

CHARLES DIXON

AMONG THE BIRDS IN
NORTHERN SHIRES

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Among the Birds in Northern Shires

PREFACE

The present volume must be regarded more as a popular introduction to the bird-life of our northern shires than in any way as an exhaustive faunal treatise, although at the same time we believe almost every indigenous species has been included. For twenty years we lived surrounded by these northern birds, so that we may fairly claim to have served our ornithological apprenticeship amongst them. With the birds of South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire we are specially familiar; whilst repeated visits not only to the Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, and Northumbrian littoral, but farther afield into Lancashire, and various parts of the Lowlands and the Highlands of Scotland, have enabled us to acquire much personal information relating to the avifauna of many a northern shire.

The difference between the avifaunæ of the northern and southern shires is strongly marked in many respects. Their study makes a record of avine comparisons of the most intense interest. The important effects produced by latitude and climate upon the bird-life of these widely separated areas make material for fascinating investigation, and have been fully dwelt upon as opportunities were presented. This variation in avine phenomena is not only far too often entirely ignored, but is apt to lead the student of bird-lore astray; due allowance has to be made in many cases for this difference in latitude, and all that it involves. The present volume, then, to a great extent a study of ornithological comparisons, will, we trust, be of some service to the bird lover or the bird student in his task of making allowances.

Unquestionably these northern shires from an ornithological point of view are much more interesting than the southern, and especially the south-western counties. Their avifauna is richer, and presents far greater variety, notably during the breeding season; whilst the marvellous phenomenon of Migration there unfolds itself each season in a manner that is never remarked elsewhere.

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CHAPTER I BY UPLAND STREAMS

There are few things more interesting to the lover of bird-life than the comparison of ornithological phenomena as they are presented in various localities, separated, it may be, by but few degrees of latitude. Not only does this apply to the species themselves – for even in our own islands the geographical distribution of birds conforms a good deal to latitude, – but to their migrational movements, their resumption of voice, their seasons of reproduction, their gatherings and movements generally, and finally to not a few habits that appear to be confined within narrow territorial limits. We have already dealt with bird-life in its many aspects in southern haunts with a view to the comparison of avine phenomena with that of more northern localities; we now propose in the present volume to review the most salient ornithological characteristics of certain favoured northern shires, especially with the object of bringing them out in contrast by their comparative study. The ornithologist with a southern experience, studying bird-life in a northern county – say in Yorkshire, for example – will soon find that the avifauna of the two areas, although it possesses much in common, is in many respects different. Birds that he was wont to find common in southern haunts are rare here; others that were scarce in the south, and which he was apt to regard even as rarities, are quite common. Not a few species are met with that are seldom normally seen in southern haunts, and opportunities are afforded him of studying the nesting economy of species, the breeding areas of which are decidedly boreal. Then, again, the change of latitude involves a change of climate, especially in winter; slight, perhaps, it may be, comparatively speaking, but yet sufficient to influence the habits and movements of birds in quite a different way from those prevailing in the milder atmosphere of southern haunts. Birds that sing all the winter through in these southern shires are silent here at that season; others that are sedentary there are of migratory habits in the wilder and colder north – in obedience to those climatic influences that act upon the food supply, and so on. The farther north he goes the more acute will the contrast in avine phenomena become; and in species common to the two areas – to northern and southern counties respectively – he will find differences of from one to two months in the ornithological calendar. Lastly, he will meet with a multitude of interesting forms, both in summer and in winter, that are normally strangers to southern localities at one season or the other, or at both seasons.

We will commence our observations by an investigation of the bird-life along the upland streams – not in their lower and quieter reaches, but at some elevation up the hillsides where the waters hurry and tumble along over rocky beds and between more or less precipitous banks fringed with alders, mountain-ashes, bracken, and brambles. The southern counties can boast no such streams; and even in the wilder south-west of England the becks are wanting in that grandeur that characterizes most of these turbulent northern waters. For twenty years or more we lived surrounded by them and within ear of their noisy clamour; whilst the birds upon their banks were our constant companions summer and winter alike. To our mind the ideal upland stream is one of the most picturesque features in the Peak district. They may be grander and wilder farther north, but with experiences of them in the remote Highlands and the Hebrides in mind, for romantic charm and wealth of bird-life these Derbyshire and Yorkshire brooks, in our opinion, remain unequalled. Almost every valley in the Peak can boast a streamlet of some kind. Some of course are more imposing than others, drain larger areas of upland, and contain a much greater volume of water. Some plough their way across the open moorland, their bed in summer being dry or nearly so; whilst others purl down wooded valleys and along well-timbered bottoms, between the ridges of millstone grit that are such a prominent feature in this particular kind of country. In their higher and wilder reaches such rivers as the Dove, the Wye, and the Derwent – all beloved by the angler for trout and grayling – may be taken as very excellent

examples of upland streams. The Rivelin, with its charming branches of Blackbrook and Wyming brook, and itself a tributary of the now polluted and ill-used Don, upon which grimy Sheffield is partly situated, were all favourite streams of ours rich in ornithological associations. So, too, was the Sheaf, with once picturesque Meersbrook, especially in its upper waters between the villages of Dore and Hathersage.

Were we asked to name the most characteristic bird of these upland streams we should unhesitatingly answer, the Dipper. Not that the bird can be regarded as plentiful anywhere; and we know not a few streams where this engaging species has dwindled seriously in numbers during the past twenty years, due partly to the senseless persecution of keepers and others, and partly to the much greater number of people that wander along the banks nowadays compared with years ago. Be this as it may, the Dipper is still sparingly dispersed along most of the streams suited to its requirements. Its exclusive habits tend to characterize it as rarer than it actually is, and its peculiarity of keeping a length of water reserved for itself and its mate creates an impression of absolute scarcity which in many cases does not actually exist. No wonder the old school of naturalists were at a loss to assign a place in their classifications to this curious bird. Brisson included it among the Sandpipers and called it *Tringa merula aquatica*; but Linnæus, with more discernment, associated it with the Passeres in his genus *Sturnus*, which is now restricted to the typical Starlings. Modern ornithologists have fared little better, and the poor Dipper, even in quite recent years, has been tossed about from one group to another utterly regardless of its true affinities. In some modern books we find it associated with the Thrushes, in others with the Wrens, but with neither group falling naturally. There may be some of its special characteristics, as, for instance, the coat of down that more or less covers the body below the feathers, due to its peculiar habits and economy; but, on the other hand, the very peculiar character of its nest and eggs (which we regard as of some importance in determining its taxonomic position) seems to suggest that the small group of birds of which the Common Dipper is typical, is not very closely allied to any other existing group, and fully to warrant the separation of these birds from other Passeres into a family apart. Small as this family is, the dozen species of which it is composed are scattered over a very large proportion of the earth's surface. Dippers in one form or another are found over the greater part of Europe, Asia, and North Africa; they occur on the upland streams of the Himalayas, and in the mountains of Formosa. Across the Atlantic they inhabit the hill streams of the Rocky Mountains and the Andes.

Our British Dipper, as probably most readers at all familiar with the bird may be aware, is one of the most sedentary of our indigenous species. Both here and in those parts of continental Europe which the typical species frequents, as well as the slightly different northern form from Scandinavia, the birds keep closely to their native streams summer and winter alike, only wandering from them in the very exceptional event of the torrents becoming frost-bound. Such a peculiarity has resulted in the establishment by variation and isolation of an almost endless number of local races or sub-specific forms. To a slight extent this may be remarked even in our own islands, birds from various localities exhibiting differences of coloration, but when we come to review the Dippers of the entire Palæarctic region the amount of variation amongst them is much more pronounced. The scope of the present little volume forbids a scientific revision of the genus *Cinclus*; but a glimpse of the sprightly little brown and white bird bobbing up and down like a fleck of foam amidst the whirling waters of a northern trout stream suggests a passing allusion to these interesting facts.

The English local names of the Dipper are not without interest. It is somewhat curious to find that the local name of Water-crow has been applied to this bird not only in Cornwall but almost universally in Scotland. The names Water-ouzel and Dipper are of very ancient application. That of "Dipper" was not "apparently invented in 1804", as Professor Newton suggests in his *Dictionary of Birds* (p. 151), by the author of the letterpress in Bewick's *British Birds* (presumably Beilby); for we find it used many years previously (in 1771) by Tunstall in his *Ornithologia Britannica*, a work which was reprinted by the Willughby Society in 1880 under the editorship of Professor Newton himself!

There can be no doubt whatever that the name had been applied much earlier still. The derivation of the words Water-crow and Water-ouzel is not difficult to determine; but that of “Dipper” is open to considerable doubt. To us it seems just as reasonable to presume that the bird received this name from its unique habit of “dipping” in the stream as from its singular dipping or bobbing motion when perched on some stone or rock in the bed of the torrent, as is suggested in Bewick’s work on British birds. In some parts of the Highlands the Dipper is known locally as the Kingfisher.

