

JOHN GEORGE WOOD

THE COMMON OBJECTS
OF THE COUNTRY

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The Common Objects of the Country

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Содержание

PREFACE	7
CHAPTER I	8
CHAPTER II	19
CHAPTER III	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

J. G. Wood
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A

PREFACE

In the following pages will be found short and simple descriptions of some of the numerous objects that are to be found in our fields, woods, and waters.

As this little work is not intended for scientific readers, but simply as a guide to those who are desirous of learning something of natural objects, scientific language has been studiously avoided, and scientific names have been only given in cases where no popular name can be found. In so small a compass but little can be done; and therefore I have been content to take certain typical objects, which will serve as guides, and to omit mention of those which can be placed under the same head.

Every object described by the pen is illustrated by the pencil, in order to aid the reader in his researches; and the subjects have been so chosen that no one with observant eyes can walk in the fields for half-an-hour without finding very many of the objects described in the book.

CHAPTER I

EYES AND NO EYES—DIFFICULTIES OF OBSERVERS—THE BATS—LONG-EARED BAT—ITS UTILITY—SPORT AND MURDER—SONG OF THE BAT—A BRAVE PRISONER—HOW BATS FEED—HAIR OF BAT AND MOUSE—WING OF THE BAT—THE FIELD-MOUSE—ITS STEALTHY MOVEMENTS—HARVEST MOUSE—WATER RAT—AN INNOCENT VICTIM.

Every one has read, or at least heard of, the tale entitled “Eyes and no Eyes”; which tale is to be found in the *Evenings at Home*. Now this story, or rather the moral of it, is, in my opinion, as often used unfairly as rightly.

Although there are those who pass through life with closed eyes and stopped ears, yet there are many more who would be glad to use their eyes and ears, but know not how to do so for want of proper teaching. To one who has not learned to read, the Bible itself is but a series of senseless black marks; and similarly, the unwritten Word that lies around, below, and above us, is unmeaning to those who cannot read it.

Many would like to read, but cannot do so; and it is in order to help such, to bring before them the first alphabetical teaching, that the following pages are written.

It is no matter of marvel that many an observant person becomes bewildered among natural objects; that he is lost amid the variety of animal, vegetable, and mineral life in which he lives; and that, after vainly attempting to comprehend some simple object, he finds himself baffled, and so in despair ceases to inquire into particulars, and contents himself with admiration of and love for nature in general.

Objects change so rapidly and so constantly, that there is hardly time to note a few remarks before the season has passed away; the object under examination has changed with it, and a year must elapse before that investigation can be continued.

From experience I know how valuable are even a few hints by which the mind can be directed in a straight course without wasting its strength and losing its time by devious wanderings. Only hints can be given, for the limits of the volume forbid any lengthened discussion of single objects; and, besides, the mind is more pleased to work out a subject according to its own individuality than to have it laid down as completed, and to be forbidden to go any further.

Almost every object that is described by the pen will be figured by the pencil, in order to assist the reader in identifying the creature in an easier manner than if it were merely described in words.

Of the birds I shall not be able to treat, as they alone would occupy the entire space of this volume; and, for the same reason, only a short account can be given of each object.

As in the scale of creation the mammals fill the highest place, we will speak of them first, taking, as far as possible, each creature in its own order.

Perhaps there are few people who would not feel some surprise when they learn that the very highest of our British animals is the Bat. Usually the bat is looked upon with rather a feeling of dread, and is regarded as a creature of such ill-omen that its very presence causes a shudder, and its approach would put to flight many a human being.

There is certainly some ground for this feeling; for the night-loving propensities of the creature, its weird-like aspect, its strange devious flight, and more especially its organs of flight, are so interwoven with the popular ideas of evil and its ministers, that bats and imps appear to be synonymous terms.

Painters always represent their imps as upborne by bats' wings, furnished with several supplementary hooks; and sculptors follow the same principle.

In consequence, all bats and objects connected with bats are viewed with great horror, with two exceptions: a cricket-bat and a bat's-wing gas-burner.

Now, I cannot but think that this is very hard on the bats. It is said that the African negroes depict and describe *their* evil spirits as white; and that, in consequence, the negro children fly in consternation if perchance a white man comes into their territory.

Yet, a white man is not so very horrid an object after all, if one only dare look at him; and the same remark holds good with the bats.



COMMON LONG-EARED BAT.

A very pretty creature is a bat, more especially the long-eared species, *Plecotus communis*, as it is scientifically called, and its habits are most curious. It is well worth the time to watch these little creatures on a warm summer's night, as they flit about in the air, and to note the enjoyment of their aerial hunt. They are fearless animals; and provided that the observer remains tolerably still and does not speak, bats will often flit so close to his face that he could almost catch them in his hand.

Their flight is very singular, and reminds one of the butterfly in its apparently vague flitting. Indeed, there are many large moths that fly by night who can hardly be distinguished from the bats, if the evening be rather dark, so similar are they in their mode of journeying through the air.

From this peculiarity of flight, they are accounted difficult marks for a gun; and it is unfortunately a custom with some ruthless powder-burners to practise by day at swallows and by night at bats. Now, even putting the matter in its lowest form, it is wrong to shoot swallows; for they are most useful birds, and serve to thin the host of flies and other insects that people the summer air.

As regards the swallow, this is well known, and does serve to protect it from some persons who have more compassion than the generality. Moreover, the swallows, swifts, and martins are extremely pretty birds, and their beauty is in some degree their shield.

But the bat is as useful a creature as the swallow, and in the very same way; for, when the evening comes on, and the swallow retires to its nest, the bat issues from its home and takes up the work just where the swallow leaves it—the two creatures dividing the day and night between them. Therefore, let those who refrain from swallow shooting include the bat in their free list.

Some there are whom nothing can restrain from killing, for the instinct of slaughter is strong in them. With them nothing is valuable unless it is to be killed. If it can be eaten afterwards, so much the better; but the great enjoyment consists in the mere act of killing.

They contrive to disguise the ugliness of the thing by giving it any name but the right one; but, in spite of the name, the thing exists. And I wonder, if they were to look very closely into themselves, whether they would not find there a decided desire to kill men, provided that they had no reason to dread the consequences. Those who have practised the sport unanimously say that nothing is so exciting as man-hunting and killing and that all other sport is tame in comparison.

