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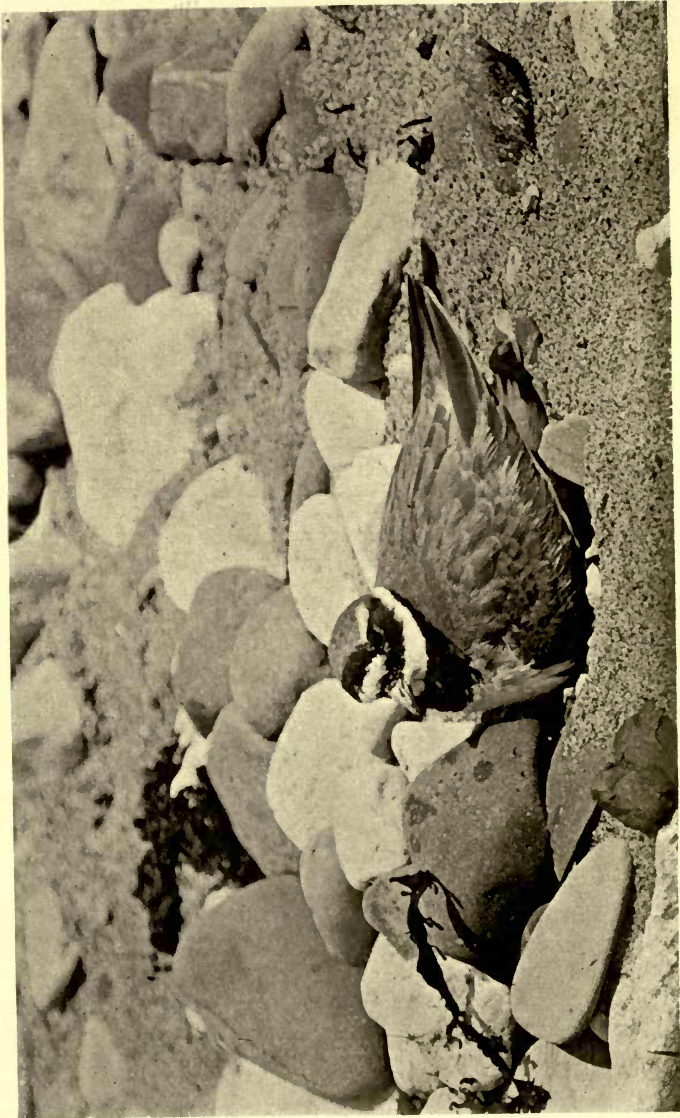


BIRDS BY LAND AND SEA

*"Men that undertake only one district are much more likely to advance natural knowledge than those that grasp at more than they can possibly be acquainted with. Every kingdom, every province, should have its own monographer."*—GILBERT WHITE.











RINGED PLOVER ON NEST

# BIRDS BY LAND & SEA

THE RECORD OF A YEAR'S WORK  
WITH FIELD-GLASS AND CAMERA  
BY JOHN MACLAIR BORASTON  
ILLUSTRATED BY PHOTOGRAPHS  
TAKEN DIRECT FROM NATURE  
BY THE AUTHOR                

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## P R E F A C E

**T**HIS book contains the gist of almost daily observation of birds occurring in Stretford and the surrounding district, and covers a period from September, 1902, until September, 1903.

The village of Stretford lies at a distance of about four miles south-west from Manchester, on the northern bank of the river Mersey, which there divides the counties of Lancashire and Cheshire. The country for miles around is low and flat, consisting mainly of grazing fields and land under cultivation. I have extended the area of observation by occasional excursions over the Cheshire border, and have embodied in the narrative an account of my experiences during a summer holiday spent in the island of Anglesey.

It seemed appropriate to let the record open at one of the two critical periods in bird life—March or September—those times at which the migrants

## Preface

come to us or depart, rather than to follow the civil calendar, which has no true application to the course of Nature.

I think that the fact of his being my son (*patre vagabundo filius vagabundior*) should not deter me from here making acknowledgment of the yeoman service rendered by a very youthful colleague who shares with me a pretty heavy pack when we take the road together.

JOHN MACLAIR BORASTON.

STRETFORD,

*September, 1903.*

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# BIRDS BY LAND & SEA

SEPTEMBER

**K**NOWLEDGE, after all, is a wonder-child ; and, though it have Reason for its father and Fact for its mother, in its infancy the parental image is not readily discernible.

The knowledge of birds, as of other things, is of two kinds—the right kind, which is profitable ; the other, which is amusing.

I call well to mind the particular September afternoon when, having become so fascinated by a book upon birds' eggs I had purchased for my small son that I was tempted seriously to retain it for myself, I set out for the first time to observe birds, and, with small regard for the advanced season of the year, haply to light upon some of the eggs whose peculiarities I had been conning. I had often "seen" birds, and could have distinguished a hawk from a gosling ; but the fact that I was then

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undertaking a four-mile walk with the avowed intention of "observing" birds at the end of it, cast upon common objects that glamour in which "things are not what they seem."

It is an open question if we were to be regarded as fortunate in having lighted first upon a gold-crest, a bird at once somewhat rare in our parts, and easily recognizable ; since, the elation we experienced in watching the tiny creature with the golden slash along its crest, and the satisfaction we felt at our ability to identify it, may have unfitted us for equally reliable observation in the sequel.

