FREDERICK AFLALO

BIRDS IN THE CALENDAR

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Aflalo F.

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Содержание

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JANUARY
THE PHEASANT

As birds are to be considered throughout these pages from any standpoint but that of sport, much that is of interest in connection with a bird essentially the sportsman's must necessarily be omitted. At the same time, although this gorgeous creature, the chief attraction of social gatherings throughout the winter months, appeals chiefly to the men who shoot and eat it, it is not uninteresting to the naturalist with opportunities for studying its habits under conditions more favourable than those encountered when in pursuit of it with a gun.

In the first place, with the probable exception of the swan, of which something is said on a later page, the pheasant stands alone among the birds of our woodlands in its personal interest for the historian. It is not, in fact, a British bird, save by acclimatisation, at all, and is generally regarded as a legacy of the Romans. The time and manner of its introduction into Britain are, it is true, veiled in obscurity. What we know, on authentic evidence, is that the bird was officially recognised in the reign of Harold, and that it had already come under the ægis of the game laws in that of Henry I, during the first year of which the Abbot of Amesbury held a licence to kill it, though how he contrived this without a gun is not set forth in detail. Probably it was first treed with the aid of dogs and then shot with bow and arrow. The original pheasant brought over by the Romans, or by whomsoever may have been responsible for its naturalisation on English soil, was a dark-coloured bird and not the type more familiar nowadays since its frequent crosses with other species from the Far East, as well as with several ornamental types of yet more recent introduction.

In tabooing the standpoint of sport, wherever possible, from these chapters, occasional reference, where it overlaps the interests of the field-naturalist, is inevitable. Thus there are two matters in which both classes are equally concerned when considering the pheasant. The first is the real or alleged incompatibility of pheasants and foxes in the same wood. The question of rivalry between pheasant and fox, or (as I rather suspect) between those who shoot the one and hunt the other, admits of only one answer. The fox eats the pheasant; the pheasant is eaten by the fox. This not very complex proposition may read like an excerpt from a French grammar, but it is the epitome of the whole argument. It is just possible – we have no actual evidence to go on – that under such wholly natural conditions as survive nowhere in rural England the two might flourish side by side, the fox taking occasional toll of its agreeably flavoured neighbours, and the latter, we may suppose, their wits sharpened by adversity, gradually devising means of keeping out of the robber's reach. In the artificial environment of a hunting or shooting country, however, the fox will always prove too much for a bird dulled by much protection, and the only possible *modus vivendi* between those concerned must rest on a policy of give and take that deliberately ignores the facts of the case.

More interesting, on academic grounds at any rate, is the process of education noticeable in pheasants in parts of the country where they are regularly shot. Sport is a great educator. Foxes certainly, and hares probably, run the faster for being hunted. Indeed the fox appears to have acquired its pace solely as the result of the chase, since it does not figure in the Bible as a swift creature. The genuine wild pheasant in its native region, a little beyond the Caucasus, is in all probability a very different bird from its half-domesticated kinsman in Britain. I have been close to its birthplace, but never even saw a pheasant there. We are told, on what ground I have been unable to trace, that the polygamous habit in these birds is a product of artificial environment; but what is even more

likely is that the true wild pheasant of Western Asia (and not the acclimatised bird so-called in this country) trusts much less to its legs than our birds, which have long since learnt that there is safety in running. Moreover, though it probably takes wing more readily, it is doubtful whether it flies as fast as the pace, something a little short of forty miles an hour, that has been estimated as a common performance in driven birds at home.

The pheasant is in many respects a very curious bird. At the threshold of life, it exhibits, in common with some of its near relations, a precocity very unusual in its class; and the readiness with which pheasant chicks, only just out of the egg, run about and forage for themselves, is astonishing to those unused to it. Another interesting feature about pheasants is the extraordinary difference in plumage between the sexes, a gap equalled only between the blackcock and greyhen and quite unknown in the partridge, quail and grouse. Yet every now and again, as if resentful of this inequality of wardrobe, an old hen pheasant will assume male plumage, and this epicene raiment indicates barrenness. Ungallant feminists have been known to cite the case of the "mule" pheasant as pointing a moral for the females of a more highly organised animal.