Although we have had not a little experience of the Dipper on the streams of a southern county we are bound to confess that the bird seems somewhat out of place upon them, possibly because we have been so accustomed to his society amidst wilder surroundings in much more northern shires. We picture him best upon the wild trout streams of Yorkshire and Derbyshire, or as a tenant of the dancing burns of the Highlands and the Western Isles. Here he is one of the most characteristic species of the stream, constantly attached to the turbulent foam-flecked waters, part and parcel of the scenery itself. As a musician the Dipper does not take a very prominent place in the avine chorus, but his music is in full harmony with its wild surroundings, though often overpowered by the noise of the torrent – a low-pitched jerky and uneven carol, not very long-continued if uttered at frequent intervals. Perhaps we might not be strictly accurate in describing the Dipper as a habitual perennial songster like the Robin, nevertheless he warbles now and then during the winter months, and is one of the first birds to resume regular music in the early spring. We are assured that the Dipper sings at intervals during all the rigour of a Scotch winter, proof of his robustness and hardy temperament. In Devonshire his winter song might be naturally expected; for there the Song Thrush and the Sky-lark are musical enough at that season, although mute, or nearly so, in northern shires. We have listened to his wild uneven music on some of the Yorkshire streams during winter when icicles a couple of feet in length have draped the rocks, or when the surrounding country-side has been covered deep with snow. Unfortunately, almost everywhere the Dipper somehow has got a bad name – a reputation amongst anglers for destroying the spawn of sporting fishes. Like the poor Owl, and not a few other feathered outcasts, he is universally persecuted for these imaginary misdeeds. But in reality he is one of the actual preservers of the ova he is accused of eating, for his food largely consists of larvæ of certain insects which in that stage of their existence are particularly destructive to the spawn. We have dissected a great many Dippers at one time and another from many different localities, and have always been much impressed with the uniform similarity of the contents of their stomachs – a little grit and the remains of insects and worms. We have, however, known the Dipper in exceptional cases to prey upon small fish, but are convinced, by the experience of a lifetime, that such food is taken so rarely as scarcely to deserve mention at all. Whenever we pause to watch the aquatic gambols of this sprightly bird, we feel less inclined to wonder why a past generation of naturalists included it amongst the water-fowl. The way it enters the quiet pools or the swifter running reaches of the stream, dashing beneath the surface from some water-encircled stone, and rising again some distance away just to take breath and then again to disappear, is never without a certain element of surprise, accustomed as we are to the habits of this bird. We can recall a northern stream – situated in the Rivelin valley close to Hollow Meadows – specially favourable for watching the actions of the Dipper. In some parts it was confined by lofty banks, upon which we could lie concealed and look right down into the clear water, and here, when the pair of Dippers that frequented the spot were on the feed, we might watch their every movement whilst they were under the surface. This stream is used as a conduit to convey the water from one large reservoir to another, and was consequently often in flood. We have often remarked that the Dippers were exceptionally busy in searching for food on these occasions, doubtless because insects and larvæ were disturbed by the unusual flow of water. Such times, however, were not favourable for observation. We liked best to watch the ways of these charming birds when the stream flowed slower, when the water was clearer, and certain reaches were almost undisturbed by the current. The Kingfisher, as most readers may know, has but one method of feeding, by plunging into the water and returning to the air almost at once. The Dipper, on the other hand, in his quest for

sustenance, is as much aquatic as a Grebe or a Moorhen. He is quite as much at home in the water as in the air or on dry land. Sometimes he walks deliberately from the bank or from a sloping moss-covered stone into the water; at others he takes a short flight over the stream and drops suddenly down into the pool; whilst yet again we have often seen him arrest a long-continued flight – which, by the way, follows every bend of the brook – and, fluttering for a moment, poise and disappear beneath the surface at once. The Dipper only maintains his subaqueous position by much evident exertion of his wings and legs and feet. Generally the wings are kept in motion whilst the bird searches the bed of the stream, but sometimes these may be seen at rest, and the body is kept beneath the water by the feet clutching the big stones and the strands of moss and other aquatic plants. Not only does the bird float buoyantly enough upon the water, but it swims well, often for many yards at a time. Dippers are exceedingly attached to certain reaches of the stream and to favourite nesting sites, using the latter year after year, often in spite of much disturbance. In this special valley we always used to find the nest in one particular spot – wedged under an overhanging rock on the bank of the stream. The nest of this species is a very characteristic one, and cannot readily be mistaken for that of any other British bird. In external appearance it bears some resemblance to that of the Wren, being of the same globular form, but a cursory examination will soon set any doubt at rest. In a great many – we might almost say the majority of – cases the nest is made outwardly of moss (sphagnum always by preference), amongst which a little dry grass is interwoven, especially round the entrance hole. This mossy globe is lined with grass roots and sometimes fine twigs, and then again lined with an enormous quantity of dead leaves all arranged very neatly layer over layer. There is never any lining of wool or feathers, and the five or six white eggs are almost exactly the same size as those of the Song Thrush. The Dipper is an early breeder even in the northern shires, commencing to build at the end of March or early in April, and rearing several broods during the course of the season. The young birds are most interesting little creatures. We retain many vivid remembrances of the actions of broods of Dippers that we have unexpectedly disturbed. The tiny creatures, when only able to fly or flutter for a few yards at most, will take to the water to escape pursuit just as readily as the chicks of a Grebe or a Moorhen, and are equally as alert and active in that element. We have upon more than one occasion known the four or five youngsters flutter out of the nest one after the other, and at once tumble into the stream below, where all efforts at capture have usually been unavailing. Not only do the nestlings dive and flutter about the water, but they are adepts at concealing themselves amongst chinks of the rocks or under the moss and herbage growing in the stream. When required for examination, we always found the best way to secure them was with our landing-net. The song of the Dipper declines considerably as spring merges into summer. The cock bird warbles most frequently whilst sitting on some water-encircled stone or rock, but we have known him to perch and sing in the alder-trees growing by the water-side. We always consider him to be in finest voice during March and April – a habit fully in keeping with his robust temperament, and one which instantly puts us in mind of a louder and sweeter singer, the Missel-thrush. The Dipper is the one constant avine dweller on the upland streams, consequently we must in fairness regard him as the most characteristic bird of these localities.

Another and daintier species, however, is almost his equal in this respect, and that is the Gray Wagtail. This bird is more susceptible to the changing seasons, and at the approach of winter deserts the higher streams altogether, or comes down to the lower and more sheltered reaches of others. The Gray Wagtail is a familiar bird along all our Yorkshire and Derbyshire streams and rivers. We look for him quite as a matter of course when we reach the rocks, and the alder and birch and mountain-ash trees, just as we expect there to find the Dipper. But this is in summer mostly; in winter he becomes far more familiar, and during that season comes much nearer to the busy haunts of men. We have often seen Gray Wagtails in the bed of the grimy Don and Sheaf in the very heart of smoky Sheffield during mid-winter; and we know the bird as a winter resident about all the streams and sluices and dams in the series of Endcliffe Woods. The bird seems, however, closely attached to the stream in its

upland solitudes, and at the first sign of spring goes back to favourite haunts among the moorlands and hills. We can recall many a romantic reach of the Derwent, the Wye, and the Dove, where the Gray Wagtail, the Dipper, and the Kingfisher might be watched together, the former bird, daintiest and most charming of its kind, deftly poised on a rock in mid-stream vigorously beating its long tail, looking like a single feather until it was opened as the startled bird took flight; the two latter species flying alarmed away arrow-like, following the winding waters, the one as a particoloured ball, the other as a blue undefined streak of refulgent light. So likewise has the Gray Wagtail oft been our sole bird companion on many a Highland water, both on the mainland and in Skye. We never tire of watching its sylph-like actions, the dainty way it poises on the stones or flits along before us stage after stage in undulating flight uttering its cheery *chiz zit* as it goes, or of admiring the exquisite blending of its showy yet delicately coloured plumage. We have often made his acquaintance upon more southern waters, far away in the remote south-west of England, but somehow he never there evokes the same feelings with which we greet him in northern haunts. The Gray Wagtail visits these upland streams for the purpose of rearing its young. Not every wanderer by the water-side is fortunate enough to get a peep at this bird's domestic arrangements. It has, fortunately perhaps, a happy way of concealing its nest under some large stone or overhanging rock, or in a quiet nook, not necessarily in a secluded spot, but often close by the wayside, where the very audacity of the selection proves a source of safety. A scrappy little nest it is, dry grass and roots and such-like litter thrown carelessly together, and lined with hair or more rarely a few feathers; artless, yet possessing a rustic beauty if wanting that elaborate finish of more painstaking nest-builders. The five or six eggs are as unassuming as the nest that holds them, grayish-white freckled with brown, and perhaps with here and there a scratch of darker hue. The bird is an early breeder, making its nest in April, although we have remarked that in Scotland it is a little later in its operations. This pretty Wagtail still further endears itself to us by its attachment to a certain breeding-place, returning in many cases year by year to build its nest in one particular spot. Unfortunately the Gray Wagtail can claim but low rank as a songster. None of our British Wagtails are singers of much merit, and all confine their melody to fitful and short snatches of rambling song, almost invariably uttered as the bird hovers and flutters in the air. The Gray Wagtail's charm rests in its pretty dress, its graceful actions, and to some extent in its loneliness, for there are few other small birds to arrest attention in the haunts it loves. It can claim our almost undivided admiration on the streams of the uplands from one extreme corner of Great Britain to the other. Certainly of few other birds can we say so much; although such an extended distribution is entirely due to physical conditions – to the presence of mountains and uplands throughout that area.