Be that as it may, we continued to advance by the side of a bramble-covered ditch in which the gold-crest had flitted to and fro beneath our eyes, until we came to a row of high beeches lining the farther side of the ditch, with a farmstead in view a furlong ahead of us.

"Look !" I exclaimed suddenly ; for, at the foot of one of the trees, the dried grass had been pressed down to form a circular ground-nest a foot in diameter, and in the centre of it, exposed to the view of the whole countryside, lay one great cream-coloured egg.

I am afraid that at that time we should have considered such a prize legitimate scientific plunder in the closest preserves, and in a moment we had leaped the fence, and appropriated it as the first specimen for a prospective cabinet.

As we were crossing the ditch to return, we

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observed a similar egg, but this time pure white, lying in an excavation that had been screened by the overhanging edge of the ditch. This we likewise secured, holding it to be another variety.

We bore those eggs carefully home, with much speculation by the way as to the nature of the bird which made a nest a foot across at the base of trees standing in open grass fields, and which, upon occasion, was capable of excavating an earthy nest equally large, depositing therein an egg of commensurate bulk.

Upon our reaching home, the verdict of the kitchen was that those eggs were the production of the ordinary domestic hen. There is not much ornithology in a kitchen.

After searching carefully through the illustrations and descriptions of the eggs of the larger species of wild fowl, it became evident that our specimens were either too rare or too common to be included among the eggs of regular British breeding birds. It then required only a little time to enable the latter view to mature, and we relinquished them, with not a little heartburning, to the prosaic offices of the kitchen.

Having eaten those eggs, we are in a position to affirm that they were freshly laid eggs of the domestic hen, which, although also a reliable observation, is probably of no great ornithological interest.

We have seen many birds and nests and eggs

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since those days, but the glory of that September afternoon, when we first went out to "observe," and returned, each with a hen's egg in his pocket, will not come again.

Some years elapsed between the experience recounted above and the time when I resolved to commit to writing the record of a year's doings among the birds of my own district, and of such as I might come across in short excursions into the adjacent country, or during holidays spent farther afield.

It was then the last week of September, 1902—the second great crisis of the year in bird-world.

Looked at mentally, the distribution of bird-life presents itself as a great permanent stream of birds encircling the globe between the Polar regions and the equator—a stream, however, which flows across rather than along.

Already in August the first waves of the migratory tide rippled southward, giving earnest of a movement destined to break up the calm full flood of summer life. Daily and nightly, with increasing frequency and volume, one living wave followed another, and we, who live within the northern bank, as it were, of this great bird-stream, found ourselves left among the shallows, from which the outward-flowing tide of bird-life was drawing off.

Although prepared in some measure by the temporary retirement of numbers of the birds during the moulting season for their subsequent



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total withdrawal, any one accustomed to life in the open could not fail to be struck with a deeper sense of silence and solitude as the month of September drew toward its close. True, the cuckoo was gone long since, and forgotten. But, then, the cuckoo is a law to himself, and has special dispensation in more matters than early going. It seemed, however, but a matter of days since the swift was darting about like the runaway head of an enchanted pickaxe, and thousands of swallows and martins clustered on the shallows by the open waters. But the disappearance of the swift on the 3rd September struck the note of the month. I had noticed that the bird was absent from his usual haunt by the river on the 29th August—a gusty, inclement day, with rain. As it reappeared on the 3rd September in its usual place, it had evidently been under shelter during the boisterous last days of August. This, however, was its last appearance, and we could only wish him a safe voyage, a healthy moult, and a punctual return.

In the older classification the swift was bracketed with swallows and martins ; but there were several points distinguishing it from those birds. It arrives later, and departs sooner than any of them ; it lays two eggs only, and has but one brood in a season, whereas they lay from four to six eggs, and have two broods. But structural differences have caused it to be transferred to the group of birds including the cuckoo, woodpecker, night-jar, and kingfisher. Nevertheless, it is evident that there exists a true

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affinity between the swift and the swallow tribe apart from their superficial resemblance, a fact to which the birds themselves give countenance by frequently consorting together on the wing, so that it is not uncommon to observe swift, swallow, house and sand-martins all hawking together. Of these birds—all fast fliers—the swift ranks first in this respect, achieving the greatest speed by the least exertion. This he no doubt owes to the great length of his wings, which, although narrow, are also very firm and strong.

The swift is in general a higher flier than either swallows or martins, and it has been thought that its earlier retiral was due to a deficiency of such insects as swifts are accustomed to find in the higher regions of the air ; but I am persuaded that this is not the only cause, for, if the swift is abroad on boisterous days, it will hawk with the swallows and martins low down to the river, which, being protected by elevated banks, serves at such times to draw all these birds under shelter and to a convenient focus.

The swift left us upon the first lull of strong south-west winds, and the day was one of bright sunshine, and notable for the immense number of insects in the air. Columns of gnats swayed beside, or above, most of the trees in the meadows, and many of these contained such multitudes as to appear like columns of smoke, and to be readily visible at a great distance.