The question of the pheasant's natural diet, more particularly where this is not liberally supplemented from artificial sources, brings the sportsman in conflict with the farmer, and a demagogue whose zeal occasionally outruns his discretion has even endeavoured to cite the mangold as its staple food. This, however, is political, and not natural history. Although, however, like all grain-eating birds, the pheasant is no doubt capable of inflicting appreciable damage on cultivated land, it seems to be established beyond all question that it also feeds greedily on the even more destructive larva of the crane-fly, in which case it may more than pay its footing in the fields. The foodstuff most fatal to itself is the yew leaf, for which, often with fatal results, it seems to have an unconquerable craving. The worst disease, however, from which the pheasant suffers is "gapes," caused by an accumulation of small red worms in the windpipe that all but suffocate the victim.

Reference has been made to the bird's great speed in the air, as well as to its efficiency as a runner. It remains only to add that it is also a creditable swimmer and has been seen to take to water when escaping from its enemies.

The polygamous habit has been mentioned. Ten or twelve eggs, or more, are laid in the simple nest of leaves, and this is generally placed on the ground, but occasionally in a low tree or hedge, or even in the disused nest of some other bird.

Comparatively few of the birds referred to in the following pages appeal strongly to the epicure, but the pheasant, if not, perhaps, the most esteemed of them, is at least a wholesome table bird. It should, however, always be eaten with chip potatoes and bread sauce, and not in the company of cold lettuce. Those who insist on the English method of serving it should quote the learned Freeman, who, when confronted with the Continental alternative, complained bitterly that he was not a silkworm!

FEBRUARY
THE WOODCOCK

There are many reasons why the woodcock should be prized by the winter sportsman more than any other bird in the bag. In the first place, there is its scarcity. Half a dozen to every hundred pheasants would in most parts of the country be considered a proportion at which none could grumble, and there are many days on which not one is either seen or shot. Again, there is the bird's twisting flight, which, particularly inside the covert, makes it anything but an easy target. Third and last, it is better to eat than any other of our wild birds, with the possible exception of the golden plover. Taking one consideration with another, then, it is not surprising that the first warning cry of "Woodcock over!" from the beaters should be the signal for a sharp and somewhat erratic fusillade along the line, a salvo which the beaters themselves usually honour by crouching out of harm's way, since they know from experience that even ordinarily cool and collected shots are sometimes apt to be fired with a sudden zeal to shoot the little bird, which may cost one of them his eyesight. According to the poet, and so no doubt they do at meal-time after sunset, but we are more used to flushing them amid dry bracken or in the course of some frozen ditch. Quite apart, however, from its exhilarating effect on the sportsman, the bird has quieter interests for the naturalist, since in its food, its breeding habits, its travels, and its appearance it combines more peculiarities than perhaps any other bird, certainly than any other of the sportsman's birds, in these islands. It is not, legally speaking, a game bird and was not included in the Act of 1824, but a game licence is required for shooting it, and it enjoys since 1880 the protection accorded to other wild birds. This is excellent, so far as it goes, but it ought to be protected during the same period as the pheasant, particularly now that it is once more established as a resident species all over Britain and Ireland.

"Lonely woodcocks haunt the watery glade;"

This new epoch in the history of its adventures in these islands is the work of the Wild Birds' Protection Acts. In olden times, when half of Britain was under forest, and when guns were not yet invented that could "shoot flying," woodcocks must have been much more plentiful than they are to-day. In those times the bird was taken on the ground in springes or, when "roding" in the mating season, in nets, known as "shots," that were hung between the trees. When the forest area receded, the resident birds must have dwindled to the verge of extinction, for on more than one occasion we find even a seasoned sportsman like Colonel Hawker worked up to a rare pitch of excitement after shooting woodcock in a part of Hampshire where in our day these birds breed regularly. Thanks, however, to the protection afforded by the law, there is once again probably no county in England in which woodcocks do not nest.

At the same time, it is as an autumn visitor that, with the first of the east wind in October or November, we look for this untiring little traveller from the Continent. Some people are of opinion that since it has extended its residential range fewer come oversea to swell the numbers, but the arrivals are in some years considerable, and if a stricter watch were kept on unlicensed gunners along the foreshore of East Anglia, very much larger numbers would find their way westwards instead of to Leadenhall. As it is, the wanderers arrive, not necessarily, as has been freely asserted, in poor condition, but always tired out by their journey, and numbers are secured before they have time to recover their strength. Yet those which do recover fly right across England, some continuing the journey to Ireland, and stragglers even, with help no doubt from easterly gales, having been known to reach America.