The chief name under which this profanity is disguised is that of "Sport," a word which always reminds me of the "Frog and Boys" fable. There are actually men who are audacious enough to declare that there is no cruelty in "sport"; that foxes are charmed at being hunted, and that pheasants derive a singular gratification from getting shot. Now, I never was either a fox or a pheasant; but I entirely repudiate the assertion that any animal likes to be chased or to be wounded; and, moreover, I disbelieve the sincerity of the man who can say such a thing. If he says openly that he finds excitement in the chase, and means to gratify himself without any reference to the feelings of the creatures which he chases, I can understand while I disapprove. But when a man justifies himself by asserting that any animal likes to be hunted, I can hardly find epithets too contemptuous for him; and I could see him run the gauntlet among the Sioux Indians with but small pangs of conscience.

Some again call themselves Naturalists, and under the shelter of that high-sounding name occupy themselves in destroying nature. The true naturalist never destroys life without good cause, and when he does so, it is with reluctance, and in the most merciful way; for the life is really the nature, and that gone, the chief interest of the creature is gone too. We should form but a poor notion of the human being were we only to see it presented to our eyes in the mummy; and equally insufficient is the idea that can be formed of an animal from the inspection of its outward frame. Nature and life belong to each other; and, if torn asunder, the one is objectless and the other gone.

Lastly, let me remind those who find such gratification in destroying, that the word "Destroyer" is in the Greek language "Apollyon".

As we do not intend to treat of the dead and dried bodies of animals, but of their active life, we return to our bat flitting in the evening dusk, and, instead of shooting him, watch his proceedings.

Every creature is made for happiness, and receives happiness according to its capacity; and it is very wrong to suppose that, because *we* should be miserable if we led the life of a vulture, or a sloth, or a bat, therefore those creatures are miserable. In truth, the vulture is attracted to, and feels its greatest gratification in, those substances which would drive us away with averted eyes and stopped nostrils. The sloth is, on the authority of Waterton, quite a jovial beast, and anything but slothful when in his proper place; and as for the bat, it sings for very joy. True, the song is not very melodious, neither is that of the swift, or the peacock, nor, perhaps, that of the Cochin-China fowl, but it is nevertheless a song from the abundance of the heart.

There are many human ears that are absolutely incapable of perceiving the cry of the bat, so keen and sharp is the note; a very razor's-edge of sound.

More than once I have been standing in a field over which bats were flying in multitudes, filling the air almost oppressively with their sharp needle-like cries. Yet my companion, who was a musician, theoretically and practically, was unable to hear a sound, and could not for some time believe me when I spoke of the noisy little creatures above.

The sound bears some resemblance to that produced by a slate-pencil when held perpendicularly in writing on the slate, only the bat's cry is several octaves more acute. I never but once heard the sound correctly imitated, and that was done by a graceless urchin, during a long sermon one Sunday morning. He had contrived to arrange two keys in such a manner that, when grated over each other, they produced a squeaking sound that exactly resembled the cry uttered by the bat. So, by

judicious management of his keys, he kept the congregation on the look-out for the bat, and beguiled the time much to his satisfaction.

Of so piercing and peculiar a nature is the cry, that it gives no clue to the position or distance of the creature that utters it, and it seems to proceed indiscriminately from any portion of the air towards which the attention happens to be directed. The note of the grasshopper lark possesses somewhat of the same quality.

Even in confinement the bat is an interesting creature, and discovers certain traits of character and peculiarities of habit which in its wild state cannot be seen. I might here refer to several stories of domesticated and tamed bats; but as they have already been given to the world, and my space is limited, I prefer to give my own experiences.

Not long ago, I received a message from a neighbouring grocer, requesting me to capture a bat which had flown into the shop, and which no one dared touch.

When I arrived, the creature had taken refuge on an upper shelf, and had crawled among a pile of sugar-loaves that were lying on their sides after the usual custom. We pulled out several loaves near the spot where the bat was last seen, and by casting a strong light from a bull's-eye lantern, discovered a little black object snugly ensconced at the very back of the shelf.

I pushed my hand towards the spot, but for some time could not seize the creature, as it was so tightly packed, and squeezed into a corner. At last the bat gave a flap with one of the wings, which I caught, and so gently drew my prisoner forwards.

He was a brave little fellow, as well as discreet, and bit savagely at my fingers. However, his little tiny teeth could not do much damage, and I put him into a cage which I brought with me.

The cage was originally made for the reception of mice, and was of a rude character—the back and ends being of wood and the front of wire. In a very few minutes after his entrance into the cage, the bat climbed up the wooden back, by hitching his claws into the slight inequalities of the wood, and there hung suspended, head downwards.

When so placed, his aspect was curious enough. The claws of the hind legs being fixed into a crevice, so as to bear the weight of the body, the wings were then extended to their utmost, and suddenly wrapped round the body. At the same time the large ears were folded back under the wings and protected by them, the orifice of the ear itself being guarded in a very singular manner.

If the reader will refer to the figure of the bat on [page 4](#), he will see that inside the great ear is a sharply-pointed membrane, somewhat resembling a second ear. This membrane is called the "*tragus*," and when the large ears are tucked away out of sight, the *tragus* remains exposed, and gives the creature a very strange appearance.

When the bat is living, the ears are of singular beauty. Their substance is delicate, and semi-transparent if viewed against the light; so much so, indeed, that by the aid of a microscope the circulation of the blood can be detected. As the creature moves about, the ears are continually in motion, being thrown into graceful and ever-changing curves. If people only knew what a pretty pet the long-eared bat can become, they would soon banish dormice and similar creatures in favour of bats.

It was rather a remarkable circumstance, that the bat of which I have just been speaking would not touch a fly, although one which I had in my possession some ten years since would eat flies and other insects readily. Whenever it took the insect, it daintily ate up the abdomen and thorax, rejecting the head, wings, and legs. But my second bat entirely refused insects of any kind, and would eat nothing but raw beef cut up into very small morsels. I never had a pet so difficult to feed.