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Stopping upon a small bridge which crosses a brook at its entrance into the river Mersey, I was between two immense columns of these gnats, which reached from about three to fifteen feet above the water. The columns were roughly cylindrical, with a diameter of two feet or thereabout, and the gnats themselves about half an inch distant from one another. The increased thickness of the column at the centre gave it the appearance of an inner denser column, which more clearly showed the serpentine undulation of the whole. Every gnat's head pointed in the same direction—towards the sun, then about to set. At one moment the whole column was rigid ; the next a number of the insects shot forward and then backward, always keeping their heads towards the sun, the rapid movements and multitudinous lines of flight leaving upon the deceived eye the impression of a suddenly woven black network. At the slightest breath of wind the column sank like a solid thing between the banks ; upon its cessation it rose again with a simultaneous movement of its numberless parts.

As interesting as the simultaneous uniformity of movement were the sounds emitted by these great hosts of gnats. One of them was a continuous rustle as of millions of tiny straws shaken together ; the other a high metallic note of a fixed and common pitch—if the ear may be trusted to discern pitch in sounds so acute. It required little imagination to elevate these two sounds—which a small noise, as

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we conceive of noise, would have drowned—into the mighty volume of sound such as it probably seemed to the gnats themselves. A choral utterance upon such a scale can never have been heard among men, for, upon a rough computation, each of these columns would contain six hundred thousand performers, and similar columns could be observed wherever one looked.

Upon such a day the swift left us, and, as if to give assurance that there was no scarcity aloft, the small sand-martins left the river, and, mounting to a great height, continued to hawk about there for the remainder of the day. It is probable that the common gnat is not to the liking of the swallow tribe, for, in spite of their numbers, they seemed to be left undisturbed by the birds.

We have no great number of house-martins in our neighbourhood, and I had to go to Ashley to find a colony of any importance. There, beneath both eaves and inside the roof of an old wooden hayshed, is a colony of about a hundred and fifty nests. They are practically continuous—often contiguous—along both eaves, and in some places a second nest has been affixed beneath the one adjoining the eaves. “I never washes ’em out. Let ’em ’ave their bit o’ pleasure like anybody else,” an old hand on the farm said to me; and this, no doubt, is the reason why the birds flock back every spring to the old shed.

What a tumult there is when they first arrive! What a mad chasing of one another with wild cries

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about the old home ! But the work of building or repairing soon claims their attention. Both birds work, each in turn bringing a little pat of mud and fixing it in position by the pressure of its chin. The mud shell thus formed is affixed to the upright, planed surface of the joist supporting the eaves, and is rounded to a rough quarter-sphere, a semicircular opening being left at the top where the shell adjoins the eaves. This opening is, as a rule, at the front of the nest ; but I once found a nest where, owing to lack of depth in the eaves, a front opening would have admitted rain to the nest : the bird therefore wisely constructed its nest with the opening in the corner at the back where the wall and eaves met. It is probably too late to inquire whence man derived his custom of mixing hair with his mortar ; the martins also have this habit. The inside of the nest is lined with fine grass and feathers, and the martin never refuses a feather at any time during the season.

From the time when the hen bird begins to sit, the everlasting coming and going of the birds from morning till evening continues ; first, when the males feed the nest-ridden hens ; and then, when the latter feed their young. When these young ones appear at the opening of the nest — little black-headed creatures with white bibs—waiting for supplies, or poking their heads and breasts out to get a view of the wonderful world of the farmyard below, the colony enters upon its most interesting phase. Every second

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or two an old bird dashes up with an excited "*Pri ! pri !*" and as she approaches the young recognize her, and respond with a chorus of "*Ick-pri's !*" Hanging on to the edge of the nest, she delivers her catch of flies, but with such haste that it is to be feared that the selfish little beggar who manages to keep possession of the doorway, so as almost to block it with his obtrusive person, gets the lion's share of the provision. The young of the house-martin, like the young of the swallow, are evidently taught that no good bird must foul his nest, even though it be a mud one, and from time to time a small tail appears over the rim of the orifice as the chick reverses his position in order to comply with this first rule of domestic propriety. Any slips are remedied by the parent bird, who carries in her bill the little membranous sac, and drops it and its contents at some distance from the nest.

During September second broods occupy the nests, and even during October young ones may be seen waiting impatiently for the supplies which now come more rarely, being harder to find in these late days, when each night nips the land with the tightening pinch of approaching winter. In early October these late broods may be seen exercising with the old birds in the air preparatory to their departure ; and then some day—it was the 19th October in 1902—they no longer appear. Nevertheless, even at that moment there were young birds in the nests.

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Although I have watched these late broods in order to witness, if possible, the very act of desertion, I do not know that I have ever been witness to it. There would in all probability be the excited evolutions of the old bird with which she is wont to encourage the first flight of the young, and, in addition, an urgency which the latter would fail to comprehend. Feeling themselves unable to respond to it, they would continue to watch her unmoved from their places in the nest. I have wondered that the old bird should not at such times—as at other times she is apt enough to do—enter the nest and turn them out on the chance of their flying. But such does not appear to be her habit. In the end she abandons them, and throughout that fatal day the young probably continue to watch for the mother who will never return, until, weak and hungry, they creep back into the nest, for the first time without a sheltering wing to cover them from the chill night air. It is well that the birds have short memories, for, when they return in the following spring, they have been known to draw out the shrivelled bodies of the young they forsook in the preceding autumn, and having cleared the nest of these unremembered children, set about preparing it for the advent of the more fortunate spring brood.