The Dipper and the Gray Wagtail are the two characteristic birds of the upland brook and riverside, rarely if ever seen anywhere else under normal circumstances, and, so far as our observations go, their happy lives are passed in much the same manner on the streams of both northern and southern shires, with the one exceptional movement to more sheltered areas on the part of the latter species in boreal localities. There is, however, another charming bird of the mountain streams which we cannot pass unnoticed, and that is the Common Sandpiper, or “Summer Snipe” as it is called in many districts. But this species is by no means exclusively confined to the banks and waters of the upland streams; neither is it a permanent dweller in such localities. It is a frequenter of our rivers and streams during summer only, the season of their greatest attractiveness; speeding south to Africa like the Swallows when autumn creeps over the uplands. From Cornwall to the Shetlands, wherever there are mountain streams and upland pools we may meet with the Common Sandpiper between the months of May and September, but it is in the northern shires that the bird becomes most abundant, say from the Peak district onwards. Our experience of this engaging bird has been a lifelong one. Each succeeding spring we used to note its arrival in the old accustomed haunts on the banks of the Yorkshire streams and moorland pools towards the end of April. It appears upon our Devonshire and Cornish waters nearly a fortnight earlier, yet farther north, in the Highlands, it is seldom seen before the first or second week in May. The return journey varies in a corresponding manner, August and September

marking its southern departure from the north; but in the south it lingers into October, November, and even December – not, however, by the stream side, but on the sea-shore. The persistency with which this Sandpiper returns each year to certain localities, and its habit of nesting in the same spot summer after summer after a prolonged absence of seven months and a double journey of thousands of miles, are not the least attractive portions of its economy. For more summers than we can now recall, the streams and reservoirs at Hollow Meadows and Red Mires – within an hour or so's walk of Sheffield – were visited by many pairs of Summer Snipes, and their nests came under our observation with unfailing certainty. Two pairs of these birds were remarkably conservative in their nesting-grounds, and used to return each summer to one spot of ground no larger than our writing-table, and there make their nests – one pair on the steep banks of a conduit between the reservoirs, the other on a few square yards of gravelly ground beside Wyming brook. We could always depend upon finding the nests of other pairs within a hundred yards of the stream banks on certain lengths of the water. We would hazard the conjecture that descendants of these birds continue to do so to the present day. During summer the Sandpiper was quite as familiar an object along these northern streams as the Dipper or the Gray Wagtail. Many a time have we seen the three species by the water-side together. Farther north, in Scotland, this Sandpiper becomes even more numerous, and in some parts of the Highlands is, or used to be, most unaccountably mixed up with the Dipper. The latter term included both species, the keepers not distinguishing between them. We have heard the Sandpiper called a “Water-crow” in various parts of Skye especially. Few birds evince more anxiety at the nest, or when their helpless chicks are just abroad. For the newly-laid eggs we cannot recall an instance of this species displaying any concern; but when those eggs are deeply incubated or the young hatched out the behaviour of the female bird especially becomes very different. She will feign a broken wing or lameness, or endeavour to draw all attention upon herself by running just out of reach of any observer foolish enough to give pursuit. But once the young birds have concealed themselves the parent flies away, or circles about in the air, generally being joined by her mate. The four handsome pear-shaped eggs – pale buff, splashed and spotted with rich brown and gray – in their scanty nest, usually made beneath the shelter of a heath tuft or bunch of grass, require no special protection from the parent, for they harmonize so closely in tint with surrounding objects that discovery is difficult in the extreme, even when we know the exact location of their resting-place. Curiously enough the Sandpiper is not aquatic in its habits. It never swims nor dives save when wounded, but obtains its food whilst tripping round the muddy and sandy portions of the water's edge. In early summer, just after their arrival, the cock birds may frequently be seen running along the tops of walls and fences with outspread drooping wings, or even soaring into the air uttering a shrill note, both actions being connected with courtship and love. The usual note of the Common Sandpiper is a shrill *weet* uttered several times in succession, and heard most frequently as the bird rises startled from the bank and pursues its way across the water, often so low as to strike the surface with its wings.

There are many other birds, of course, that may be met with by upland streams, but the foregoing are the characteristic species, each in every way adapted to a life in, or by, the side of their turbulent waters. These other species found by the mountain or upland waters may be met with in even greater plenty elsewhere, so that a mere passing mention of them will suffice in the present chapter. The Heron, of course, is a visitor to the side of the upland stream; often flushed from the quiet reaches where the trout and grayling hide under the moss-grown stones. He is, however, just as much at home by the margin of lowland pools and streams, or about the rocky coasts and estuaries, and no exclusive dweller or sojourner in one locality more than another. Then the Mallard, especially in the Highlands, shows a strong preference for these upland burns, especially during the breeding season; and we can recall instances of flushing the duck of this species with a numerous progeny from these mountain torrents. On one occasion we were tramping the moorlands in Skye in company with a gamekeeper friend and a fine retriever. Suddenly we came upon a brood of young Wild Ducks and their mother. The young birds scattered in all directions, and hid themselves in holes and corners by the stream

and amongst the tufts of rushes. The old bird, however, would not leave her brood notwithstanding the onslaught of the barking dog. With bill wide open and wings expanded she refused to be driven from the spot; so that, to save her life we were obliged to secure the dog and to leave the spot, where doubtless she soon gathered her brood around her again. Then the Redshank, one of the prettiest and most graceful of our indigenous wading birds, is a by no means unfrequent visitor to the sandy reaches about the eddies in the Highland burns. This we have repeatedly remarked to be the case in Cromartyshire, in the streams that flow into Loch Carron, and in the vicinity of Strome Ferry. But more of all these interesting birds anon. Lower down the hillsides, where the course of the upland streams is marked by a fringe of alder-trees, we have avine visitors in some variety, especially during the autumn and winter months. These trees are a favourite resort of Redpoles, Siskins, and almost all the British species of Titmice between October and March. The Kingfisher again should claim passing notice in the bird-life of the upland stream. He, like the Heron, may be often met with during a ramble along the banks of these romantic water-ways, but inasmuch as he is also a dweller on all descriptions of water from the hills to the flat country, we cannot fairly claim him as a special feature in the bird-life of an upland stream. There are, for instance, many pairs of Kingfishers that habitually nest in the steep banks of the Derwent in its higher reaches among the hills and dales of the Peak; there are others on many of the hill brooks in the vicinity of Sheffield; whilst we have repeatedly seen this gem-like bird on many a Scottish burn. Lastly, we might mention that the cries of Plovers, Curlews, Grouse, and Greenshanks, the song of Ring-ouzel, Twite, and Titlark, the bleating of the Snipe, and the gag of Wild Geese may often be heard mingling with the babble of these upland torrents, and the birds themselves met with on their banks, or within a short distance of their waters; but all these species more correctly belong to other localities, and must be dealt with elsewhere.