If the meat were not perfectly fresh, or if it were not cut small enough, the bat would hardly look at it. Now if a bit of raw meat about the size of a large pin's head be placed in the air, a few minutes will dry and harden its exterior; and when this was the case, my bat did not even notice it. So I had to make twenty or more attempts daily before the creature would condescend to take any food.

When, however, it *did* eat, its mode of so doing was remarkable enough. It seized the meat with a sharp snap, retreated to the middle of the cage, sat upright—as in the engraving already alluded to—thrust its wings forward to form a kind of tent, and then, lowering its head under its wings, disposed of the meat unseen.



From the movement of the neck and upper portion of the head, it would be seen that the creature ate the meat much after the manner of a cat; that is, by a series of snaps or pecks; for the teeth are all sharply pointed, and have no power of grinding the food. These teeth can be seen in the accompanying sketch of a bat's skull.

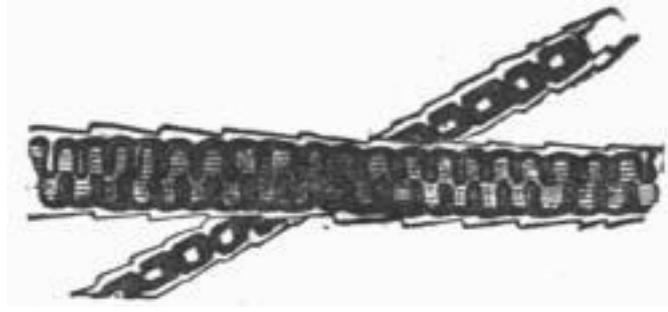
In many parts of England the bats are called “Flutter-mice,” and are thought to be simply mice plus wings. This opinion has been formed from the resemblance between the general shape, and especially that of the fur, of the two animals. But if we look at the teeth, we find at once that those of the bat are sharp and pointed, extending tolerably equally all round the jaw-bone; while the teeth of the mice are of that chisel-shaped character found in the rabbit and other rodent animals.

Now if we turn to the fur, and examine it with a microscope, we shall there find characteristics as decided as those of the teeth.

On this page is the magnified image of a single hair, taken from the long-eared bat. It will be seen that the outline of the hair is deeply cut, and the markings run in a double line. These markings and outlines are caused by the structure of the hair, which is covered with a regular series of scales adhering but loosely to its exterior. These scales can be removed by rough handling, and therefore the aspect of the hair can be much altered.



Let us now take a hair from the common mouse, and place it under the microscope. This being done, we find the result to be as shown in the accompanying cut.



The two objects here shown are two portions of the same hair; the upper one showing the middle of the hair, and the lower being taken from a portion nearer the root. Both these specimens were taken by myself from the animals, and drawn by myself by means of the Camera Lucida, so that they are to be depended on.

To return to my caged bat.

Although it did not do much in the eating way, it frequently came to the water vessel and drank therefrom; but it was so timid when drinking, that I could not see whether it lapped or drank. When disturbed, it used to scuttle away over the floor, in a most absurd manner, but with some speed. Sometimes it tried to drink by crawling to a spot just over the vessel, and lowering itself until its nose was within reach of the water; but the distance was too great for the attempt to be successful. In its wild state, the bat hunts insects, as they hover over the surface of water, and drinks as it flies, by dipping its head in the water while on the wing.

I rather think that my bat must have received some injury from the brooms and caps that were aimed at it when it entered the shop, for it only lived a fortnight or so, and one morning I found it hanging by its hind claws from the roof of the cage, quite dead.

I believe that bats generally die while thus suspended, for it is a very common thing to find plenty of suspended bats, dry and mummified, when entrance is made into an unfrequented cave, or a hollow tree cut down, or, indeed, when any bat-haunted spot is examined.

In speaking of the bat, I have used popular terms, and therefore have employed the word “wing”. But the apparatus of the bat is not a wing at all, but only a developed hand. Let the reader spread his hand as wide as he can, and he will see that between each finger, and especially between the forefinger and the thumb, the skin forms a kind of webbing, something of the same kind as that on the feet of ducks and other aquatic birds.

Now if the bones of the fingers were drawn out like wire until they became some seven or eight feet long, and the skin between them were extended to the nails of the elongated fingers, we should have a structure analogous to that of the bat’s wing. The thumb joint is left comparatively free; and by means of this joint, and the hooked claw at its extremity, the creature walks on a level surface, or can crawl suspended from a beam or a trunk. It is very curious to see the bat stretching out its wings and feeling about for a convenient spot whereon to fix the hooks.

So tenacious are these hooks, that the baby bat is often found enjoying an airing by clinging to the body of its mother, and holding firm, while she flies in search of prey.

It is true that the little creature is suspended with its head downwards; but it appears quite comfortable, nevertheless. Bat-children do not suffer from determination of the blood to the brain. Neither do certain human children, it seems, if we are to take as a criterion those whom we see hanging half out of perambulators, fast asleep, and rolling from side to side with every movement of the vehicle.

Both my bats were very particular, not to say finicking, about their personal appearance. They bestowed much time and pains on the combing of their fur, and specially seemed to value a straight parting down the back.

It was most interesting to watch the little thing parting its hair. The claw was drawn in a line straight from the top of the head to the very tail, and the fur parted at each side with a dexterity worthy of an accomplished lady's-maid. The same habit has been observed in other bats that have been tamed.

There are more than twenty British bats, but the habits of all are very similar; and so I prefer to take the prettiest, and, having described it, to leave the remaining species for a future occasion.

Pass we now from the Flitter-mouse to the Mouse.

In the fields, in the farm-yards, in the barns, and in the ricks are to be found myriads of certain little animals called Field-mice. Acting on the principle that I have just laid down, I shall take the most common and I think the prettiest species—the Common Short-tailed Field-mouse, represented on next page.

The fur of this creature is strongly tinged with red, and by its colour alone it is easily to be distinguished from the common grey or brown mouse. Its tail is short and stumpy, looking as if it had suffered amputation at an early period of life, and its nose is more rounded than that of the common mouse. Indeed, it has a very bluff and farmer-like aspect, and looks as if it ought to wear top-boots.



SHORT-TAILED FIELD-MOUSE.