Seeing that this colony produces certainly upwards of a thousand new birds each year, and that the birds return to the site year after year, it seems a matter for some surprise that the number of the nests

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remains more or less stationary. The enormous wastage of life this suggests would be more than offset by the increase in numbers if only a quarter of the young ones of one season returned to add two broods to the colony in the following one.

During September the swallows are much increased in numbers by the advent of birds bred in the surrounding country, which now come to fly up and down the river in company with the host of sand-martins.

Of the latter species we have always a goodly number, but towards the close of the season several thousands frequent the river Mersey in our neighbourhood. Where the banks have been sapped and fallen in, leaving soft earthy or sand walls at the side of the river, this little mouse-coloured martin makes its nest. The colonies individually do not comprise many nests, but they occur frequently along the banks. There is no need to search for them, because the birds belonging to any particular colony have a certain beat on the river before it, and by their presence indicate the site. The nesting-holes are about four feet deep, being bored horizontally into the bank at about ten feet above the average level of the water. At the end of the passage is a wider chamber, in which the nest—a bedding of fine grass lined with feathers—is placed. I have found these tunnels bored in converging lines so as to meet in a common chamber at the end; but probably the birds themselves were not a little



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surprised at this result when they met inside the earth.

The bank or sand-martin is the one untamed spirit of the swallow tribe. Whilst swift and house-martin at times revert to what must once have been their universal habit of nesting on the high crags, the little sand-martin has never left the state of nature, and only avails himself unconsciously of man's handiwork when he tunnels his nesting-hole into the side of some sand-pit or railway embankment.

At the end of the season in 1902, these birds used to congregate to roost upon a line of willows overhanging a sheet of water near the river, clustering upon the slender wands until they bent beneath their weight. At sundown the willows were literally alive with this fluttering, twittering host, full of excitement and commotion. In September, 1903, the water had been drained off and the willows cut down, and some time before sunset the birds used to get up high into the sky and move round in wide arcs, suddenly condensing and as suddenly dispersing, until before sunset they had drawn off in such a manner as scarcely to afford an indication of the direction in which they went. I failed to find their roosting-place, but judging from the general movement of the birds coming in from the more distant reaches of the river, and the direction in which they headed when last seen, I inferred that it lay somewhere west of Stretford, and at no great distance.

## Birds by Land and Sea

On the 10th September sudden gales and rains caused the river to rise about fifteen feet in one night, and when I went out early the following morning I found the water in places pouring over the high embankment into the meadows. Strangest sight of all was the companies of sand-martins flying on their usual beats, and with their usual cheerful note, at the edge of the swollen river, picking from the water the insects which had been washed up from the submerged grassy banks. Although their nesting-holes were now some five or six feet beneath the surface of the water, the birds still recognized the old landmarks, and continued to beat up and down on the former lines, apparently unconscious of the catastrophe which had befallen them. However, they probably suffered no great loss by the inundation, for I had noticed that for some time previously they no longer entered their nesting-holes. Cold days and nights succeeding, the birds drew off rapidly, the greater portion of them leaving on the 14th September, and only a few remaining until the morning of the 15th. By noon of that day these, too, had disappeared, so that punctually at the middle of September the sand-martin left us.

Although what is known of the migration of birds is meagre enough as compared with what remains to be learned, there are few chapters in the history of bird science which are more engaging in the retrospect than the gradual formation and confirmation of the theory that certain species of birds

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annually come and go with the regularity of the equinoxes themselves. In the light of more recently acquired knowledge, one can trace with sympathetic interest and some amusement the doubtful steps of those who every autumn asked with the perplexity of the child in the song, "Oh, where and oh where are my pretty swallows gone?"

It was natural that the annual disappearance and reappearance of the swallow tribe should be fixed upon as the crux in the attempt to solve the question of migration generally; for, while these birds are with us, there is no other which is more in evidence; and when they depart, the gap they create is too obvious to be overlooked. Their intimate association with man, their habit of swarming in conspicuous places just before migration, and of returning in the spring in vast congregations, as well as the suddenness of their arrival and departure, caused these movements to be more remarked than would have been the case in birds of less gregarious habit.

The retrospect is not without instruction or the satisfaction to be derived from the reflection that in the end wisdom is justified of her children.

The tradition—of hoary antiquity even in Dr. Johnson's days—that swallows hibernated under water found dogmatic finality in that learned gentleman's dictum: "Swallows certainly sleep all the winter. A number of them conglobulate together by flying round and round, and then all in a heap

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throw themselves under water, and lie in the bed of the river"—an instance of the fallibility of literary judgments in matters scientific.

