

CHAPTER XXIV.

DECEMBER.

Owls; destruction of Mice by them—Frogs—Snakes—Roebucks—Fondness of Birds for Sunshine—Loch of Spynie—Habits of Wild-fowl; rapidity of their flight—Retrievers—The Otter; shooting of, by night—Eley's Cartridges—Wildswans—Accidents in Shooting—Variety of Country in Moray—Forres; public Walks of—Rabbits—Foxes—Immigration of Birds—Conclusion.

DURING the clear frosty nights of this month we hear the owls hooting for hours together in the old ash-trees around the house. Occasionally they used to be caught in the pole-traps set for hawks, but the poor fellows looked so pitiable as they sat upright, held by the legs, that I took down all these traps, which were set near the house. And the owl is far more a friend than an enemy to man: the mischief he does to game is very trifling; but the service he is of to the gardener, the farmer, and even to the planter of forest trees, by destroying rats and mice, is incalculable. I have a great liking, too, for the quaint, old-fashioned looking bird, and by no means believe him to be the

“*Ignavus bubo, dirum mortalibus omen.*”

My kitchen-garden was overrun with mice, who not only ate up peas and other seeds, but also nibbled and destroyed great numbers of peaches : but since I have had a tame owl in the garden, the mice have disappeared entirely, having been destroyed by him and his relations and friends who visit him at night. Sometimes an owl, either the common brown one or else one of the long-eared kind, posts himself all day long bolt upright in one of the evergreens near the house. The small birds first point out his whereabouts, by their clamour and fluttering round him ; but the owl sits quite unconcerned in the midst of the uproar, blinking his eyes and nodding his head as quietly as if in his accustomed sequestered thicket or hollow tree.

The long-eared owl, with his bright yellow eyes and hooked bill, has a most imp-like appearance when seen sitting motionless on the low branch of a tree or ivy-covered wall.

The chief food of owls are mice and birds, but they are also very fond of frogs. When an owl catches one of these animals, instead of swallowing it whole, as he does a mouse, he tears it to pieces, while still alive, in the most cruel manner, regardless of its shrill cries.

I have no doubt that were it not for their numerous enemies, such as birds of prey, crows, ravens,

rats, etc., frogs would increase to such a degree as to become a serious nuisance. The snake is another of the frog's devourers. It is a curious, although I cannot venture to say a pleasant sight, to see one of these reptiles attack and swallow a living frog, of a diameter four times as large as its own. After a frog has been pursued for a short time by a snake it suddenly seems to be fascinated by the bright sparkling eye of its enemy, and gives up all attempt at escape; then the snake, with a motion so rapid that the eye cannot keep pace with it, darts on its unhappy prey, generally seizing it by the hind-leg. There now commences a struggle for life and death. the frog clinging pertinaciously to any branch or projection which it can reach with its fore-legs; but all in vain; for the snake quietly but surely, by a kind of muscular contraction, or suction, gradually draws the frog into its mouth, its jaws expanding and stretching in the most extraordinary and inconceivable manner, in order to admit of the disproportioned mouthful.

I have little doubt that many birds and other animals are in reality fascinated by the fixed gaze of a snake, when they once come under the immediate influence of his eye. Their presence of mind and power of escape, or even of moving, seems entirely to desert them when their enemy is near them, and

they become so paralysed with fear, that the snake has nothing to do but to seize them. Any person who has seen one of our common snakes swallow a large frog will readily believe all accounts of deer being swallowed by the giant-serpent of the East.

Early in December the roebucks lose their horns. I have shot them during the first week of this month with the horns so loose that they have fallen off as the animal was carried home. They are, however, in as good or perhaps even better order for the table in December than at any other time.