CHAPTER II

ON MOORLANDS AND ROUGHS.¹

In a previous volume, dealing with bird-life in a southern county, we expressed disappointment not only with the miniature moorlands of Devonshire, but with their lack of feathered inhabitants. Tame these lands must ever seem by comparison with the typical moors, and from an ornithological point of view wanting in interest to persons familiar with the grand expanse of heath and mountain waste in the north. For many years we lived within little more than an hour's walk of the Yorkshire and Derbyshire moors. At one period we used to visit them several times a week in quest of ornithological information, varying our experience by occasional much more extended excursions over them. We know them in the heat and the brightness of spring and summer; in the autumn, when their rolling expanse is aflame with a glow of purple and brazen bloom from the heath and gorse; as well as in winter, when the wind sweeps across them in resistless fury, and the snow covers them with a dazzling pall, levelling the hollows and drifting into fantastic wreaths. We retain vivid memories (supplemented with copious notes) of the constantly changing aspects of bird-life upon them. Farther afield we are well familiar with some of the wildest and grandest of the Highland heaths. Monotonous as these vast wastes may seem, relieved by little or no sylvan variety, a detailed examination will not fail to reveal that the impression gained by a casual scrutiny is an erroneous one. The configuration of their surface is subject to as much diversity as more pastoral or arboreal country. We find lofty eminences, spacious valleys, rolling billowy tracts, extensive plains, hills, and dales – all for the most part devoid of timber, yet presenting considerable variety in the vegetation according to the nature of the soil. The heather (of various kinds) is of course the one predominating shrub, but mingled amongst it are more or less extensive tracts of bilberry and kindred plants, of bracken, bramble, briar, and a host of others, the botanical names of which we need not stay here to specify. This is upon the drier ground; where marshy conditions prevail we find grasses of various kinds, rushes, large patches of sphagnum, variegated here and there with sundew and clumps of bell-heather, the latter easily identified by its large pale-pink blooms. Here and there the monotony of the moors is relieved by lofty crags and ridges of millstone grit, the slopes below them studded with boulders of varying size right down to the stream. In some parts the soil is deep and peaty, almost black; in others it is scanty, and the bed-rocks peep through the stone-strewn ground, where the sturdy ling and wire-like bilberry have a hard struggle to maintain themselves. Roughly speaking, each description of moorland ground has its own peculiar birds. Some species there are, it is true, that distribute themselves more or less universally throughout the moorlands, but others are confined to well-defined limits. Then, again, these moors are inhabited by two very distinct avifaunæ – a limited one which is practically sedentary, and a more extensive one composed entirely of migratory species. As might naturally be expected, the birds that can exist upon these bleak storm-swept moorlands during winter are extremely few; possibly we might reduce the number to a single species, and even this is occasionally partially driven from its heathy haunts by the inclemency of the northern winter. Of the avine visitors that flock to the moors each recurring spring-time, and just as surely depart in autumn, there are close upon thirty species – a goodly list, and which is slightly increased by a few passing migrants. From this it will be seen that these uplands, with their universal reputation for barrenness, are by no means devoid of bird-life, and that in summer especially they abound with interest to the ornithologist. The lover of birds, however, will in many, if not in most cases, find that his quest for knowledge is hampered by not a few restrictions. Almost everywhere these moors are jealously guarded from the intrusion of strangers,

¹ “Rough”, a local name for wild, uncultivated, rocky lands on the borders of the moors, clothed with coarse herbage, bramble, heath, and a variety of Vacciniaceæ, sphagnum, and other plants.

however harmless they may be. Keepers are ever on the look-out to warn intruders off the sacred breeding grounds of the Red Grouse; the hillsides and plains are systematically swept by the keeper's telescope in quest of trespassers; innumerable notice-boards threaten the innocent wayfarer with all the rigours of the law should he chance to wander from the scarcely discernible footpath or the public highway. To ornithologize in comfort one must make our peace – usually purchasable at a certain price – with the custodians of the moors, and then all is plain sailing. There is much to be said both for and against such restrictions. On the one hand the Grouse represent vast sums of money to the owners of the moors, an income in not a few cases to many an otherwise impoverished landlord; considerable expense is incurred in maintaining a staff of keepers and watchers, and there is no small outlay in many other directions. On the other hand, there are those that argue that the public have a legitimate right to wander at will over these noble expanses of heather, that they should be free to all, and that no vested rights should be allowed in such an utterly wild bird as the Red Grouse. Unfortunately there can be little doubt that if the bird were not strictly preserved, and its shooting an expensive luxury, there would soon be no Red Grouse left. Of the two evils we would prefer the former after all, for every naturalist worthy of the name would deeply deplore the extermination of such an interesting species, found as it is in no other part of the world except on the British moorlands. Let us keep the species strong and vigorous and abundant, by whatever means, rather than see it meet the same wretched fate as the Great Auk and scores of other interesting avine forms that have vanished from this world for ever as a direct result of man's crass stupidity and wanton slaughter!

Practically there is but one species confined to the moors all the year round, absolutely indigenous to them, and found in no other localities. This is the famous Red Grouse, a species familiar by name if not by appearance to most people. The abundance of this bird in the game-dealers' shops from the 12th of August onwards to the middle of December renders it familiar enough with the multitude; but comparatively few people know the bird in life amidst its wild and breezy upland haunts. Not that it is a species that takes much finding, or that secretes itself in the remoter parts of its wild home; it is obtrusive enough, by no means shy, and may generally be seen in plenty from the highways. Very frequently half a dozen or more Grouse may be seen sitting upon the top of the rough stone walls that separate the heath from the road; tame enough, too, to allow an observer to approach them within a few paces before they take wing with noisy cries and hide themselves among the brown heath. Or again, the wanderer over the moors who keeps a sharp look-out may detect plenty of Grouse among the heather, craning their necks above the vegetation, ready to fly off to safer quarters if too deeply alarmed. Then, in spring especially, their very peculiar and unmistakable notes never fail to arrest the attention; and not unfrequently the birds will startle one as they rise, calling loudly, from the herbage at our very feet by the wayside. Or very often the big brown birds may be approached very closely during a fog. In these districts fogs frequently come on with absolutely startling rapidity. Not the yellow soup-like abominations that are so familiar in London and other big cities, but dense shrouds of white vapour that chill one to the very marrow, obscure every landmark, and render the moors practically impassable for the time being. Often have we been so caught in these moorland fogs and been compelled to wait amongst the heath until they cleared. On other occasions they have overtaken us upon the highways across the moors, and then we have remarked the apparent stupidity of the Grouse amongst the mist. We have approached the birds as they sat bewildered in the stunted thorn and birch trees by the wayside, or upon the walls, and often remarked how loth they were to take wing, allowing us to come within a few feet of them without showing the slightest concern. The poacher would make the most of such splendid opportunities, but his fraternity are scarce upon the moors, and the keepers are not much bothered by such gentry. He has perhaps the most to fear from the wandering gypsy – that curious mixture of itinerant tinker, hawker, horse-dealer, and romany, that scours the country-side nomad-like, with a retinue of scraggy horses, dirty children, tilted wagon and tent. This man takes every Grouse egg that he can with impunity, and every bird that comes in his way. We well remember how one of the most disastrous moorland fires in South Yorkshire was

attributed to these gypsies. Some of their number, we believe, had been prosecuted for poaching or egg-stealing, and out of revenge the moors were fired. For days the heather burned in all directions in spite of every effort to subdue it, and vast numbers of Grouse were destroyed in the flames, and their ancient strongholds reduced to a blackened waste. The fire, which we could see from our residence at Heeley, was a most impressive sight by night, and must have cost the owner of the moors a large sum even in the mechanical labour of arresting its progress, to say nothing of the destruction of the long heather which takes years to replace and become suitable cover for Grouse. As some readers may be aware, the heather is systematically fired, usually in spring, so that a supply of tender shoots from the resprouting ling may be furnished as food for the Grouse. Great judgment and care are required, or vast tracts of cover may be ruined for years. We have known farmers so destroy many acres of valuable Grouse cover purely to secure pasturage for sheep. The Grouse loves to frequent this long, well-matured ling; it affords a splendid shelter during winter, whilst the buds and tender tops form favourite food. Next to the Ptarmigan, the Red Grouse is by far the wildest of British game birds, and the least dependent upon the protection of man. Owing, however, to the ever-increasing value of the bird for sporting purposes (a sovereign per brace shot being considered by no means an exorbitant price), the preservation and propagation of Red Grouse now receive more care and consideration than ever. Grouse breeding is becoming as important in one direction as Pheasant and Partridge breeding is in another. The birds are not kept up to their present numbers, notwithstanding the inroads of the sportsman and the periodical epidemics of disease, without the exercise of great care and skill, not only in the preservation of a necessary amount of breeding stock, but by the improvement of the moors by surface-draining, burning, and so on.