The wisdom which comes after the event enables one to appreciate the delightfully naïve spirit in which another Mr. Johnson, writing from Brignall on the 7th May, 1686, to John Ray, the naturalist, states: "On the back Side you have the Description of a new *English Bird*. It agrees in material Points with your *Garrulus Bohemicus*; and therefore I imagine it to be of that Sort, for some Birds vary much in Colour. They came near us in great Flocks, like *Field-Fares*, and fed upon *Haws*, as they do. I cannot but think that the Wars in those Parts have frightened them from thence, and brought them hither this Winter (which with us was above measure plentiful in *Haws*), for certainly they are not Natives. And now 'tis in my Thoughts, I would intreat you, at your best Leisure, to let me know if you can tell any thing concerning the *Birds of Passage*, whither they go, when they leave us? If it be granted the *Swallow* Kind, and such small Birds, do hide themselves in Rocks and Trees, yet *Storks*, *Soland-Geese*, and Birds of great Size cannot possibly do so. The *Moon* is too far a Journey, and a New World in the South temperate Zone methinks they can hardly reach, seeing *Wild-Geese* from *Ireland*, and *Wood-Cocks* from *Norway*, come often so tired to us; and yet how they should 'scape the eyes of so many diligent Enquirers, both by Sea and Land,

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especially since our Increase of Trade and Navigation, is to me a Matter of no less Difficulty.”

But it is toward dear old Gilbert White of Selborne that one warms with equal sympathy and respect. Again and again he opens his mind on this subject in that inimitable series of letters constituting the “Natural History of Selborne.” He has the true scientific horror of extremes.

“As to swallows being found in a torpid state during winter,” he writes, “. . . I never heard any such account worth attending to. But a clergyman, of an inquisitive turn, assures me, that when he was a great boy, some workmen, in pulling down the battlements of a church tower early in the spring, found two or three swifts among the rubbish, which were at first appearance dead; but, on being carried toward the fire, revived. He told me that, out of his great care to preserve them, he put them in a paper bag, and hung them by the kitchen fire, where they were suffocated.”

Further on, in the same letter, adverting to the fact that broods of young swallows came forth so late as the 18th September, he asks, “Are not these late hatchings more in favour of hiding than migration?”

Then, as to the swarming of swallows prior to migrating, he writes (Letter XII.): “In the autumn I could not help being much amused with those myriads of the swallow kind which assemble in those parts. But what struck me most was, that from the

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time they began to congregate, forsaking the chimneys and houses, they roosted every night in the osier beds of the aits of that river (the Thames). Now, this resorting toward that element, at that season of the year, seems to give some countenance to the northern opinion (strange as it is) of their retiring under water."

Writing again in February of 1769, he states : "If ever I saw anything like actual migration, it was last Michaelmas Day. . . . We were then on a large heath, or common, and I could discern, as the mist began to break away, great numbers of swallows clustering on the stunted shrubs and bushes, as if they had roosted there all night. As soon as the air became clear and pleasant, they all were on the wing at once ; and, by a placid and easy flight, proceeded on southward, towards the sea. After this I did not see any more flocks, only now and then a straggler. I cannot agree with those persons who assert that the swallow kind disappear some and some, gradually, as they come ; for the bulk of them seem to withdraw at once ; only some stragglers stay behind a long while, and do never, there is the greatest reason to believe, leave this island. Swallows seem to lay themselves up, and to come forth in a warm day, as bats do continually of a warm evening, after they have disappeared for weeks. For a very respectable gentleman assured me that, as he was walking with some friends under Merton wall on a remarkably hot noon, either in the last week in December or

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the first week in January, he espied three or four swallows huddled together on the moulding of one of the windows of that college."

If only the "clergyman of an inquisitive turn" and the "very respectable gentleman" would have spared the perplexed naturalist their trivialities! Theirs is the only testimony we have to set aside; his observations are unimpeachable to-day.

Our last glimpse of him is in Letter XCIX., in which he writes: "Much the most considerable part of the house martins withdraw from hence about the first week in October; but some, the later broods, I am now convinced, linger on till the middle of that month; and, at times, once perhaps in two or three years, a flight for one day only has shown itself in the first week of November. Having taken notice in October, 1780, that the last flight was numerous, amounting perhaps to one hundred and fifty, and that the season was soft and still, I resolved to pay uncommon attention to these late birds, to find if possible where they roosted, and to determine the precise time of their retreat."

After describing minutely their place and manner of roosting, he continues: "I watched them on the thirteenth and fourteenth October, and found their evening retreat was exact and uniform; but after this they made no regular appearance. Now and then a straggler was seen; and on the twenty-second of October I observed two in the morning over the village, and with them my remarks for the season

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ended. From all these circumstances put together, it is more than probable that this lingering flight, at so late a season of the year, never departed from this island. Had they indulged me that autumn with a November visit, as I much desired, I presume that, with proper assistants, I should have settled the matter past all doubt; but though the third of November was a sweet day, and, in appearance, exactly suited to my wishes, yet not a martin was to be seen, and so I was forced reluctantly to give up the pursuit."

One cannot but sympathize with the perplexed naturalist in his closing reference to the subject: "I have only to add that, were the bushes, which cover some acres, and are not my property, to be grubbed and carefully examined, probably these late broods, and perhaps the whole aggregate body of the house martins of the district, might be found there in different secret dormitories; and that, so far from withdrawing into warmer climes, it would appear that they never depart three hundred yards from the village."—So human, so confident, and, withal, upon grounds apparently so sufficient; and yet—so mistaken!