Common as these little creatures are, they are seldom seen, because they keep themselves so close to the ground, and assimilate so nearly with it in colour, that they cannot easily be descried among the grass stalks, under shelter of which they pursue their noiseless way.

Their speed is not nearly so great as that of the house-mice, but they are much more difficult to catch; for they wind among the grass so lithely, and press upon the earth so closely, that the fingers cannot readily close on them, even when they are discovered.

From this facility of avoiding observation and capture, they seem to derive much audacity, and run about a field in fear of nothing but the kestrel.

When first I made a personal acquaintance with these creatures, it was under rather peculiar circumstances. There is a certain field, which was given up to football, cricket, hockey, and similar games, as soon as the grass was converted into hay and removed. One day I was very tired with

running, and lay down to rest on a pile of coats that had been laid aside; my eyes were fixed on one spot of earth, just visible between the grass stalks, but without any particular object. Presently I thought I saw a something red glide across the spot, but was not certain. However, I leaned over the place and a little farther on saw the same thing again. So I made a sharp pounce at the object, and found that I had caught a short-tailed field-mouse.

Now here was this impertinent little animal taking a walk close to the wicket, in spite of the bats, ball, and runners. In order to watch its proceedings, I released it, and followed it in its progress. After watching for a few minutes, I happened to look up for a moment; and when I again looked for the creature, it was gone, and I could not find it again.

Subsequently I became sufficiently expert to find them whenever I wished; and if I wanted a field-mouse, seldom had to examine more than a square yard of ground without finding one.

They are very injurious little creatures, for they are not content with eating corn, but nibble the young shoots of various plants, and sometimes strip young trees of their bark.

Fortunately we have allies in air and on earth, in the persons of owls and kestrels, stoats and weasels, or the damage done by these red-skinned marauders would be more than serious.

Some idea of the damage that may be done by the aggregate numbers of these small quadrupeds may be formed from the fact that in Dean Forest and the New Forest great numbers of holly plants were entirely destroyed by them, they having eaten off the bark for a distance of several inches from the ground. And other trees were favoured with the notice of the field-mouse, but in a different mode. Great numbers of oak and chestnuts were found dead, and pulled up; and when pulled up, it was seen that their roots had been gnawed through, about two inches below the level of the ground.

Various modes of destroying the marauders were put in practice, such as traps, poison, &c., but the most effectual was, as effectual things generally are, the most simple.

A great number of holes were dug in the ground, about two feet long, eighteen inches wide, and eighteen inches deep. This is the measurement at the bottom of the hole; but at the top the hole was only eighteen inches long and nine wide, so that when mice fell into it, they were unable to escape.

In these holes upwards of forty thousand mice were taken in less than three months, irrespective of those that were removed from the holes by the stoats, weasels, crows, magpies, owls, and other creatures.

Like most of the mouse family, the field-mouse is easily tamed; and I have seen one that would come to the side of its cage, and take a grain of com from its owner's fingers.



HARVEST-MOUSE.

There is another kind of mouse which may be found in the autumn, together with its most curious nest. This is the Harvest-mouse, the tiniest of British quadrupeds, two harvest-mice being hardly equal in weight to a halfpenny.

The chief point of interest in this little creature is its nest, which is not unfrequently found by mowers and haymakers when they choose to exert their eyes.

One of these nests, that was brought to me by a mower, was about the size of a cricket ball, and almost as spherical. It was composed of dried grass-stems, interwoven with each other in a manner equally ingenious and perplexing. It was hollow, without even a vestige of an entrance; and the substance was so thin that every object would be visible through the walls. How it was made to retain its spherical form, and how the mice were to find ingress and egress, I could not even imagine. The nest was fastened to two strong and coarse stems of grass that had grown near a ditch, and had overgrown themselves in consequence of a superabundance of nourishment.



WATER-RAT.

If we walk along the bank of a stream or a pond, we shall probably hear a splash, and looking in its direction, may see a creature diving or swimming, which creature we call a Water-rat; to the title of Rat, however, it has but little right, and ought properly to be called the "Water-vole".

On examining the banks we shall find the entrance to its domicile, being a hole in the earth, just above the water, and generally, where possible, made just under a root or a large stone. Sometimes the hole is made at some height above the water, and then it often happens that the kingfisher takes possession, and there makes its home. Whether it ejects the rat or not I cannot say, but I should think that it is quite capable of doing so. Many a time I have seen the entrance to a rat-hole decorated with a few stray fish-bones, which the rustics told me were the relics of fish brought there and eaten by the water-rat. But I soon found out that fish-bones were a sign of kingfishers, and not of rats; and so guided, found plenty of the beautiful eggs of this beautiful bird. Excepting the eggs of swallows and martins, I hardly know any so delicately beautiful as those of the kingfisher, with their slight rose tint and semi-transparent shell. But, alas! when the interior of the egg is removed, the pearly pinkness vanishes, and the shell becomes of a pure white, very pretty, but not containing a tithe of its former beauty.

The piscatorial propensities of the kingfisher are not the only cause of the slanderous reports concerning the water-vole, and its crime of killing and eating fish. The common house-rat often frequents the water-side; and, it being a great flesh-eater, certainly does catch and eat the fish.

But the water-rat is a vegetable feeder, and I believe almost, if not entirely, a vegetarian in diet. That it is so in individual cases, at all events, I can personally testify, having seen the creature engaged in eating.

In former days, when I thought the water-rats ate fish, I waged war against them, for which warfare there are great facilities at Oxford. However, a circumstance occurred which showed me that I had been wrong.

I saw a water-rat sitting on a kind of raft that had formed from a bundle of reeds which had been cut and were floating down the river. Seeing it busily at work feeding, I took it for granted that it was eating a captured fish, and shot it accordingly, stretching it dead on its reed raft.

On rowing up to the spot, I was rather surprised to find that there was no fish there; and on examining the reeds, I rather wondered at the regular grooves cut by my shot. But a closer inspection revealed a very different state of things; namely, that the poor dead rat was quite innocent of fish eating, and had been gnawing the green bark from the reeds, the grooves being the marks left by its teeth. After this I gave up rat shooting on principle.

Once, though, a rather curious circumstance occurred.