The Red Grouse is much more of a ground bird than the Capercaillie or the Black Grouse, although it may be seen perched in trees from time to time. This is all the more interesting because its near ally, the Willow Grouse – the *Lagopus albus* of ornithologists – is greatly attached to trees, roosting in them, and is chiefly met with amongst birch or willow thickets. Another interesting fact concerning the Red Grouse is its strictly monogamous habits, and, as is almost universally the rule in such cases, the male resembles the female in colour much more closely than in Grouse where polygamous instincts prevail. Marvellously protective in coloration is the plumage of the Red Grouse in both sexes and at all times of the year. The birds are seen only with the greatest difficulty as they skulk amongst the heath and other moorland vegetation; the sitting bird upon her nest is one of the most impressive object-lessons in protective coloration that we have, whilst the eggs and chicks themselves are tinted in colours that harmonize most beautifully with the objects around them. Very early in spring the crow of the cock Grouse proclaims the approaching breeding season. This, however, varies to some extent, the birds on the highest and most exposed moors being later to nest than those dwelling on more sheltered heaths. Late snow-storms often destroy many nests, even on the English moors; and we have seen nests in April in South Yorkshire buried in snow and the eggs frozen. Farther north, on the Scottish moors, the young birds sometimes suffer considerably from late snow-storms, whilst persistent wet is almost as fatal to them. The nest is scanty enough, and always made upon the ground amongst the ling and heather, being merely a hollow scratched out by the hen bird and lined with a little vegetable refuse, such as bents, withered sprays of heath, and fern fronds. Many nests are made quite close to the highways and footpaths. We have known nests within half a dozen yards of the turnpike road along which traffic of some kind was continually passing. The number of eggs varies a good deal according to the season, age of the hen bird, and situation of the moor. Few of our British eggs are handsomer, being cream-white in ground colour, thickly marked with brown of varying shades from red and crimson to nearly black. The colour, however, is by no means a “fast” one, and may be easily washed off, so that they require to be taken as soon as laid, and handled and kept for some weeks at least with care, if their beauty is to be preserved in the cabinet. Although the Red Grouse is not polygamous, the cock bird does not assist in the duties of incubation, still he assists the hen in bringing up the brood. During autumn and winter the life of the Red Grouse

is by no means a happy one, that is to say in some ways. From the 12th of August to the 10th of December he has to run the gauntlet of the gunner; and now that the deadly practice of “driving” is almost universally resorted to, on the Yorkshire moors at all events, even the wary old birds are shot down practically at will. Then when the shooters are done with him the Grouse has all the hardships of a northern winter to go through. Snow-storms of unusual severity often drive Red Grouse from the moors to the lower and more sheltered valleys, even to the nearest farmyards, where we have known them search for food with the poultry. During some winters the Grouse have been so hard pressed as to quit the heather in numbers, and we have then known them actually to be taken in the streets of Sheffield! With a moderate winter, however, the birds manage fairly well, snow-storms being always the most fatal to them. Upon the return of spring, given an absence from disease, the birds soon get into prime condition again; most of the weakly ones have been weeded out, and the surviving stock of vigorous birds are ready to propagate their kind.

But we must now leave the Red Grouse crowing so lustily to each other amongst the heather, and devote a portion of our space to the many other feathered dwellers upon the moors and heaths. Perhaps it may be best to clear off the few Passerine species first. These are all birds of migratory habits, although some are greater travellers than others. Beginning with those that journey the shortest distance, we may notice first the Meadow Pipit. Although by no means an exclusively moorland bird, the Meadow Pipit is almost universally distributed over these wastes between spring and autumn, wherever the ground is wet. Almost to a bird these Pipits leave the South Yorkshire moors during September and October. We used sometimes to meet with odd birds on the rough grounds below the moors during winter, but, speaking generally, the migrational movement is pretty complete. Meadow Pipits always give us the impression of being somewhat sad little birds, taking life very seriously, as even human dwellers on these moorland solitudes are apt to do. We may illustrate this by a comparison of the cheery Wren with these Pipits, and then the reader will quite understand our meaning. The melancholy complaining note of the Meadow Pipit is one of the most characteristic small-bird notes on the moors between April and October. Every marshy spot is almost certain to contain a pair or more of them, and their nests are the favourite nursery of the Cuckoo. The song of this species is a pleasing one, uttered as the bird descends from a short flight into the air. All through the genial days of a moorland spring the birds may be watched rising and falling, shuttlecock-like, from the heath and cotton-grass. Then, when the nesting season is past, the young and old join into flocks of varying size and betake themselves to the lower ground, appearing in autumn in large numbers in turnip-fields and potato patches. The breeding season of this Pipit varies considerably according to latitude. On the southern uplands, in Devonshire for instance, the nest is made in April; in the Highlands it is from one to two months later. The migrational movements are about the same date in Yorkshire as they are in Devonshire; and the journey extends in both localities from the high inland moors down to the marshy meadows and saltings of the coast. We have found nests of this Pipit in the Rivelin Valley built absolutely in shallow pools of stagnant water, the moss of the foundation being saturated with moisture. These nests contained the usual complement of eggs and the birds were sitting upon them.

Another characteristic bird of the moors, and one with almost exactly the same migrational movements as the Meadow Pipit, is the Twite. This unassuming species is the one Finch of the wide undulating expanses of heather. It may be readily identified by the merest novice. Like a Linnet in general appearance, but wanting the exquisite carmine flush that adorns the more homely bird, as well as the ruby-coloured patch on the crown, its distinction is its bright yellow bill. The Twite, most appropriately called in many districts the “Heather Lintie”, is but a bird of summer amongst the heather, retiring in autumn to the lowland fields, where we shall meet with it again amidst much more pastoral surroundings. Usually one meets with it sitting on some tall twig of ling, uttering its monotonous note, which the imagination of ornithologists has syllabled as *twa-ite*; hence the bird’s trivial name. It will thus sit and call monotonously until our nearer approach disturbs it, and it rises and flits in a drooping manner just above the heather to another perching-place a little farther on,

to repeat its call and again to await our advance, when once more it rises to drop upon some twig and renew its plaint. The Twite gains an additional interest when we remember how rare a bird it is in the south; we know it as a by no means common winter visitor in Devonshire, notwithstanding the fact that there are many localities where one might expect to find it in summer; whilst even in treeless Cornwall – a wild rugged land enough – the bird is so rare that Rodd knew of but a single example, and that was obtained near Penzance. Then again the bird is confined during the breeding season exclusively to the British moors, with the exception of the coast districts of Norway. From the midlands of England northwards to the Shetlands, the Twite has its only summer residence with us. We fear that we never appreciated the Twite sufficiently when we lived so close to its haunts and considered him too common for any special notice or admiration. It is only after we have dwelt in districts where he is unknown that we have begun to regard him with exceptional attention; and now, profiting by past experience, we never see him flitting about the heather without giving a thought to his localness. After all, he is a most interesting little bird; and his pretty nest, cunningly concealed amongst the tangled heath, possesses a rustic beauty that well rewards one's patience for the often toilsome search. It is a cup-shaped structure, made externally of grass bents, twigs, and moss, the inside warmly lined with down from willow catkin and cotton-grass, wool from the sheep that graze upon the moors, and feathers. The five or six eggs are very similar to those of the Linnet, pale bluish-green spotted with reddish-brown and gray. The Twite gets back to the moors in April, and its domestic duties, accompanied by its weak little song, are performed in April and May. In the Highlands the birds nest later than in Yorkshire, but not much, for we have seen flocks of young birds strong on the wing in Scotland in June. The moorlands are finally deserted for the winter during September and October – a vertical migration as interesting, if not so extensive, as the Swallows' flight to Africa. A passing glance should also be given at the Wheatear. This bird is by no means confined to the moors, yet it is very characteristic of many parts of them, especially in the far north. In Yorkshire it is by no means uncommon about the old quarries and pits on the moors; farther north it becomes more numerous, although scarcely attached to the heather in the same way as the Twite. Like its congeners it is a dweller among the stones, a trait which has not escaped the notice of the Highland peasants, who call the Wheatear a "Clacharan", a "Stone-clatter", or a "Little Mason". This may possibly be because his note resembles the clicking noise made by two pebbles struck together, as well as from his propensity for the rocks and stones. On the Scottish moorlands we have found this bird specially common about the peat-pits and stacks, and in these latter we have often found its nest – a somewhat untidy structure made of dry grass and sometimes lined with hair and feathers, usually containing five or six pale-blue eggs. The migrations of the Wheatear must be performed very quickly. In Devonshire we note its arrival towards the end of March, and yet by the first half-dozen days of April it has penetrated even as far as the Orkneys and the Hebrides! Passing mention should here also be made of the Sky-lark and the Stonechat – neither bird strictly a moorland one, yet both found in the locality. The Stonechat, we remember, used to be, and may be now, fairly common on the rough broken ground, not exactly true moorland, in the valley of the Rivelin at Hollow Meadows, half a dozen miles west of Sheffield.

Our last moorland Passere is the Ring-ouzel, a prime favourite with us, and a species with which we have been exceptionally familiar from boyhood's days. This bird always impressed us to a remarkable degree, possibly because it is such a bold and assertive one. With a lifelong experience of this handsome Ouzel – he is known to the country people in South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire as the "Tor Ouzel", *i. e.* Mountain Ouzel – we should unhesitatingly state that it is commonest in the district of the Peak. He breeds upon the Cornish uplands, and in Devonshire upon Dartmoor, as we have repeatedly remarked; then we find him on the uplands of Somerset, and increasingly common over the Welsh mountains northwards to the vast solitudes of the Pennine chain. Farther north in Scotland he is found, but our experience is that the bird is local, and common nowhere in the latter country. The moors west of Sheffield, for some reason or another, are specially sought by the Ring-

ouzel; and nowhere in that district is the bird more abundant than in the Rivelin Valley and between Stanage Edge and Derwent Edge, and on the Bamford and Bradfield moors. South of Sheffield we may meet with this Ouzel in fair numbers about Dore, Owlbar, and westwards over the Hathersage uplands.