Still, it requires little imagination to recognize, even at this distance of time, that to White and his contemporaries migration must have appeared almost as mysterious as the alleged hibernation under water, and even more so than the theory, to which in part he clung to the last, that the birds passed the winter



## September

in hiding-places in a state of torpidity. For the latter he had definite examples in the mode of hibernation of bats, hedgehogs, and the like; and it was in a spirit of true scientific moderation that he sought to apply them in the case of the swallow tribe, thereby avoiding the extremes of hibernation under water on the one hand, and of the scarcely less wonderful migration on the other. He admits, however, at times, that he is of opinion that the majority of the birds migrate, and in doing so goes as far as evidence then available warranted.

I remember, early in the "eighties," coming upon a heap of dead swallows on the ground, apparently killed by a sudden spring frost. I have also found young swallows drowned on the day of their first flight, and can only imagine that, seeing the clear reflection of the sky in the pool, they had flown into it with the intention of continuing their flight. Had similar occurrences come under White's personal notice, I cannot but think that he would wholly have disregarded the theory of hibernating under water, and have been led to reflect with growing doubt upon the probability of these birds having local hiding-places, whither they might retreat at short notice from the inclemency of a capricious spring.

I have taken swallows from beneath as they perched at the edge of the awning covering the after-deck of a steamer which left England on the 9th of November, and which was at that time south of Finisterre, proceeding to Vigo, *en route* for Brazil.

## Birds by Land and Sea

I have also known swallows to follow vessels outward bound from Spain and Portugal for the West Indies and Brazil, or to appear suddenly at sea in companies of a few birds, perching about the boat.

After having been absent during the summer months, the kestrel reappeared in our fields on the 6th of September. As will appear in the sequel, this bird remained with us until the keen frosts in November, then disappeared until February of the following year, when a *pair* of these hawks arrived. From that time kestrels continued with us until the third week in April, after which they vanished completely during the breeding season, reappearing again at the time this book closes. Whilst with us the kestrel shows itself freely, and I seldom go into the fields at such times without meeting it. The time when it may confidently be looked for is when there is a high wind running; and it is then that one recognizes the appropriateness of the name of "wind-hover," by which this bird is known in some parts of the country. With us the kestrel haunts particularly the open grass lands bordering the river Mersey, and may there be seen poised conspicuously in the air with head to windward, now hovering without advancing, now motionlessly sustained on level wings. It advances by a series of semicircles, at the completion of each of which it invariably heads up again to the wind, and resumes its stationary hovering or floating. At times it drops suddenly to earth, but stopping short of the ground, soars up again, as if

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disappointed of, or mistaken in, its quarry ; at other times its disappearance is less momentary, and either a mouse or some small bird has paid the price of its weakness. It affects the windward slope of any rising ground, to profit, as I suspect, by the uprush of the wind, which aids it in its poisoning. Even in our flat lands it shows this preference, but it is more manifest on the great Derbyshire "cops," where it will continue to circle and poise at the front of the ridge the whole day through. In dull calm weather it often flies low to the ground, at times quartering the hedgerows, or taking up its post of observation on a tree. I have sometimes seen it skimming the grass long after sunset, when one would have thought that it had need of an owl's sight to detect its prey.

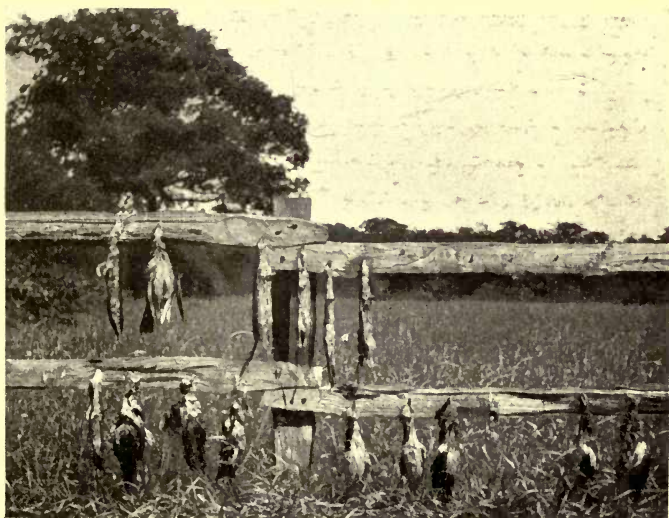
As the bird came into sight on the 6th September, it was beating up to a strong north-wester which was blowing at the time, and eventually circled about above a field where between two and three hundred rooks were feeding in two large companies. I was surprised to see the whole body of rooks rise at the hawk's approach, some perching on trees, others remaining on the wing, while now one, now another, made a dash at the kestrel as it ran the gauntlet between the two companies. Although I have seen the kestrel attacked scores of times by birds great and small, I have never known him to strike back. He invariably wheels aside with a chattering cry just so far as is necessary to avoid the attacker, and resumes his hovering as if nothing had happened.