The roe being very much disturbed by woodcutters in most of our woods, keep to the wild rough extent of cover, too young for the axe, which lies between the upper country and the shore; there they live in tolerable security, in company with the foxes, black game, and wild-fowl which tenant the woods and swamps of that district. Occasionally, whilst I am woodcock-shooting, a roe affords a pleasant variety and weighty addition to the game-bag. All my dogs, whether pointers, spaniels, terriers, or retrievers, become very eager when on the scent of roe.

The blackcocks, like other birds, are very fond of catching the last evening rays of a winter's sun, and are always to be found in the afternoon on banks facing the west, or swinging, if there is no wind, on

the topmost branch of the small fir-trees. On the mountains, too, all birds, as the sun gets low, take to the slopes which face the west; whilst in the morning they betake themselves to the eastern banks and slopes to meet his rays. No bird or animal is to be found in the shade during the winter, unless it has flown there for shelter from some imminent danger.

This is very remarkable in the case of the golden plovers, who in the evening ascend from slope to slope as each becomes shaded by intervening heights, until they all are collected on the very last ridge which the sun shines upon. When this is no longer illuminated, and the sun is quite below the horizon, they betake themselves to their feeding-places near the sea-shore or elsewhere. Goats have the same habit.

There is no fresh-water lake which has so large a quantity of wild-fowl on it as the Loch of Spynie; and I do not know a more amusing sight than the movements and proceedings of the thousands of birds collected there during this season. All wild-fowl, from the swan to the teal, swarm on this lake; and it is most interesting to see the habits and manners of feeding and of passing their time of the different kinds, some feeding only by night and others moving about at all hours. On the approach

of night, however, the whole community becomes restless and on the move, and the place is alive with the flocks flying to and fro, all uttering their peculiar notes, and calling to each other, as they pass from one part of the loch to another. The mallards for the most part take to the fields in search of food, flying either in pairs or in small flocks of five or six. The widgeon keep in companies of ten or twelve, whistling constantly to each other as they fly to feed on the grassy edges of the lochs. The teal and some other birds feed chiefly on the mud-banks and shallows which abound in parts of this half-drained lake; and amongst the loose stones of the old castle of Spynie, which overlooks it, and where formerly proud ecclesiastics trod, the badger has now taken up his solitary dwelling.

The flight of wild-fowl in the evening is more rapid in reality than it appears to be; and I have seen many a good shot fairly puzzled by it, and unable to kill these birds at this period of the day with any certainty until practice had taught them the necessity of aiming well ahead. Another great requisite to success in wild-fowl shooting is a first-rate retriever, quick and sagacious in finding and bringing the killed and wounded birds from the swampy and grassy places in which they fall. Long shots ought never to be taken in the evening, as,

independently of the time lost in loading (during which operation, by the by, the birds always contrive to come over your head) you are sure to lose many which fly away wounded, to drop several hundred yards off, serving only to feed the foxes and crows, which always seem to be on the lookout for food near lakes and marshes.

Some retrievers have a most wonderful instinct in discovering whether a wounded bird is likely to fall; invariably marking down and finding them, without wasting their time and strength in vain pursuit of those which are able to escape.

Nothing is more trying to the constitution of a dog than this kind of shooting in the winter, when the poor animal spends his time either in paddling or swimming about in half-frozen water, or in shivering at his master's feet whilst waiting for a fresh shot. The master perhaps has waterproof boots and a warm jacket on, a pipe in his mouth, and a mouthful of brandy to keep him warm; while his poor dog has none of these accompanying comforts, and is made to sit motionless on the wet or frozen ground with the water freezing on his coat. For my own part I administer as much as I can to the comfort of my canine companion, by always carrying him some biscuits, and by giving him either my plaid or a game-bag to lie upon. It is amusing

enough to see the retriever wrapped in the plaid, with only his head out of it, watching eagerly for the appearance of a flock of widgeon or ducks, which he often sees before I do myself.