The woodcock is interesting as a parent because it is one of the very few birds that carry their young from place to place, and the only British bird that transports them clasped between her legs. A few others, like the swans and grebes, bear the young ones on the back, but the woodcock's method is unique. Scopoli first drew attention to his own version of the habit in the words "*pullos rostro portat*," and it was old Gilbert White who, with his usual eye to the practical, doubted whether so long and slender a bill could be turned to such a purpose. More recent observation has confirmed White's objection and has established the fact of the woodcock holding the young one between her thighs, the beak being apparently used to steady her burden. Whether the little ones are habitually carried about in this fashion, or merely on occasion of danger, is not known, and indeed the bird's preference for activity in the dusk has invested accurate observation of its habits with some difficulty. Among well-known sportsmen who were actually so fortunate as to have witnessed this interesting performance, passing mention may be made of the late Duke of Beaufort, the Hon. Grantley Berkeley, and Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey.

Reference has already been made to the now obsolete use of nets for the capture of these birds when "roding." The cock-shuts, as they were called, were spread so as to do their work after sundown, and this is the meaning of Shakespeare's allusion to "cock-shut time." This "roding" is a curious performance on the part of the males only, and it bears some analogy to the "drumming" of snipe. It is accompanied indeed by the same vibrating noise, which may be produced from the throat as well, but is more probably made only by the beating of the wings. There appears to be some divergence of opinion as to its origin in both birds, though in that of the snipe such sound authorities as Messrs. Abel Chapman and Harting are convinced that it proceeds from the quivering of the primaries, as the large quill-feathers of the wings are called. Other naturalists, however, have preferred to associate it with the spreading tail-feathers. Whether these eccentric gymnastics are performed as displays, with a view to impressing admiring females, or whether they are merely the result of excitement at the pairing season cannot be determined. It is safe to assume that they aim at one or other of these objects, and further no one can go with any certainty. The word "roding" is spelt "roading" by Newton, who thus gives the preference to the Anglo-Saxon description of the aërial tracks followed by the bird, over the alternative derivation from the French "roder," which means to wander. The flight is at any rate wholly different from that to which the sportsman is accustomed when one of these birds is flushed in covert. In the latter case, either instinct or experience seems to have taught it extraordinary tricks of zigzag manœuvring that not seldom save its life from a long line of over-anxious guns; though out in the open, where it generally flies in a straight line for the nearest covert, few birds of its size are easier to bring down. Fortunately, we do not in England shoot the bird in springtime, the season of "roding," but the practice is in vogue in the evening twilight in every Continental country, and large bags are made in this fashion.

In its hungry moments the woodcock, like the snipe, has at once the advantages and handicap of so long a beak. On hard ground, in a long spell of either drought or frost, it must come within measurable distance of starvation, for its only manner of procuring its food in normal surroundings is to thrust its bill deep into the soft mud in search of earthworms. The bird does not, it is true, as was once commonly believed, live by suction, or, as the Irish peasants say in some parts, on water, but such a mistake might well be excused in anyone who had watched the bird's manner of digging for its food in the ooze. The long bill is exceedingly sensitive at the tip, and in all probability, by the aid of a tactile sense more highly developed than any other in our acquaintance, this organ conveys to its owner the whereabouts of worms wriggling silently down out of harm's way. On first reaching Britain, the woodcock remains for a few days on the seashore to recover from its crossing, and at this time of rest it trips over the wet sand, generally in the gloaming, and picks up shrimps and such other soft food as is uncovered between tidal marks. It is not among the easiest of birds to keep for any length of time in captivity, but if due attention be paid to its somewhat difficult requirements in the way of suitable food, success is not unattainable. On the whole, bread and milk has been found the

best artificial substitute for its natural diet. With the *kiwi* of New Zealand, a bird not even distantly related to the woodcock, and a cousin rather of the ostrich, but equipped with much the same kind of bill as the subject of these remarks, an even closer imitation of the natural food has been found possible in menageries. The bill of the *kiwi*, which has the nostrils close to the tip, is even more sensitive than that of the woodcock and is employed in very similar fashion. At Regent's Park the keeper supplies the bird with fresh worms so long as the ground is soft enough for spade-work. They are left in a pan, and the *kiwi* eats them during the night. In winter, however, when worms are not only hard to come by in sufficient quantity but also frost-bitten and in poor condition, an efficient substitute is found in shredded fillet steak, which, whether it accepts it for worms or not, the New Zealander devours with the same relish.