In my possession was a pet pistol, which would throw a ball with great accuracy, and I considered myself sure of an apple at sixteen paces. One day, just as I was standing by a branch of the river Cherwell, I saw a water-rat sitting on the root of a tree at the opposite side of the river, and watching me closely. The river was not above twelve or fourteen yards wide; and the rat presented so good a mark that I fired at him, and, of course, expected to see him on his back.

But there sat the rat, quite still on the stump, and about two inches below him the round hole where the bullet had struck.

As the creature seemed determined to stay there, I reloaded, and took a good aim, determined to make sure of him. As the smoke cleared away, I had the satisfaction of seeing the rat in exactly the same position, and another bullet-hole close by the former. Four shots I made at that provoking animal, and four bullets did I deposit just under him. As I was reloading for a fifth shot, the rat walked calmly down the stump, slid into the water, and departed.

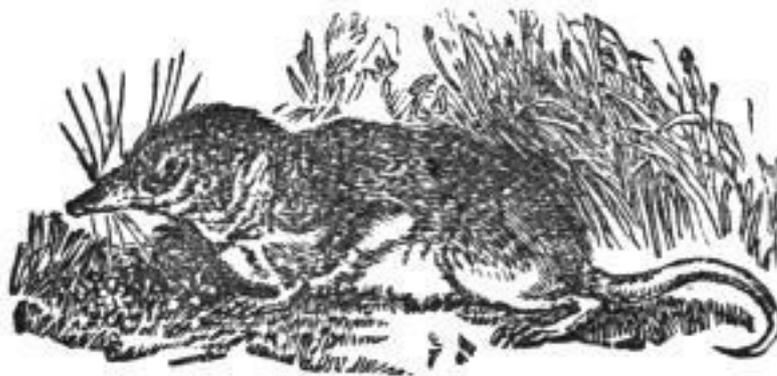
Now, whether he acted from sheer impertinence, or whether he was stunned by the violent blow beneath him, I cannot say. The latter may perhaps be the case, for squirrels are killed in North America by the shock of the bullet against the bough on which they sit, so that no hole is made in

their skins, and the fur receives no damage. Perhaps the rat was actuated by a supreme contempt for me and my shooting powers; and, as the result showed, was quite justified in his opinion.

CHAPTER II

SHREW-MOUSE—DERIVATION OF ITS NAME—SHREW-ASH— THE SPIRIT AND THE LIFE—WATER-SHREW—ITS HABITS—THE MOLE —MOLE-HILL—A PET MOLE—THE WEASEL.

I have already mentioned that the water-rat has little claim to the title of rat; and there is another creature which has even less claim to the title of mouse. This is the Shrew, or Shrew-mouse as it is generally called. This creature bears a very close relationship to the hedgehog, and is a distant connection of the mole; but with the mouse it has nothing to do.



SHREW-MOUSE.

Numbers of the shrews may be found towards the end of the autumn lying dead on the ground, from some cause at present not perfectly ascertained. If one of these dead shrews be taken, and its little mouth opened, an array of sharply-pointed teeth will be seen, something like those of the mole, very like those of the hedgehog; but not at all resembling those of the mouse.

The shrew is an insect and worm-devouring creature, for which purpose its jaws, teeth, and whole structure are framed. A rather powerful scent is diffused from the shrew; and probably on that account cats will not eat a shrew, though they will kill it eagerly.

On examining Webster's Dictionary for the meaning of the word "shrew," we find three things. Firstly, that it signifies "a peevish, brawling, turbulent, vexatious woman".

Secondly, that it signifies "a shrew-mouse".

Thirdly, that it is derived from a Saxon word, "*screawa*," a combination of letters which defies any attempt at pronunciation, except perhaps by a Russian or a Welshman.

Now, it may be a matter of wonder that the same word should be used to represent the very unpleasant female above-mentioned, and also such a pretty, harmless little creature as the shrew. The reason is shortly as follows.

In days not long gone by, the shrew was considered a most poisonous creature, as may be seen in the works of many authors. In the time of Katherine—the shrew most celebrated of all shrews—any cow or horse that was attacked with cramp, or indeed with any sudden disease, was supposed to have suffered in consequence of a shrew running over the injured part. In those days homœopathic remedies were generally resorted to; and nothing but a shrew-infected plant could cure a shrew-infected animal. And the shrew-ash, as the remedial plant was called, was prepared in the following manner.

In the stem of an ash-tree a hole was bored; into the hole a poor shrew was thrust alive, and the orifice immediately closed with a wooden plug. The animal strength of the shrew passed by

absorption into the substance of the tree, which ever after cured shrew-struck animals by the touch of a leafy branch.

The poor creature that was imprisoned, Ariel-like, in the tree, was, fortunately for itself, not gifted with Ariel's powers of life; and the orifice of the hole being closed by the plug, we may hope that its sufferings were not long, and that it perished immediately for want of air. Still, our fathers were terribly and deliberately cruel; and if the shrew's death was a merciful one, no credit is due to the authors of it.

For on looking through a curious work on natural history, of the date of 1658, where each animal is treated of medicinally, I find recipes of such terrible cruelty that I refrain from giving them, simply out of tenderness for the feelings of my reader. Torture seems to be a necessary medium of healing; and if a man suffers from "the black and melancholy cholic," or "any pain and grief in the winde-pipe or throat," he can only be eased therefrom by medicines prepared from some wretched animal in modes too horrid to narrate, or even to think of.

We are not quite so bad at the present day; but still no one with moderate feelings of compassion can pass through our streets without being greatly shocked at the wanton cruelties practised by human beings on those creatures that were intended for their use, but not as mere machines. Charitably, we may hope that such persons act from thoughtlessness, and not from deliberate cruelty; for it does really seem a new idea to many people that the inferior animals have any feelings at all.

When a horse does not go fast enough to please the driver, he flogs it on the same principle that he would turn on steam to a locomotive engine, thinking about as much of the feelings of one as of the other.

Much of the present heedlessness respecting animals is caused by the popular idea that they have no souls, and that when they die they entirely perish. Whence came that most preposterous idea? Surely not from the only source where we might expect to learn about souls—not from the Bible; for there we distinctly read of "the spirit of the sons of man"; and immediately afterwards of "the spirit of the beast," one aspiring, and the other not so. And the necessary consequence of the spirit is a life after the death of the body. Let any one wait in a frequented thoroughfare for only one short hour, and watch the sufferings of the poor brutes that pass by. Then, unless he denies the Divine Providence, he will see clearly that unless these poor creatures were compensated in another life, there is no such quality as justice.