As most readers may know, the Ring-ouzel is a spring migrant to the British Islands, and the only migratory Thrush that comes to that area to rear its young. Like some other northern migrants, its passage is by no means a slow one. It arrives in South Devon sometimes as early as the end of March, more usually the beginning of April, and what is rather remarkable, this date is practically coincident with its arrival in South Yorkshire. For many years we paid special attention to the migrational movements of this bird, and should give its date of arrival as the first week in April in that district. This seems to indicate beyond question that Ring-ouzels migrate direct to their breeding areas after landing on our southern coasts. They journey in flocks, often of considerable size, and several seasons we were fortunate enough to observe them in companies numbering several hundreds of birds, on the very day of their appearance in the Rivelin Valley. These flocks soon disband; in a day or so they break up, and the birds scatter themselves in pairs over all the suitable breeding-places. The cock bird is not only a handsome one, but very distinctively marked, easily recognized as far as the eye can reach by his pure white gorget; otherwise he very closely resembles the Blackbird in general appearance. The resemblance does not end here, though, and in its habits and movements generally, as well as in the nest and eggs, we have an equal similarity.

Whilst in flocks the birds are wary and wild enough, but when breeding they become bold and venturesome to an astonishing degree – in these respects exactly resembling their ally, the Missel-thrush. We remark this Ouzel's habit of elevating the tail after alighting, just as the Blackbird does; we also cannot fail to notice its exceeding noisiness just prior to seeking a roosting-place; neither shall we fail to observe its very Blackbird-like way of feeding, ever alert and watchful. Soon after their arrival, but never, so far as we have observed, before the flocks or travelling parties have disbanded, the cock birds regain their vernal music characteristic of the love season. With the resumption of song the bird loses a good deal of its wariness, a fact we may notice in not a few other species. He will sit and warble on the big boulders of granite or millstone grit, or when perched on the top of a rough wall or some bending spray of ling or gorse, just as sweetly as when sitting in the higher branches of some birch or mountain-ash. His music is not of that rich excellence that marks the song of the Blackbird, nor has it the variety so characteristic of the Thrush; yet there is a wild beauty in harmony with the surrounding scene that makes ample recompense for its failings in other ways. Unfortunately the bird continually spoils his music by introducing a series of inharmonious harsh notes. Like that of the Blackbird the song is all too short, and even lacks the redeeming feature of continuous flute-like melody, short as it is, that saves the Blackbird's from being classed as commonplace. To our mind, the Ring-ouzel always increased in interest during the breeding season. Many scores of nests of this bird have we kept under observation, not a few of them from the time the first twig was laid until the four or five nestlings left them for ever. The birds are much attached to certain spots, and return to nest in them with wonderful pertinacity. Then, again, how often have we remarked their absurd attachment to a nest in the course of building. We have known Ring-ouzels show more concern for a handful of nest material – by no means a finished nest – than scores of other species display over the absolute loss of a nest and eggs. The Ring-ouzel is the Stormcock of the moor – ready to do battle with much noisy clamour the moment its nest is approached. This nest is not always made amongst the ling and heather; numbers are placed in low bushes on the outskirts of the moor, and on the banks of the streams and by the sides of the roughly-formed cart-tracks, especially where the banks are steep. In early autumn Ring-ouzels again become more or less social and gregarious; they then begin to wander off the moors to the nearest fruit-gardens, and so gradually work south in parties and flocks. Gilbert White, whose pleasure at his discovery of the migrating Ring-ouzels across the Sussex Downs may easily be surmised by the reader of his ever-charming letters, tells us that he used

to see these Thrushes – more than a hundred years ago – in little parties about Michaelmas, and again in April, and remarked their tameness. The birds are not so common in that area now; times have changed and many species are gone, for in the same letter (No. VII) he tells us that there are Bustards on the wide downs near Brighthelmstone! Perhaps we might here take the opportunity of mentioning that flocks of Snow Buntings sometimes appear on the Highland moors, but our own experience of this charming arctic stranger relates to more southern shires, and where we hope to meet with it again later on in the present work.

The birds of prey that haunt the moors are all more or less migratory in their habits, as might naturally be expected, because the species upon which they depend for food are non-resident too. The Red Grouse, it is true, is sedentary, but no raptorial bird frequents the moors that preys exclusively upon that species, and it chiefly suffers during the breeding season when the young chicks and poults are about. The Merlin is the most deadly enemy of these. It is a spring migrant to the moors, and is not known to breed with certainty south of Wales. It may just possibly do so on Exmoor, but certainly does not on Dartmoor; in fact, to Devonshire it must be regarded as a rare visitor in autumn and winter. We have always found the Merlin to be fairly common throughout the moors of North Derbyshire and South Yorkshire. It is ruthlessly persecuted by the gamekeeper, and its numbers consequently have declined almost to the vanishing point in not a few districts. We never saw much of the Merlin on the moors between Castleton and Sheffield before April. There are many favourite haunts on these moors in which the bird may be found breeding every summer; and curiously enough, although pair after pair may be destroyed, others come and settle in the district the following season. We are glad to be able to record that the bird has not been so severely hunted down in one or two places, and consequently its numbers seem to be on the increase. The spirited dash of this pretty little Falcon is not exceeded by that of the Peregrine itself. Times without number have we witnessed its fatal chase of the smaller birds of the moor – Twites, Ring-ouzels, Meadow Pipits, and less frequently of Plovers, Grouse, and occasionally Cuckoos. In the higher valley of the Rivelin, we once watched an exciting chase by this bird of a Common Sandpiper, which had been flushed from the heath-clad bank of one of the reservoirs at Hollow Meadows. Pursuer and pursued strove their utmost, the Sandpiper doubling, rising, and turning from side to side, and the relentless Merlin following closely every movement as though each bird were guided simultaneously by a common impulse. The chase was continued over the large reservoir, and we had a fine uninterrupted view of each bird's powers of wing. The Sandpiper, after the water was crossed, gained a brief respite by hiding amongst the rushes on the opposite bank; but the Falcon, undeterred, hovered above the spot and once more flushed its quarry. The poor little Sandpiper wheeled rapidly round and then flew off across a rough bit of rock and heath-strewn ground, but its strength was exhausted; the Merlin's superior powers of flight and endurance asserted themselves, and the Sandpiper, with a piteous *weet weet* of terror, was struck down. But the various birds of the moorlands are by no means the Merlin's only food. Like most, if not all the smaller Falcons, it subsists largely on certain insects. Whether the bird's good offices in this direction counterbalance its tax upon young Grouse we need not stay here to enquire. Perhaps in this case they do not, for the insects caught can do little or no damage in such localities; but on the other hand, we must remember that the Falcon assists in keeping up the Grouse to a strong and vigorous standard by killing off – if amongst others – a certain percentage of weakly and unfit birds. There is some evidence to show that Grouse disease appears in regular cycles on most moors – say every seven years – and competent observers have attributed it to old birds spreading the contagion. Now, had the larger Raptorial birds not been so ruthlessly exterminated in these localities, surely it is only reasonable to suppose that they would have thinned out many of these birds, not perhaps preventing an epidemic, but thus assisting in rendering it of a milder character than otherwise prevails. Depend upon it, man seldom or never meddles with the delicately-adjusted balance of nature without unfortunate results in some direction. But to return to the Merlin and its economy. Like the Sparrow-hawk and many other raptorial birds, this pretty species selects some spot or spots in its haunts to which it conveys its

captures to devour them in peace. The nest is almost invariably made at no great distance from these “dining-tables” or “larders”, where the bare and often rock-strewn ground is sprinkled with feathers, bones, pellets, wing-cases and wings of insects, the remains of the Merlin’s food. These haunts, as previously remarked, are tenanted yearly with wonderful regularity, and the nest each season is made in much the same locality as in previous years. This nest is of the simplest, and always, so far as we know, upon the ground. “Nests” have been recorded in Scotland in the old nest of some other bird in a tree;² whilst in some foreign countries a ledge of a cliff is said to be selected. Our experience is that it is invariably upon the ground, and generally on a rather bare spot amongst the heather or ling, often on an eminence of some kind. Here in a slight hollow, with no lining as likely as not, the four or five pretty red eggs of the Merlin are laid. They are absolutely indistinguishable from those of the much commoner Kestrel, but their terrestrial resting-place should prevent the novice confusing them *in situ*. In autumn the Merlins quit the moors. It is difficult to say how far these birds indigenous to our own moorlands migrate; there is evidence to suggest that the movement is limited to a trip to the lowlands, extending even to the coast. On the other hand, the bird is certainly a species with a strongly marked and regular passage in most parts of its extra British range. A word as to the plumage of this interesting Falcon. The cock bird, with his slate-gray upper parts, rufous nape, more or less distinctly barred tail, dark wings, and rufous under parts streaked with dark brown, is possibly familiar to most readers. The hen bird, so far as we can determine, is not only slightly bigger than her mate, but much less handsome in colour. She is dark rufous-brown on the upper parts, each feather with a paler margin, the buff nape patch is paler and much less distinctly defined, the tail is browner, and the under parts are dirty white streaked with brown. This plumage closely resembles that of the young male. During the past quarter of a century we have examined a great many skins of the Merlin, and almost without exception the sexual differences in colour were as described above. There are authorities, however, that maintain that the adult plumage of the female of this Falcon is very similar to that of the male. In this we are disposed to concur, for we have examined an adult female obtained by Dr. Scully in Gilgit (and his sexing of specimens is most reliable, as every naturalist who has had the pleasure of seeing them will agree, the sexual organs being in most cases sketched on the labels attached to the skins), in which the sexual differences of colour were most trifling. It is said that the females are shot off in this country before they can obtain their fully adult dress. In fairness, however, we must state that there is always the possibility of very old females assuming the male plumage, and their apparent rarity may be due to this fact.