## Birds by Land and Sea

The kestrel feeds principally on mice, and I will not seek to extenuate its offences against the feathered kind. From a close knowledge of this bird, however, I am convinced that, if the balance were struck, its credit with the farmer would largely exceed its debit to the game account. This is one of the birds I always find nailed up in the gamekeeper's "museum." I am far from blaming him: it is his livelihood. Those whom I blame are men, presumably of education, to whom one would have thought that appeals to desist from the organized slaughter of fine native birds would awaken something of the feeling which made their forefathers proud to preserve them. Falconry, after all, was a sport on natural lines, and there was some show of dignity in associating oneself with the falcon in the pursuit of its natural quarry. But this woeful slaughter of the hawk kind in the interest of meaner birds, which also are only preserved for wholesale slaughter, savours too much of the machine-gun for manly men, and too much of the wholesale poulterer for gentlemen. Does it ever enter the minds of such that the extermination of any species—and some have gone altogether—is an *irreparable* loss?—a link gone in a chain of life which began ere man was, and a link whose living presence may well be indispensable to men who, in a more enlightened age, will demand account of it with scorn from the present one? It is to me an appalling thought that any age should have wiped out a living species from creation for all time. An appeal to the



RIVER MERSEY AT STRETFORD



GAMEKEEPER'S 'MUSEUM'



## September

vulgar "pot-shotter" would be futile; but there should be something in the nobler sort to prompt them to protect our finer breeding birds, or such as from time to time try to regain a footing in a land of which they once were ornaments, but where their very rarity now makes them objects for immediate slaughter at the hand of the man with the gun.

Yellow wagtails are at this time exceptionally plentiful beside the Mersey. They attend the cows grazing in the fields near the river, for the sake of the insects which they disturb in grazing, and keep so near to the animals' feet and mouths that I have seen the birds continue to walk round a cow's nose as it fed, and pick off the flies when they settled upon it. The cattle fed on stolidly, evidently approving of the action. Toward the end of the month these birds resorted at sunset in companies of a dozen or so to the topmost foliage of high trees on the river bank, small parties frequently flying out, and, after playing about on the wing, returning to the tree-tops. As they remained there until it was too dark to distinguish them, it seemed probable that they would continue in that position through the night, in spite of their known habit of sleeping on the rushes.

Pied wagtails at this period enter into loose association with the yellow species, and both may be seen feeding together in the water meadows. When the term "*lugubris*" was applied to the former of these

## Birds by Land and Sea

birds, it was evidently intended to refer only to the funereal black and white of its outward dress. If the pied wagtail were subject to even passing moods of reposefulness, the epithet might have served to obscure in the popular eye this tricky spirit which masquerades in mourning. But, as if to repel the suggestion, it would appear to have taken to itself the very genius of caprice. "*Tizit! tizit!*" it cries, as it takes wing with an air of bustle and purpose, flying tolerably high, and following a straight course, as do most birds hampered with a more than ordinary freight of tail. The laboured, undulating flight, consisting of short spells of rapid beating of the wings alternating with longer periods during which the bird dips through a shallow curve with folded wings, suggests a distant errand. But in a moment it drops to earth, and, wagging its tail vigorously, at once forsakes the spot where it alighted for another, probably at right angles to its former course. Scarcely has it stopped when it springs up at a passing insect, and having captured it, breaks back as if jerked by a string fastened at the root of its tail, the expanded feathers of which, as well as those of the wings, give to the confused movement the appearance of a somersault. The running gait with which the bird moves, now this way, now that, along the ground, over the matted water weeds, or through the shallow water itself, is instinct with daintiness and grace, so that his brusque movement seems but a light test of the natural art of this little master of motion.



## September

And so, zigzagging and somersaulting, it continues, until a sudden "*Tizit!*" arouses it, as one of its fellows swoops at it, when both get up and make off in a rough-and-tumble flight, like a pair of giddy butterflies. No, there is certainly not much that is lugubrious in the pied wagtail.

At the time of the equinox a blustering sou'-wester came up, blowing this way and that, with a backward "suck" at times equal to a counterblast from nor'-east. The leaves were whirled from the trees like gadding pipits; the pipits themselves, congregated in wandering bands, were scattered in the air like irresponsible leaves. Rook and starling tacked and headed up to windward, and tacked again, in vain endeavours to forge ahead, then wheeled about and slid down the wind for a breathing space in the stubble.

For the fields were bare, and hosts of sparrows searched for the remains of their recent feast among the sheaves, rising in serried sheets when disturbed, and taking refuge in the first hedge or tree. Song and missel-thrushes abounded where the uptorn potato roots had broken the ground, and one kept an interested eye upon them in anticipation of the arrival of their fellow thrushes, the fieldfare and redwing, from the north.

The blackbird, although he winters with us, was not to be found in his usual haunts. The yellow-hammer and corn-bunting, albeit also permanent residents throughout the year, had been absent for

## Birds by Land and Sea

some weeks from the trees and bushes where they perched and sang regularly the summer through. The wren, too, was no longer heard in the darksome thicket where every morning found it with its grown-up brood—as completely gone from its old quarters as chiff-chaff and white-throat which used to search the branches over his head, but which, unlike him, make no profession of weathering the hard season with us.

After a week of blustering, the sou'-wester blew itself out, and for a day the sun looked down from a cloudless sky. Now and again a skylark sprang up from nowhere into the blue, and carolled as if it were a later spring. But the next day he had vanished as he came.