It is owing to sayings such as these, that men come to deny an all-ruling Providence, and so become infidels. They don't examine the Scriptures for themselves, but take for granted the assertions of those who assume to have done so, and seeing the falsity of the assertion, naturally deduce therefrom the falsity of its source. If a man brings me a cup of putrid water, I naturally conclude that the source is putrid too. And when a man hears horrible and cruel doctrines, which are asserted by theologians to be the religion of the Scriptures, it is no wonder that he turns with disgust from such a religion, and tries to find rest in infidelity. In such a case, where is the fault?

All created things in which there is life, *must* live for ever. There is only one life, and all living things only live as being recipients; so that as that life is immortality, all its recipients are immortal.

If people only knew how much better an animal will work when kindly treated, they would act kindly towards it, even from so low a motive. And it is so easy to lead these animals by kindness, which will often induce an obstinate creature to obey where the whip would only confirm it in its obstinacy. All cruelty is simply diabolical, and can in no way be justified.

Supposing that the two cases could be reversed for just one hour, what a wonderful change there would be in the opinion of men; for it may be assumed that the person most given to inflicting pain and suffering is the least tolerant of it himself.

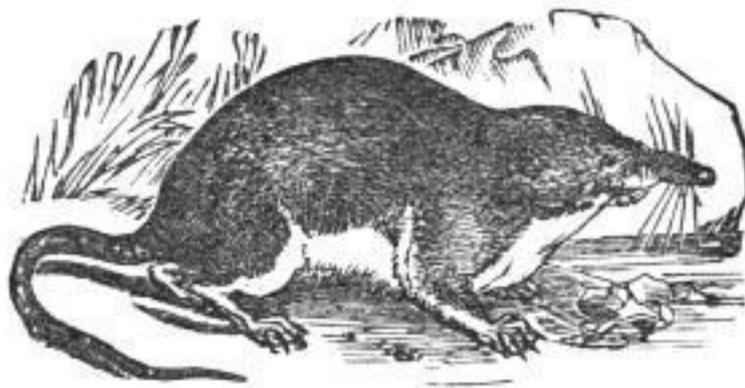
There is, perhaps, hardly one of my readers who does not know some one person who finds an exquisite delight in hurting the feelings of others by various means, such as ridicule, practical

jokes, ill-natured sayings, and so on. If so, he will be tolerably certain to find that the same person is especially thin-skinned himself, and resents the least approach to a joke of which he is the subject.

So, if the shrew were to be the afflicted individual, and the human the victim, there would be found no one so averse to the medicinal process as he who had formerly resorted to it under different circumstances.

This principle is finely carried out, in the terrible scene of Dennis, the executioner's, last hours in *Barnaby Rudge*.

These are not pleasant subjects; and we will pass on to another shrew that is generally found in the water, and called from thence the Water-shrew. It is a creature that may be found in many running streams, if the eyes are sharp enough to observe it, and is well worth examination. As it dives and runs along the bottom of the stream, it appears to be studded with tiny silver beads, or glittering pearls, on account of the air-bubbles that adhere to its fur. I have seen a whole colony of them disporting themselves in a little brooklet not two feet wide, and so had a good opportunity of inspecting them.



WATER-SHREW.

I may mention here, as has been done in one or two other works, that nothing is easier than to watch animals or birds in their state of liberty. All that is required is perfect quiet. If an observer just sits down at the foot of a tree, and does not move, the most timid creatures will come within a few yards as freely as if no human being were within a mile. If he can shroud himself in branches or grass or fern, so much the better; but quiet is the chief essential.

It is impossible to form an idea of the real beauty of animal life, without seeing it displayed in a free and unconstrained state; and more real knowledge of natural history will be gained in a single summer spent in personal examination, than by years of book study.

The characters of creatures come out so strongly; they have such quaint, comical, little ways with them; such assumptions of dignity and sudden lowering of the same; such clever little cheateries; such funny flirtations and coquetries, that I have many a time forgotten myself, and burst into a laugh that scattered my little friends for the next half-hour. It is far better than a play, and one gets the fresh air besides.

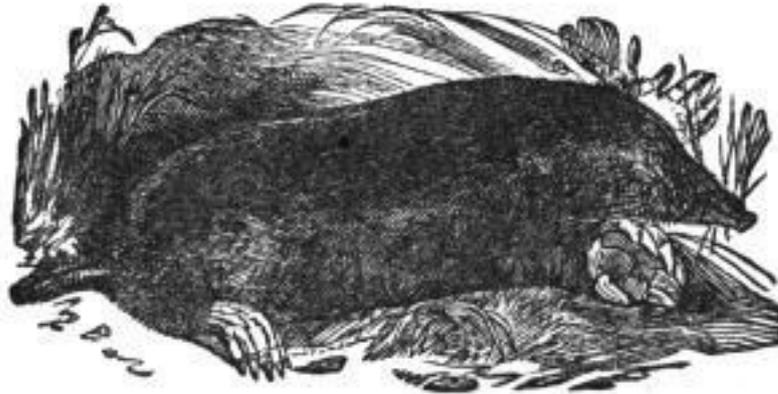
These little water-shrews are most active in their sports and their work, for which latter purpose they make regular paths along the banks. And as to their sport, they chase one another in and out of the water, making as great a splash as possible, whisk round roots, dodge behind stones, and act altogether just like a set of boys let loose from the school-room. And then—what a revulsion of feeling to see a stuffed water-shrew in a glass-case!

Now for a few words respecting the distant relation of the shrews, namely, the mole. Of its near relation, the hedgehog, there will not be time to speak.

Every one is familiar with the little heaps of earth thrown up by the mole, and called mole-hills. But as the animal itself lives almost entirely underground, comparatively little is known of it;

at all events, to the generality of those who see the hills. The mole is not often seen alive; and few who see it suspended among the branches by the professional killer would form any conception of the real character of this subterranean animal.