The best and most sagacious dog of this kind that I ever saw, and whose cunning and skill were unequalled, I sold to make room for a stronger retriever, who however never equalled his predecessor in sagacity and usefulness. I the less repented having parted with the dog, as he fell into the hands of a friend of mine, Captain Cumming, a most excellent shot and persevering wild-fowl shooter, who fully appreciated the good qualities of the animal. The Loch of Spynie belonging principally to this gentleman's family, he preserves the place strictly; and I do not know so successful a wild-fowl shooter—successful I mean in a gentlemanly and sportsmanlike manner—and with what I term *fair shooting*. With due deference to the followers of this sport, I cannot include under that denomination the punt and swivel-gun system. Amongst other objections to this kind of sport is the vast number of birds maimed, wounded, and left to perish miserably, or to feed crows and other vermin. Not even Colonel Hawker's amusing work on the subject reconciles me to this (proh pudor!) his favourite branch of sport.

In the snow I constantly see the tracks of weasels and stoats going for considerable distances along the edges of open ditches and streams, where they search not only for any birds which may be roosting on the grassy banks of the ditches, but also for eels and whatever fish they can make prey of.

The otters, too, puzzled by the accumulation of ice and frozen snow on the shallows, and about the mouth of the river, go for miles up any open ditch they can find ; turning up the unfrozen mud in search of eels, and then rolling on the snow to clean themselves.

There are few animals whose scent is so attractive to dogs of all kinds as the otter ; but it requires that they should have great experience in order to be sure of finding an otter, or of following with any certainty when started, so strange and well concealed are the nooks and corners of broken banks and roots under which it lies or takes refuge when hunted.

My old keeper has great delight in the pursuit of otters, and continually neglects his more legitimate duties for the sake of getting a midnight shot at one of these animals. Having carefully determined on the way from which the wind blows, and made himself sure that no eddy of air can carry his own scent towards the stream, the old man sits well concealed

under a projecting bank near some shallow ford, where he expects the otter will appear on his way up or down the burn. This plan seldom fails, and he not unfrequently makes his appearance in the morning with a dead otter in his hand, the result of many hours of patient watching in a winter's night, of which the disordered and somewhat bemuddled appearance of his habiliments bears further witness. I cannot plead guilty of ever sending him on these expeditions. In the first place, I have no very deadly feud with the otters; and, in the next, I think that the old fellow would be better in his bed than squatting under a broken bank through a long winter's night.

Though not an advocate for Eley's cartridges for game-shooting, I use a great number of them against stronger animals, such as otters, foxes, and roe, and also for wild-fowl shooting of all kinds. In steady hands these cartridges undoubtedly do great execution amongst ducks and geese, but they are very apt to induce the sportsman to take shots which are too long and random, conceiving that no distance is too great for this kind of charge. That they very frequently do not open at all, or at any rate sufficiently soon, I have clearly ascertained; and I have often found in shooting roe and hares that the cartridge has passed through the animal

like a single ball. Every sportsman knows that this will not answer his purpose in general shooting; and, therefore, that Eley's cartridges should only be used in the most open places, and at strong birds and animals.

The wild-swans still remain feeding in the lakes, and seem to have completely made themselves at home; going lazily off to the bay when disturbed, but seldom taking the trouble to do so unless the particular loch which they frequent, and in which they feed, comes within the line of my beat for wild-ducks. When their territory is invaded they first collect in a close body, and after a short conference, flap along the water for some distance, and gradually rising fly across the sandhills with loud cries to the sea. Hundreds of ducks of all kinds constantly attend on the swans when feeding, to snatch at the water-grasses and weeds pulled up by the long-necked birds from the bottom of the shallow water—a proceeding the swans seem by no means to approve of, as they evidently have no wish to labour for the good of these active little pirates.

It has often occurred to me how perfectly helpless a man would be were he to lame himself during the distant and lonely wanderings on the mountain, which the pursuit of deer and wild-game sometimes leads him into; and I was forcibly reminded of

this by a curious accident which happened to myself in the woods of Altyre while roe-shooting this month.