When a woodcock lies motionless among dead leaves, it is one of the most striking illustrations of protective colouring to be found anywhere. Time and again the sportsman all but treads on one, which is betrayed only by its large bright eye. There are men who, in their eagerness to add it to the bag, do not hesitate in such circumstances to shoot a woodcock on the ground, but a man so fond of ground game should certainly be refused a game licence and should be allowed to shoot nothing but rabbits.

MARCH
THE WOODPIGEON

The woodpigeon is many things to many men. To the farmer, who has some claim to priority of verdict, it is a curse, even as the rabbit in Australia, the lemming in Norway, or the locust in Algeria. The tiller of the soil, whose business brings him in open competition with the natural appetites of such voracious birds, beasts, or insects, regards his rivals from a standpoint which has no room for sentiment; and the woodpigeons are to our farmers, particularly in the well-wooded districts of the West Country, even as Carthage was to Cato the Censor, something to be destroyed.

It is this attitude of the farmer which makes the woodpigeon pre-eminently the bird of February. All through the shooting season just ended, a high pigeon has proved an irresistible temptation to the guns, whether cleaving the sky above the tree-tops, doubling behind a broad elm, or suddenly swinging out of a gaunt fir. Yet it is in February, when other shooting is at an end and the coverts no longer echo the fusillade of the past four months, that the farmers, furious at the sight of green root-crops grazed as close as by sheep and of young clover dug up over every acre of their tilling, welcome the co-operation of sportsmen glad to use up the balance of their cartridges in organised pigeon battues. These gatherings have, during the past five years, become an annual function in parts of Devonshire and the neighbouring counties, and if the bag is somewhat small in proportion to the guns engaged, a wholesome spirit of sport informs those who take part, and there is a curiously utilitarian atmosphere about the proceedings. Everyone seems conscious that, in place of the usual idle pleasure of the covert-side or among the turnips, he is out for a purpose, not merely killing birds that have been reared to make his holiday, but actually helping the farmers in their fight against Nature. As, moreover, recent scares of an epidemic not unlike diphtheria have precluded the use of the birds for table purposes, the powder is burnt with no thought of the pot.

The usual plan is to divide the guns in small parties and to post these in neighbouring plantations or lining hedges overlooking these spinneys. At a given signal the firing commences and is kept up for several hours, a number of the marauders being killed and the rest so harried that many of them must leave the neighbourhood, only to find a similar warm welcome across the border. Some such concerted attack has of late years been rendered necessary by the great increase in the winter invasion from overseas. It is probable that, as most writers on the subject insist, the wanderings of these birds are for the most part restricted to these islands and are mere food forays, like those which cause locusts to desert a district that they have stripped bare for pastures new. At the same time, it seems to be beyond all doubt the fact that huge flocks of woodpigeons reach our shores annually from Scandinavia, and their inroads have had such serious results that it is only by joint action that their numbers can be kept under. For such work February is obviously the month, not only because most of their damage to the growing crops and seeds is accomplished at this season, but also because large numbers of gunners, no longer able to shoot game, are thus at the disposal of the farmers and only too glad to prolong their shooting for a few weeks to such good purpose.

Many birds are greedy. The cormorant has a higher reputation of the sort to live up to than even the hog, and some of the hornbills, though less familiar, are endowed with Gargantuan appetites. Yet the ringdove could probably vie with any of them. Mr. Harting mentions having found in the crop of one of these birds thirty-three acorns and forty-four beech-nuts, while no fewer than 139 of the latter were taken, together with other food remains, from another. It is no uncommon experience to see the crop of a woodpigeon that is brought down from a great height burst, on reaching the earth, with a report like that of a pistol, and scatter its undigested contents broadcast. Little wonder then, that the farmers welcome the slaughter of so formidable a competitor! It is one of their biggest customers, and pays nothing for their produce. One told me, not long ago, that the woodpigeons had got at a

little patch of young rape, only a few acres in all, which had been uncovered by the drifting snow, and had laid it as bare as if the earth had never been planted. Seeing what hearty meals the woodpigeon makes, it is not surprising that it should sometimes throw up pellets of undigested material. This is not, however, a regular habit, as in the case of hawks and owls, and is rather, perhaps, the result of some abnormally irritating food.