Unfortunately the other moorland birds of prey are now rare almost to the verge of extinction; indeed, we regret to say the Merlin itself in not a few localities is fast approaching the same condition. The species that we shall allude to here is the Hen Harrier. This bird, like nearly all the other birds of the moors, is a migratory one, although there is some evidence to suggest that in our islands the movement is to some extent confined to a journey to the lowlands and the southern counties. Formerly this Harrier was a fairly familiar bird on the moors of the south-western counties, where, however, its local names of “Blue Hawk” and “Furze Kite”, indicative of old-time abundance, are nearly all that is left to us. We may remark in connection with this bird that a century ago the male and female (being so much unlike each other in plumage) were almost universally regarded as two distinct species, the latter known as the “Ring-tail” Hawk. Montagu cleared up the confusion by rearing a brood (doubtless from a Devonshire nest), and clearly demonstrated that the two supposed species were in reality the opposite sexes of one. About the South Yorkshire moors the Hen Harrier is practically unknown. Our limited experience of the bird was obtained on the moors of Skye, where we believe it still continues to nest. We have there seen it beating along the hillsides in a slow deliberate manner just above the tall ling, amongst which, in this island, it almost invariably makes its nest, placing it upon the ground. The four or five very pale-blue eggs are often destroyed by sheep; in fact, we were assured by an

² Conf. *Zoologist*, 1878, p. 29.

intelligent keeper in Skye that to this cause alone its diminishing numbers must be attributed. This Harrier reaches the moors in April or early May, and nests during the latter month and the first half of June. The cock is a beautiful bird, with gray upper parts, darker on the throat and breast, the remainder of the under parts and the upper tail-coverts pure white, the primaries black. The hen is somewhat larger, dark-brown above, paler brown below, streaked with rufous-brown; the upper tail-coverts are, however, nearly white as in the male, which fact seems to suggest that they are a recognition mark (Conf. *Curiosities of Bird Life*, p. 249). The principal food of this Harrier consists of small animals, such as moles, mice; of frogs, lizards, and insects. The bird is also a great egg eater, robbing the nests of other moorland species. Although to some small extent it may prey upon birds, there is nothing in its habits to cause uneasiness to the owner of a Grouse moor; the bird's comparative harmlessness should secure for it greater immunity from gun, trap, and poison than it at present receives. There are one or two other Raptores we may just allude to here as dwellers on or fairly regular visitors to the moorlands. On the South Yorkshire moors the Kestrel is, we are glad to say, still a fairly common bird. It is fond of the outskirts of the moors, the rough grounds often crowned with ridges – ranges of low cliffs – of millstone grit, and in these it habitually nests. Then the Sparrow-hawk is a frequent visitor to the heath-clad wastes, but chiefly to the borderland and in localities where there are plantations of larch and fir, in which the bird can find seclusion and a suitable nesting haunt. We have often remarked that these moorland Sparrow-hawks quit such areas during winter when small birds are absent. The Rough-legged Buzzard passes over many parts of the South Yorkshire moors on migration, especially in autumn. We have examined many fine examples of this bird, obtained on the Ashopton moors and about Derwent, chiefly birds of the year. The two species of British Eagles must also be mentioned as visitors to the Highland moors, although not exclusively indigenous to them. They are better described as mountain birds, and shall receive more detailed notice in our chapter devoted to the avine characteristics of such localities. (conf. [p. 81](#).) So also may we remark that the Raven will be dealt with in the same chapter. In Devonshire the Raven is still to be found on Dartmoor – one of the few inland localities that it frequents in England nowadays; but elsewhere on the English moors, so far as our experience goes, the bird is but a casual visitant.

The moorlands, being as they are the least changed districts in the British area, continue to be the resort of a large number of shy birds of the Plover and Sandpiper tribe during the breeding season. In some places no doubt the number of these birds is visibly diminishing, but in the wilder districts there still remain sufficient to constitute a decided ornithological feature. One of the best-known of these is the Lapwing. Fortunately we can still class the Lapwing as a common and even abundant bird in suitable districts, and now that its eggs are protected by law in not a few spots we may hope to see a welcome increase. This beautiful Plover – one of the handsomest of the entire group – is by no means confined to the moors; it is a most adaptive species, and makes itself at home on arable land as readily as in wilder areas, still it is a prominent feature in not a few moorland scenes. Who does not know the sad mewling cries and the restless uneven flight of this Plover, as it rises startled from the ground and commences its plaintive protest against our intrusion? Large numbers of Lapwings breed on the North Derbyshire and South Yorkshire moorlands, as well as on the rough grounds in their vicinity. We remember on one occasion – we have a note recording the fact – seeing a pair of Lapwings drop quietly to the ground just behind a stone wall that separated the moor from the highway. Creeping carefully up to the spot we looked through a chink in the wall and saw the two old birds with four chicks which could not have been hatched many hours. The scene was a charming one. The downy long-legged little creatures were running about picking here and there, their parents standing guard, alert and watchful, yet totally unconscious of prying human eyes not a dozen feet away from them. After watching this family party for some time we intentionally came into view, when the scene instantly became more interesting than it was before. Both old birds rose into the air and commenced wheeling and rolling about just above our head, the female by far the most venturesome of the two. Then she alighted a yard or so away, and with both her broad wings sweeping the ground

dragged herself along for a few paces, striving her hardest to get us to follow. But we confined our attention for a time to the chicks. All four of these artful youngsters at the first alarm scattered in as many different directions and hid themselves amongst the heath and grass almost with the rapidity of thought. Search as we might we could find but two, although we knew full well the others were concealed on a patch of ground no larger than an ordinary table. These two chicks we pocketed for specimens, but we were so touched by the way the old Lapwings followed us over the moor crying so plaintively that more humane feelings got the better of us, and we returned to the spot and placed both young birds where we had found them. Such little episodes as these go so far, we always think, in making ornithology so very attractive.

Another allied species breeding on most of our northern moors (and in some few instances in the south-western counties) is the Golden Plover. There are few more handsome birds of this order than the Golden Plover in wedding plumage. The upper parts – as they are all the year round – are thickly spotted with golden yellow on a dark-brown ground, the under surface is black as jet. We begin to see these Plovers back upon their moorland breeding-places in March; in April they become more numerous. Like most of the other birds found on these moors in summer they spend the winter upon the lowlands; in this case frequenting the flat coasts and marshy meadows and saltings near the sea. They love the swampy portions of the moors – the spacious hollows between the hills, where the wet ground is clothed with a dense growth of rushes, cotton-grass, and sphagnum, amongst which the heath and ling in scattered patches mark the drier portions of the ground. At the first alarm the ever-watchful Plovers rise one after the other from all parts of the waste, and then begins a chorus of flute-like whistling cries, bird after bird taking up the chorus and alarming all other and less demonstrative species within hearing. Here and there a Golden Plover may be seen quietly standing upon the spongy ground. But it needs sharp eyes to see them, so closely does their spangled backs harmonize with the golden sphagnum and other vegetation. May is their breeding season, and their four large pear-shaped eggs are deposited in a scantily-lined hollow, often beneath the shade of a tuft of rushes or cotton-grass. These eggs are very much the same in general appearance as those of the Lapwing, but the tints are richer and brighter. Of the Sandpiper or Snipe tribe there are at least half a dozen more or less common species that visit the moors in spring to breed. Most of them are never met with on our south-western uplands at this season, although the Snipe, the Curlew, and the Dunlin are more cosmopolitan in their choice. The two former species are by far the commonest and most widely dispersed on the Yorkshire moors, the remaining four or five are rarer, more local, or absent altogether. The peculiar drumming or bleating of the Snipe is one of the most characteristic of avine sounds upon these moors in spring; the quavering whistle (uttered always, or nearly so, whilst the bird is upon the ground), or the better known and somewhat mournful *curlee* (heard whilst the bird is careering to and fro in mid-air) of the Curlew is little, if any, less familiar. On the Hebridean moors, as well as on those of Orkney and Shetland, in the neighbourhood of the sea, the Whimbrel breeds sparingly. It is extremely local, but its habits and economy generally are very similar to those of the larger and better known Curlew. It differs, however, in its migrations, and is a summer visitor only to the British Islands, the greater number passing over them to still more northern breeding grounds in the Faroes, Iceland, and elsewhere. The Dunlin, notwithstanding the fact that it nests on some of our south-western uplands, finds its favourite breeding grounds on more northern moors up to the Orkneys and the Shetlands. Here again we have a species donning a jet-black belly for the nuptial season. It also displays a very decided preference for the swampy portions of the moors in which to perform its nesting duties. Then there are the two species of Totani, the one easily distinguished by its orange-coloured legs (the Redshank), the other by its green legs and slightly upturned bill (the Greenshank). The latter, however, is much rarer than the former, and is only known to breed in the Highlands. The Redshank is fairly common during summer on our northern moors, but this species, like one or two others, is as much at home in more lowland haunts. You may meet with it during summer amongst scenery of a directly opposite character – the fens and broads of the eastern counties. Redshanks are

