown themselves again till the receding tide has warned them that it was time to leave the place. From the situation they were in, and the calmness of the water, the seals could scarcely have put up their noses to breathe without my having seen them. Apparently they sunk to the bottom in a certain part of the bay, in order to be at rest, and remained there till the ebb was pretty far advanced, when they reappeared in the same place where I had lost sight of them, perhaps, some hours before. It was a curious and amusing sight to see

these great creatures swim up within a few yards of the ambuscade which I had erected close to the narrow entrance where the tide came in to fill the bay. At thirty or forty yards distance I found it impossible to shoot a seal swimming if he had seen me and was watching my movements: my best chance always was when the animal, having turned away, presented the broad back of his head as a mark to my rifle. If I arrived at the place in time to do so, I put up some small object at a distance off, on the side of the inlet opposite to where I was concealed. This had the effect of distracting the attention of the animal from his real danger.

A flock of seals playing and fighting on a sandbank is one of the drollest sights which I know in this country. Their uncouth cries and movements are unlike anything else. In the Dornoch Firth and near Tain there are still great numbers of them, and every fine day they are in large flocks on the sandbanks; but near this part of the country they have been very much thinned off, and scarcely any are killed excepting by myself. My keeper tells me that when he was a boy their number was very great, and that the inhabitants of the place could always kill as many as they wanted for oil, and for their skins, picking out the largest of the herds and sparing the smaller ones; but, alas! cheap

guns and salmon-fisheries have combined to make them scarce. Formerly, also, in the pools left by the sea within the old bar of Findhorn, numbers of seals were left at every ebb of the tide, and the farmers occasionally went down and killed a few to supply themselves with oil for the winter.

Any unusual number of wild-fowl in the bay at this season generally prognosticates stormy weather or snow. On the 27th I saw nearly fifty wild-swans swimming and flying between this place and the town of Findhorn; and some large flocks of geese were passing over to the south. The next day the ground was covered with snow, an unusual occurrence at this season. Of these swans, one flock of six located themselves in the fresh-water lakes between this and Nairn, and the rest wended their way to the south. The Icelanders hail the appearance of the wild-swau in the same manner as we do that of the cuckoo or swallow, it being with them the foreteller of spring and genial weather, whilst here they are connected in our minds with storms and snow-clad fields.

The Loch of Spynie is another established wintering place of the wild-swan. A few years ago great numbers remained both in that loch and in Loch Lee during the whole winter. I know of no other

fresh-water lakes in this country where they now appear regularly. Near Invergordon numbers of swans feed with other wild-fowl on the sea-grass.

Late in the evening the golden plovers come in considerable numbers to the bare grass-fields to feed during the night; but when the ground is hardened by frost they resort to the sands at the ebb-tide, both by night and day. Whilst the tide is high, these birds fly up to the hills, resting on those places where the heather is short; and their instinct teaches them exactly when to leave the hills for the sands as soon as the sea has receded sufficiently; and yet their principal resting-place is fully five miles inland.

I have observed the same instinct in the female sheldrakes when sitting on their eggs. Although several feet underground they know to a moment when the tide has sufficiently ebbed, and then, and only then, do they leave their nest to snatch a hasty meal on the cockles, etc., which they find on the sands.

The frost and snow send all the mallards down from the hill lakes to the bay. I shot a bird exactly answering to Bewick's description of the dun diver, excepting that it was much smaller. Bewick describes his bird as twenty-seven inches in length. This was only twenty inches. It was apparently

quite full grown. I shot it whilst it was fishing in a small stream, and the bird had already swallowed twenty-five sticklebacks and one small eel. Its bright red bill is well adapted to hold any fish, however slippery, being supplied with the sharp teeth sloping inwards, which are peculiar to birds of this class.

Hares have a particular fancy for sitting near houses, undeterred by the noise of the men and dogs who may inhabit them. When found sitting, a hare sometimes seems fascinated in an extraordinary manner by the eye of a person looking at her. As long as you keep your eye fixed on that of the hare, and approach her from the front, she appears afraid to move, and, indeed, will sometimes allow herself to be taken up by the hand. A hare, when dogs are near her, is particularly unwilling to start from her form. In cover shooting many of the old and experienced hares steal off quietly the moment they hear the sound of dogs or beaters at one end of the wood; and thus their quick senses of hearing and smelling enable them to escape the guns, however numerous and however well placed. Shooters in wood pay too little attention to the direction of the wind. All small game, like deer, are most unwilling to face an enemy standing to windward of them; but keepers either expect, or

pretend to expect, that game will always go exactly ahead of the beaters, though the least observation ought to have taught them the contrary; for when once running game have discovered the scent of an enemy, they will never go in that direction, but will make their way back in spite of all the noise and exertions of the beaters.