Meek and quiet as the mole looks, it is one of the fiercest, if not the very fiercest of animals; it labours, eats, fights, and loves as if animated by one of the furies, or rather by all of them together.



MOLE.

Intervals of profound rest alternate with savage action; and according to the accounts of country folks near Oxford, it works and rests at regular intervals of three hours each.

Useful as these creatures are as subsoil drain-makers, they sometimes increase to an inconvenient extent, and then the professed mole-catcher comes into practice, and destroys the moles with an apparatus apparently inadequate to such a purpose. But the mole is easily killed, and pressure he cannot survive; so the traps are formed for the purpose of squeezing the mole, not of smashing or strangling him.

The mole-catchers are in the habit of suspending their victims on branches, mostly of the willow or similar trees; but their object I could never make out, nor could they give me any reason, except that it was the custom.

When a mole is taken out of the ground, very little earth clings to it. There is always some on its great digging claws; but very little indeed on its fur, which is beautifully formed to prevent such accumulation. The fur of most animals “sets” in some definite direction, according to its position on the body; but that of the mole has no particular set, and is fixed almost perpendicularly on the creature’s skin, much like the pile of velvet. Indeed the mole’s fur has much the feel of silk-velvet; and so the title of the “Little gentleman in the velvet coat” is justly applied.

Those small heaps of earth that are so common in the fields, and called mole-hills, are merely the result of the mole’s travelling in search of the earth-worms, on which it principally feeds; and in their structure there is nothing remarkable.

But the great mole-hill, or mole-palace, in which the animal makes its residence, is a very different affair, and complicated in its structure. In it is found a central chamber in which the mole resides; and round this chamber there run galleries or corridors in a regular series, so as to form a kind of labyrinth, by means of which the creature may make its escape, if threatened with danger.

The accompanying cut shows a section of the mole-palace.



MOLE-HILL.

This palace is formed, if possible, under the protection of large stones, roots of trees, thick bushes, or some such situation; and is located as far as possible from paths or roads.

The food of the mole mostly consists of earth-worms, in search of which it drives these tunnels with such assiduity. The depth of the tunnel is necessarily regulated by the position of the worms; so that in warm pleasant days or evenings the run, as it is called, is within a few inches of the surface; but in winter the worms retire deeply into the unfrozen soil, and thither the mole must follow them. For this purpose it sinks perpendicular shafts, and from thence drives horizontal tunnels. It may be seen how useful this provision is when one thinks of the work that is done by the mole when providing for its own sustenance.

In the cold months, it drives deeply into the ground, thereby draining it, and preventing the roots of plants from becoming sodden by the retention of water above; and the earth is brought from below, where it was useless, and, with all its properties inexhausted by crops, is laid on the surface, there to be frozen, the particles to be forced asunder by the icy particles with which it is filled, and, after the thaw, to be vivified by the oxygen of the atmosphere, and made ready for the reception of seeds.

The worms have a mission of a similar nature; but their tunnels are smaller, and so are their hills. Every floriculturist knows how useful for certain plants are the little heaps of earth left by the worms at the entrance of their holes. And by the united exertions of moles and worms a new surface is made to the earth, even without the intervention of human labour.

Among other pets, I have had a mole—rather a strange pet, one may say; but I rather incline to pets, and have numbered among them creatures that are not generally petted—snakes, to wit—but which are very interesting creatures, notwithstanding.

Being very desirous of watching the mole in its living state, I directed a professional catcher to procure one alive, if possible; and after a while the animal was produced. At first there was some difficulty in finding a proper place in which to keep a creature so fond of digging; but the difficulty was surmounted by procuring a tub, and filling it half full of earth.

In this tub the mole was placed, and instantly sank below the surface of the earth. It was fed by placing large quantities of earth-worms or grubs in the cask; and the number of worms that this single mole devoured was quite surprising.

As far as regards actual inspection, this arrangement was useless; for the mole never would show itself, and when it was wanted for observation, it had to be dug up. But many opportunities for investigating its manners were afforded by taking it from its tub, and letting it run on a hard surface, such as a gravel-walk.

There it used to run with some speed, continually grubbing with its long and powerful snout, trying to discover a spot sufficiently soft for a tunnel. More than once it did succeed in partially burying itself, and had to be dragged out again, at the risk of personal damage. At last it contrived to slip over the side of the gravel-walk, and, finding a patch of soft mould, sank with a rapidity that seemed the effect of magic. Spades were put in requisition; but a mole is more than a match for a spade, and the pet mole was never seen more.

I was by no means pleased at the escape of my prisoner; but there was one person more displeased than myself—namely, the gardener: for he, seeing in the far perspective of the future a mole running wild in the garden, disfiguring his lawn and destroying his seed-beds, was extremely exasperated, and could by no blandishments be pacified.

However, his fears and anxieties were all in vain, as is often the case with such matters, and a mole-heap was never seen in the garden. We therefore concluded that the creature must have burrowed under the garden wall, and so have got away.

Sometimes the fur of the mole takes other tints besides that greyish black that is worn by most moles. There are varieties where the fur is of an orange colour; and I have in my own possession a skin of a light cream colour.

A perpetual thirst seems to be on the mole, for it never chooses a locality at any great distance from water; and should the season turn out too dry, and the necessary supply of water be thus diminished or cut off, the mole counteracts the drought by digging wells, until it comes to a depth at which water is found.

I should like to say something of the Hedgehog, the Stoat, and other wild animals; but I must only take one more example of the British Mammalia, the common Weasel.



WEASEL.

Gifted with a lithe and almost snake-like body, a long and yet powerful neck, and with a set of sharp teeth, this little quadruped attacks and destroys animals which are as superior to itself in size as an elephant to a dog.

Small men are generally the most pugnacious, and the same circumstance is noted of small animals. The weasel, although sufficiently discreet when discretion will serve its purpose, is ever ready to lay down that part of valour, and take up the other.

Many instances are known of attacks on man by weasels, and in every case they proved to be dangerous enemies. They can spring to a great distance, they can climb almost anything, and are as active as—weasels; for there is hardly any other animal so active: their audacity is irrepressible, and their bite is fierce and deep. So, when five or six weasels unite in one attack, it may be imagined that their opponent has no trifling combat before him ere he can claim the victory. In such attacks, they invariably direct their efforts to the throat, whether their antagonist be man or beast.