The hounds were in pursuit of a roe ; and I was partly occupied in listening to their joyous cry, and partly in admiring the beautiful light thrown by the low rays of the winter sun on the bright trunks of the fir-trees, contrasted as it was with the gloomy darkness of their foliage, when I heard the foot of a roe as it came towards me, *ventre à terre*. Taking a cool aim I sent a cartridge through the poor animal's head, who, of course, fell rolling over like a rabbit. I went up in order to bleed her, according to rule, when, just as I was knife in hand, I heard the hounds coming up in chase of another roe. I dropped the knife on the heather, and at that instant the dying roe gave an expiring plunge, as animals almost always do when shot in the head. Her hind foot struck the hilt of the *couteau de chasse*, driving it straight into my foot. Having, not without some little difficulty, drawn it out, I had next to cut off my shoe, when the blood came out like a jet d'eau. Making a tourniquet of my handkerchief and a bit of stick, I managed to stop the bleeding, not, however, before I began to feel a little faint. Then not waiting for my companions, who were at a distant part of the woods, I hobbled off to a forester's

house, where I rebound the cut, and having directed the man where to find the roe, and to tell the other shooters that I had left the woods, I made my way homewards as well as I could, and, luckily meeting on the road one of my servants exercising a pony, I got home without more inconvenience, but I had to pass many a long day upon a sofa. Had a similar accident happened on some of the wild and distant mountains of the country where I often shoot, I should probably not have been seen again, till the ravens and the storms of winter had left nothing but my bones. From such slight and trivial causes do accidents sometimes happen to remind us how helpless we all are.

In the low parts of Morayshire the snow seldom lies long, and consequently after every lengthened snow-storm there is a constant migration not only of wild-fowl of all kinds, but also of partridges and other game, who come down to the bay and shore from the higher parts of the district, where the ground is more completely covered with snow, the depth of which increases gradually as one recedes from the shore.

A more strikingly varied drive of twenty miles can scarcely be taken than from the Spey at Grantown down to Forres on the sea-side near the mouth of the Findhorn river. After emerging

from the woods of Castle Grant, in the immediate vicinity of the Spey, and that curiously-built place Grantown, with its wide street of houses, almost wholly inhabited by Grants, which appellation with every variety of Christian name is written at least on nine houses out of every ten, the traveller comes out on the extended flats and moors of the district round Brae Moray, where there is scarcely a sign of life, animal or human; excepting when a grouse rises from the edge of the road, or runs with comb and head erect a few yards into the heather, and then crouches till the intruder has passed by. There is, I admit, a turnpike house here, but it is a wretched-looking affair, and its tenant must live a life as solitary as a lighthouse-keeper. After several miles of this most dreary though not very elevated range, the road enters the woods and for a long distance passes through a succession or rather one continued tract of fine fir-trees. It goes through the beautiful grounds of Altyre, and along the banks of the most picturesque part of the Findhorn; and gradually descending it opens upon the rich fields and firth of Moray, with the mountains of Ross, Caithness, and Sutherland—a glorious range—in the background: a great and most pleasing change from the dreary brown moorland near Brae Moray. Having passed through this

long and varied tract of woodland, the road suddenly emerges into the rich open corn-land of the most fertile district in Scotland, near the bay of Findhorn, where the river, as if tired by its long and rapid course, gradually and slowly mixes itself with the salt water of the Moray Firth. By crossing the river near this spot, another very different kind of country is reached—the strange sandhills of Findhorn or Culbin. Thus, in a very few hours' drive as great a variety of country is passed through as could be found in any part of the island, each portion of which is characteristic and interesting.

Forres itself is one of the prettiest and cleanest little towns in the kingdom. The entrance from the river Findhorn is extremely picturesque; and the bright sparkling burn, with the public bleaching-green close to the town, always gives it a gay and lively appearance. The town magistrates, too, with public-spirited zeal, have laid out pleasure-grounds and walks on the wooded hill above the town, which, as regards the views which they command of rich cultivated land, are probably not surpassed by any in the kingdom.