alert and noisy birds, rising from their moorland haunts when alarmed, and keeping up their shrill double note with almost irritating persistency. As numbers often breed in the same district, the din from the frightened birds soon becomes general. The Greenshank visits its breeding grounds in April and May, coming from over the sea like all our strictly summer visitors, and departing in September and October with its young. This bird again is a noisy one when disturbed, and careers about the air in excitement until left in peace. All these birds breed upon the ground, lay four eggs possessing very similar characteristics in colour and shape, and their nests are found with some difficulty, owing to the protective tints of their eggs.

Of the Duck family the Mallard is by far the commonest and most widely dispersed. It loves the pools and streams and marshy spots upon the moors, but as it breeds as generally in more lowland localities we can scarcely describe it as a typical moorland bird. The same remarks may be said to apply to the Teal, the Wigeon, and some few others. Then in the moorland fastnesses of the Hebrides, and in some parts of the mainland Highlands, the Gray-lag Goose still finds a haunt sufficiently seclusive, although we are assured that its numbers are decreasing. We know from personal experience that it breeds amongst the ling and heather on some of the Outer Hebrides, making a huge nest of branches and twigs, rushes, and other dry vegetation which is finally lined with down. The six to eight eggs are creamy-white in colour. This bird again is by no means a typical moorland one, for it formerly bred in the fens of East Anglia, and would do so to this day had it not been exterminated. Of the Gull tribe, perhaps the most characteristic moorland species are the Skuas, two species of which are summer migrants to certain of our wildest Highland moors. Where the moors extend down to the coast in various northern districts, such birds as Terns, Sheldrakes, and Eider Ducks may be found breeding upon them, but we can scarcely regard such species or such localities to come within the scope of the present chapter.

CHAPTER III ON MOUNTAIN AND LOCH

Mountain bird-life, if scarce, is not without its charm. That of the loch, taking one season with another, is more varied and abundant; so that combining the two districts together – and they are in most cases inseparably associated – we shall have abundant material to interest us. The mountain bird-life of England – except, perhaps, in the extreme north – is comparatively limited, especially nowadays when persecution has worked such havoc amongst certain species. That of the loch is peculiarly of a Scottish type inasmuch as the present chapter is concerned. The bird-life of these two districts is essentially of a northern type, belonging, like the mountains and lochs themselves, to a wilder and more rugged scenery than any the southern shires can boast. Many of the avine forms belonging to these localities are strictly boreal or even arctic in their distribution, finding a suitable habitat by altitude rather than latitude; many of them are but winter visitors or abnormal wanderers to the south. In some cases these particular localities are the home of representative species that take the place of more southern types, and afford us a fine series of ornithological comparisons of the deepest interest. The naturalist familiar with bird-life in the southern counties only, will, in investigating the avifauna of mountain and loch, enter upon an entirely novel series of avine phenomena.

From the moorlands to the mountains and lochs is in many localities a transition of an almost imperceptible character. In not a few cases the moors terminate in mountain summits beyond the borderland, where the two species of heather cease to climb, or the most sturdy and tenacious ling that clothes the hillsides for still another thousand feet or more. In a similar manner the lochs are usually situated in hollows among the hills, or penetrate in winding fiords from the sea between towering highlands or heath-clothed wastes that at higher altitudes terminate in bare and wind-swept mountain summits. As with the avifauna of the moors and heaths we shall find that the birds of the mountains are more or less a shifting population. Indeed the similarity is made even more complete by the fact that in both regions – moor and mountain – we find but one sedentary species. Upon the moors we found the practically resident Red Grouse; upon the mountains we shall find the Ptarmigan, a bird that clings to the bleak summits throughout the year. In some respects the Ptarmigan is a more interesting species than the Red Grouse; there is more variety in its economy, and the bird itself is one of the most beautiful examples of protective coloration that the entire range of organic life can show. Our first acquaintance with the Ptarmigan was made nearly twenty years ago, near the summit of the Cuchullin Hills in Skye. Although the time was May, patches of snow were lying in the hollows and a cold piercing wind swept along the hillsides. Lower down the slopes we had lingered to watch the gambols of a pair of Ravens that were haunting the rocks; whilst a Peregrine Falcon had just swept by. Upon a small piece of level ground we flushed several Ptarmigan, one after the other, that had been lying concealed on the stony face of the mountain. They were readily identified by their white wings. After the first bird had risen we scanned the ground carefully for others, but none were seen until they rose in noisy flight and sped away. It is interesting to remark that the Peregrine we had seen a short time before must have flown right over the spot where these Ptarmigan were crouching. Possibly the recent appearance of the Falcon had made them lie closer than usual, and rendered them loth to take wing. With the exception of a few weeks in the very depth of winter, the Ptarmigan is more or less changing in colour throughout the year. In mid-winter, as most readers may know, the bird is pure unsullied white, with the exception of a jet-black patch in front of the eye in the male, and the outermost tail-feathers, which are black in both sexes. In early spring, sometimes it is said by the middle or end of February, the first signs of the coming summer plumage are seen on the neck, and during the three succeeding months the birds undergo a complete transformation, the feathers on the breast, it should be noted, being assumed last of all. It is a significant fact that the parts of the plumage

least exposed, such as the flight feathers and the feathers on the belly, present the smallest amount of change from the white winter dress. This is more apparent in the male than in the female, doubtless owing to the fact that the latter is more liable to injury whilst brooding on the nest. Broadly speaking, in the male in summer plumage the upper parts and the breast and flanks are dark-brown, more or less mottled, and barred with gray and buff; whilst in the female the upper parts are darker, practically black, mottled with gray and rufous, and the under parts are chestnut-buff barred with dark-brown. This plumage prevails during June and July, although subject to some change by sun and abrasion, whilst towards the end of the latter month signs of the autumn livery begin to be apparent. In this dress again the sexes are similar, as we might naturally expect to be the case, now that the breeding season is over, and both male and female are exposed to the same conditions of life. The upper parts, the breast and flanks, are gray, vermiculated with black. By the end of August this autumn dress is fully attained. It is worn for nearly a couple of months, subject of course to some change from abrasion and sun. Then comes the transition to the white winter plumage, which in most cases becomes complete by the middle of November contemporaneously with the snow that lies upon the mountains for the next three months or more. This beautiful arrangement of nature becomes even more impressive by certain comparisons. For instance, the Red Grouse, living as it does amongst the ling and heath, and in a region where snow seldom covers the ground for many days at a time, retains a brown dress throughout the year; in this species also the flight feathers are constantly brown in hue, just as those of the Ptarmigan are white. But the nearest ally of the Red Grouse, the Willow Grouse (the *Lagopus albus* of ornithologists), inhabiting the tundras of the arctic regions right round the world, assumes a pure white plumage for the winter (readily distinguished, by the way, from the Ptarmigan by the absence of the black patch before the eye), and in this case again the flight feathers are constantly white – a dress that is admirably protective amidst the winter snows of its northern home. Here, then, we have two birds distantly related, like the Ptarmigan and the Willow Grouse, donning white plumage in winter for protection, whilst the Red Grouse, so closely allied to the Willow Grouse, and resembling it in many details of its economy, remains practically the same in appearance summer and winter alike. The retention of the white quills is a very interesting fact. These Grouse moult their flight feathers but once in the year, in autumn; and probably the reason they are constantly white is because this tint is no disadvantage to the species, being always concealed except during flight. As we know, these birds take wing most reluctantly, always endeavouring to elude observation by crouching close to the ground. Similarly, the central tail-feathers of the Willow Grouse and Ptarmigan are the only ones that change in colour with the seasons – varying from white in winter to brown marked with gray and buff in summer, and gray mottled with black in autumn – the remainder being constantly black, and when the tail is closed of course concealed by the central pair.

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