They feed upon various animals, chiefly those of the smaller sort, and especially affect mice; so that they do much service to the farmer. There is no benefit without its drawbacks; and in this case, the benefits which the weasel confers on farmers by mouse-eating is counterbalanced, in some degree, by a practice on the part of the weasel of varying its mouse diet by an occasional chicken, duckling, or young pheasant. Perhaps to the destruction of the latter creature the farmer would have no great objection.

The weasel is a notable hunter, using eyes and nose in the pursuit of its game, which it tracks through every winding, and which it seldom fails to secure. Should it lose the scent, it quarters the ground like a well-trained dog, and occasionally aids itself by sitting upright.

Very impertinent looks has the weasel when it thus sits up, and it has a way of crossing its fore-paws over its nose that is almost insulting. At least I thought so on one occasion, when I was out with a gun, ready to shoot anything—more shame to me! There was a stir at the bottom of a hedge, some thirty yards distant, and catching a glimpse of some reddish animal glancing among the leaves, I straightway fired at it.

Out ran a weasel, and, instead of trying to hide, went into the very middle of a footpath on which I was walking, sat upright, crossed its paws over its nose, and contemplated me steadily. It was a most humiliating affair.

The weasel has been tamed, and, strange to say, was found to be a delightful little animal in every way but one. The single exception was the evil odour which exudes from the weasel tribe in general, and which advances from merely being unpleasant, as in our English weasels, to the quintessence of stench as exhibited by the Skunk and the Teledu. A single individual of the latter species has been known to infect a whole village, and even to cause fainting in some persons; and the scent of the former is so powerful, that it almost instantaneously tainted the provisions that were in the vicinity, and they were all thrown away.

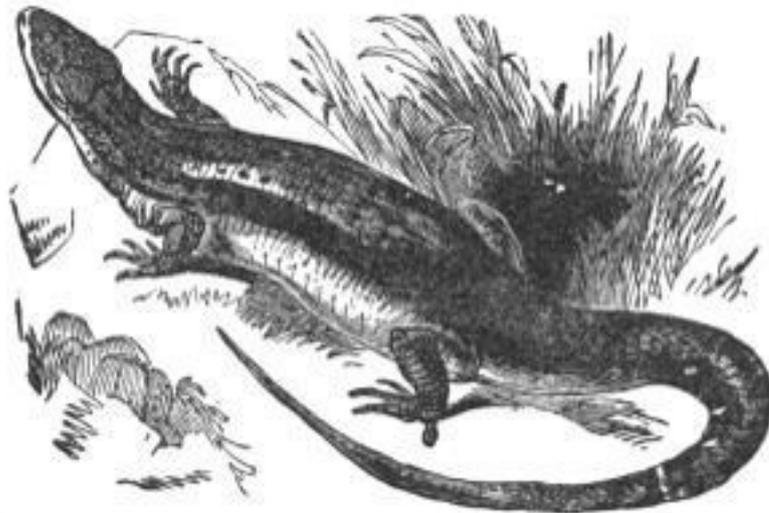
The Polecat, Ferret, Marten, and Stoat belong to the true weasels; the Otters and Gluttons claiming a near relationship.

CHAPTER III

THE COMMON LIZARD—SUDDEN CURTAILMENT—BLIND-WORM—A CURIOUS DANCE—THE VIPER—CURE FOR ITS BITE—THE COMMON SNAKE—SNAKE-HUNTING—CURIOUS PETS—SNAKE AND FROG—CASTING THE SKIN—EGGS OF THE SNAKE—HYBERNATION—THE FROG—THE TADPOLE—THE EDIBLE FROG—THE TOAD—TOADS IN FRANCE—TOAD'S TEETH—VALUE OF TOADS—MODE OF CATCHING PREY—POISON OF THE TOAD—CHANGE OF ITS SKIN.

I have already said that the birds must be entirely passed over in this little work; and therefore we make a jump down two steps at once, and come upon the Reptiles, of whom are many British examples.

The first reptile of which we shall treat is the common little Lizard that is found in profusion on heaths, or, indeed, on most uncultivated grounds.



THE COMMON LIZARD.

It is an agile and very pretty little creature, darting about among the grass and heather, and twisting about with such quickness that its capture is not always easy. Sunny banks and sunny days are its delight; and any one who wishes to see this elegant little reptile need only visit such a locality, and then he will run little risk of disappointment.

There is one peculiarity about it that is rather startling. If suddenly seized, it snaps off its tail, breaking it as if it were a stick of sealing wax, or a glass rod. Several lizards possess this curious faculty, and of one of them we shall presently treat.

The food of this lizard is composed of insects, which it catches with great agility as they settle on the leaves or the ground. If captured without injury—a feat that cannot always be accomplished, on account of the fragility of its tail—it can be kept in a fern case, and has a very pretty effect there.

One of the chief beauties of this animal is its brilliant eye; and this feature will be found equally beautiful in many of the reptiles, and especially in that generally-hated one, the toad.

In the winter-time the lizard is not seen; for it is lying fast asleep in a snug burrow under the roots of any favourable shrub, and does not show itself until the warm beams of the sun call it from its retreat.

The next British lizard that I shall mention is one that is generally considered as a snake, and a poisonous one; both ideas being equally false. It is popularly known by the name of the Blind-worm, or Slow-worm; and is not a snake at all, but a lizard of the Skink tribe, without any legs.



BLIND-WORM.

The scientific name for it is *Anguis fragilis*; and it is called fragile on account of its custom of snapping itself in two, when struck.

Only very lately, I saw an example of this strange propensity, and was the cause of it. Near Dover, there is a small wood, where vipers are reported to dwell; and as I was walking in the wood, I caught a glimpse of a snake-like body close by my foot. I struck, or rather stabbed, it with a little stick—for it had a very viperine look about it—and with success rather remarkable, for the very slight blow that the creature could have received from so insignificant a weapon, used in such a manner. The viper was clearly cut into two parts, but how or where could not be seen, owing to the thick leaves and grass that rose nearly knee-high.

On pushing among the leaves, I found with regret that the creature was only a blind-worm.

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