During the time that the snow remained on the ground the rabbits in a wood near my house took to barking the fine old hollies, thus destroying trees

of a very great age, and of from eight to ten inches in diameter. Oaks also, of twenty years' growth, are frequently destroyed by these animals. In fact, wherever they once establish themselves they overrun the country and become a nuisance. In the sandhills of Culbin I admit that they can do but small mischief, there being in that region little else but bent, sea-weed, and furze-bushes. They thrive, however, on this food, and in spite of foxes and guns keep up their numbers sufficiently to afford plenty of sport. The foxes are numerous in the rough wild district which lies to the west of the sandhills, and hunt regularly for rabbits wherever they abound. From their tracks it is evident that two foxes constantly hunt together; and they take different sides of every hillock.

If a fox finds a rabbit at a sufficient distance from the cover, he catches it by fair running; but most of his prey he obtains by dint of the numberless stratagems which have earned for him a famous, or rather an infamous, reputation from time immemorial. From what I have myself seen of the cunning of the fox, I can believe almost any story of his power of deceiving and inveigling animals into his clutches. Nor does his countenance belie him; for handsome animal as he certainly is, his face is the very type and personification of cunning.

The cottagers who live near the woods are constantly complaining of the foxes, who steal their fowls frequently in broad daylight, carrying them off before the faces of the women, but never committing themselves in this way when the men are at home. From the quantity of débris of fowls, ducks, etc., which are strewed here and there near the abodes of these animals, the mischief they do in this way must be very great.

Cunning, however, as they are, I not unfrequently put them up while walking through the swamps. They lie, in fancied security, on some dry tuft of heather in the midst of the pools; and not expecting or being accustomed to be disturbed, they remain there until my retriever raises them close to my feet. One fine day, in the beginning of this month, when the sun was bright and warm, a setter who was with me made a very singular kind of point in the long heather, looking round at me with an air most expressive of "Come and see what I have here." As soon as I got near the dog made a rush into the rough heather, putting out a large dog fox, who had been napping or basking. The fox made a bolt almost between my legs to get at a hole near the place; but I stopped him with a charge of duck shot: the dog, though as steady as possible at all

game, pursued the fox full cry, and when he rolled over, worried and shook him, as a bull-dog would a cat.

December, in this part of the island, is seldom a very cold or boisterous month; our principal storms of snow and wind come with the new year. Frequently, indeed, there is no covering of snow on that part of the county which lies within the influence of the sea-air till February.

During the first days of snow and storm a constant immigration of larks takes place, these birds continuing to arrive from seaward during the whole day, and frequently they may be heard flying in after it is dark. They come flitting over in a constant straggling stream, not in compact flocks; and pitching on the first piece of ground which they find uncovered with snow, immediately begin searching for food, feeding indiscriminately on insects, small seeds, and even on turnip leaves, when nothing else can be found.

The wagtails frequent the sheepfolds near the shore, and keep up an active search for the insects which are found about these animals.

And now having brought my readers (if the patience of any of them has enabled them to follow

me so far) to the end of the year, and of my sojourn in Moray, I must say—Farewell.

I have aimed neither at book-making nor at giving a scientific description or arrangement of birds and other animals. All I wish is that my rough and irregularly put together notes may afford a few moments of amusement to the old; and to the young not amusement only, but perhaps an incitement to them to increase their knowledge of natural history, the study of which in all its branches renders interesting and full of enjoyment many a ramble and many an hour in the country which might otherwise be passed tediously and unprofitably. We all know that there is scarcely a foot of ground that is not tenanted by some living creature, which, though it may offer itself to our observation in the lowly shape of an insect or even a minute shell, is as perfect in all its features and parts, in its habits and instincts, and as demonstrative of the surpassing wisdom and power and goodness of the Creator, as the most gigantic quadruped which walks the earth.

Again, kind readers, Farewell!