Pigeons digest their food with the aid of a secretion in the crop, and it is on this soft material, popularly known as "pigeons' milk," that they feed their nestlings. This method suggests analogy to that of the petrels, which rear their young on fish-oil partly digested after the same fashion. Indeed, all the pigeons are devoted parents. Though the majority build only a very pretentious platform of sticks for the two eggs, they sit very close and feed the young ones untiringly. Some of the pigeons of Australia, indeed, go even further. Not only do they build a much more substantial nest of leafy twigs, but the male bird actually sits throughout the day, such paternal sense of duty being all the more remarkable from the fact that these pigeons of the Antipodes usually lay but a single egg. Australia, with the neighbouring islands, must be a perfect paradise for pigeons, since about half of the species known to science occur in that region only. The wonga-wonga and bronze-wing and great fruit-pigeons are, like the "bald-pates" of Jamaica, all favourite birds with sportsmen, and some of the birds are far more brightly coloured than ours. It is, however, noticeable that even the gayest Queensland species, with wings shot with every prismatic hue, are dull-looking birds seen from above, and the late Dr. A. R. Wallace regarded this as affording protection against keen-eyed hawks on the forage. His ingenious theory receives support from the well-known fact that in many of the islands, where pigeons are even more plentiful, but where also hawks are few, the former wear bright clothes on their back as well.

The woodpigeon has many names in rural England. That by which it is referred to in the foregoing notes is not, perhaps, the most satisfactory, since, with the possible exception of the smaller stock-dove, which lays its eggs in rabbit burrows, and the rock-dove, which nests in the cliffs, all the members of the family need trees, if only to roost and nest in. A more descriptive name is that of ringdove, easily explained by the white collar, but the bird is also known as cushat, queest, or even culver. The last-named, however, which will be familiar to readers of Tennyson, probably alludes specifically to the rock-dove, as it undoubtedly gave its name to Culver Cliff, a prominent landmark in the Isle of Wight, where these birds have at all times been sparingly in evidence.

The ringdove occasionally rears a nestling in captivity, but it does not seem, at any time of life, to prove a very attractive pet. White found it strangely ferocious, and another writer describes it as listless and uninteresting. The only notable success on record is that scored by St. John, who set some of the eggs under a tame pigeon and secured one survivor that appears to have grown quite tame, but was, unfortunately, eaten by a hawk. At any rate, it did its kind good service by enlisting on their side the pen of the most ardent apologist they have ever had. Indeed, St. John did not hesitate to rate the farmers soundly for persecuting the bird in wilful ignorance of its unpaid services in clearing their ground of noxious weeds. Yet, however true his eloquent plea may have been in respect of his native Lothian, there would be some difficulty in persuading South Country agriculturists of the woodpigeon's hidden virtues. To those, however, who do not sow that they may reap, the subject of these remarks has irresistible charm. There is doubtless monotony in its cooing, yet, heard in a still plantation of firs, with no other sound than perhaps the distant call of a shepherd or barking of a farm dog, it is a music singularly in harmony with the peaceful scene. The arrowy flight of these birds when they come in from the fields at sundown and fall like rushing waters on the tree-tops is an even more memorable sound. To the sportsman, above all, the woodpigeon shows itself a splendid bird of freedom, more cunning than any hand-reared game bird, swifter on the wing than any other purely wild bird, a welcome addition to the bag because it is hard to shoot in the open, and because in life it was a sore trial to a class already harassed with their share of this life's troubles.

APRIL
BIRDS IN THE HIGH HALL GARDEN

All March the rooks were busy in the swaying elms, but it is these softer evenings of April, when the first young leaves are beginning to frame the finished nests, and the boisterous winds of last month no longer drown the babble of the tree-top parliament at the still hour when farm labourers are homing from the fields, that the rooks peculiarly strike their own note in the country scene. There is no good reason to confuse these curious and interesting fowl with any other of the crow family. Collectively they may be recognised by their love of fellowship, for none are more sociable than they. Individually the rook is stamped unmistakably by the bald patch on the face, where the feathers have come away round the base of the beak. The most generally accepted explanation of this disfigurement is the rook's habit of thrusting its bill deep in the earth in search of its daily food. This, on the face of it, looks like a reasonable explanation, but it should be borne in mind that not only do some individual rooks retain through life the feathers normally missing, but that several of the rook's cousins dip into Nature's larder in the same fashion without suffering any such loss. However, the featherless patch on the rook's cheeks suffices, whatever its cause, as a mark by which to recognise the bird living or dead.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.