For there came a first touch of frost in the small hours of a late September morning, and any one early abroad found the spiders' webs on the hedgerows strung with microscopic pearls—thousands upon thousands of fly-traps transformed in one magic night into as many fairy palaces, bejewelled chandeliers, and what not; yet of a beauty so chastely subdued as to elude any but a closely curious eye.

With this occurred a sudden mingling of strange birds among the summer lingerers in the old haunts, and for a day or two the wheatear from the hills played the robin on lowland clod or post; the spotted flycatcher was found in the open far from his customary station; and yellow and pied wagtails

## September

roamed aimlessly about, showing none of that knowledge of the land which distinguishes the flight, however erratic, of the local residents as they jerk themselves along from one favourite feeding-ground to another. The willow-wren, whose early morning singing lasted from the 8th August until well on in September, when it was the only companion in song of the returned robin, vanished with his congener the wood-wren before the frost, and the month closed with the robin as the only true songster then vocal.

Following upon the boisterous equinoctial winds, there set in a reaction from the north-east. The red and yellow leaves danced to death with a semblance of merriment before the wild sou'-wester, itself but short-lived in its rollicking violence; but the north-east plied its office with a more leisurely purpose, having as long a tenure of life before it as winter itself; and where it cut, it cut like a scythe-blade, and the leaf fell straight to earth, and lay as it fell.

The approach of winter draws closer the natural bonds uniting man and his fellow-creatures; and besides the brisk "*cheep!*" and comfortable "*chow, chow!*" with which the house-sparrows continued to greet the returning sun, one awakened in the grey morning to the "*tetera-tet-tet!*" of the robin and the "*ping-ping!*" of the blue-tits beneath the window, already lodging their claim to protection with those who should be, and often are, their best

## Birds by Land and Sea

winter friends. And if there were others farther afield, whose shy natures only the direst straits could compel to approach the dwellings of man, still there was brave store of berries in the open, and the evil days were not yet.

## OCTOBER

OCTOBER ran its course with as many changes as ever diversified its vernal counterpart, April, of varying sun and shower. On the whole a grey, still month, with low, leaden, rain-full clouds above; and below, a white mist which hugged the sodden land, where the ponds were full to the lips, and swollen brook and river ran high between their rat-riddled banks. The trees, stripped to the bark, save for the late-born leaf that still clung dangling to each branch's tip, rose from the monotonous mist like those in Segantini's weird piece, "The Unnatural Mothers,"—so bare, so detached, so alone. The sparely clad hedgerow, through which the light now filtered unobstructed, disclosed the unsuspected nest, whose summer brood had long since flown afield for better or worse, and only returned to feast improvidently upon the clustering haws—summer's last largess; for the white of the misletoe and the red of the holly are but a winter pittance in a frost-bound land.

Nature's provision for the birds seems strangely

## Birds by Land and Sea

at variance with the rules man has laid down for his own dieting. In summer, most land birds feed on flesh, whether in the form of grub, or worm, or insect; in the cold of winter, their diet is of necessity chiefly a vegetable one, consisting almost entirely of berries. That a bird's temperature is considerably higher than that of man would only render it more sensitive to the effects of cold, for the higher temperature means an enhanced vitality, and the quicker pace of life a greater wastage. If animal food be necessary for the maintenance of bodily heat, it would seem to be more necessary for bird than for man. Has Nature blundered in her economy, or is the mistake the birds' own in remaining to face a fearful mortality where food is both insufficient and unsuitable? That it is not over-palatable appears from the fact that in a mild winter the berries remain on the boughs until they wither.

October is not all grey: some night both cloud and mist slip quietly away, and in the keen starlight the white rime is laid upon the fields. The following day breaks bright and sharp like an early spring morning, and only man, who looks both "after and before," knows that it is in truth but the sunset of the year.

The rooks, however, which, even out of the breeding season, daily visit a large rookery near my home, immediately set to work to transform their nests. The sticks and twigs are transferred from

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the old nests, and arranged on some near branch to form new ones, the birds working in pairs. They seem never wholly to demolish the old nest, or to complete the new one; and apparently are not yet sufficiently assured of the return of spring to go afield for new material. The first inclement day dispels the illusion, and the nests are left as they are, in every stage of demolition and reconstruction.

On one such bright morning, the last of October, a yellow-hammer, which had been missing for the greater part of a month from his accustomed station, returned to the top of a thorn, where he had perched and sung almost every morning during the summer, and on the hedge below were four young ones, brilliant in their new yellow bonnets just acquired at the autumn moult. Two days later, a company of wrens were back in a tangle of dead bramble, where they had seldom failed to make themselves heard until late in September, when they suddenly disappeared. From a prominent elm branch the corn-bunting notified his reappearance by his strange song, which opens with three or four detached notes—a kind of musical stuttering, preluding a precipitate trill which runs up into a continuous, shrilly modulated scream—a song to become notable as time went on by its continuance throughout the winter months into the spring. The blackbird, which suffered a temporary eclipse during September, became increasingly visible during October; but neither he nor the song-thrush was yet to be heard in song. Missel-thrushes

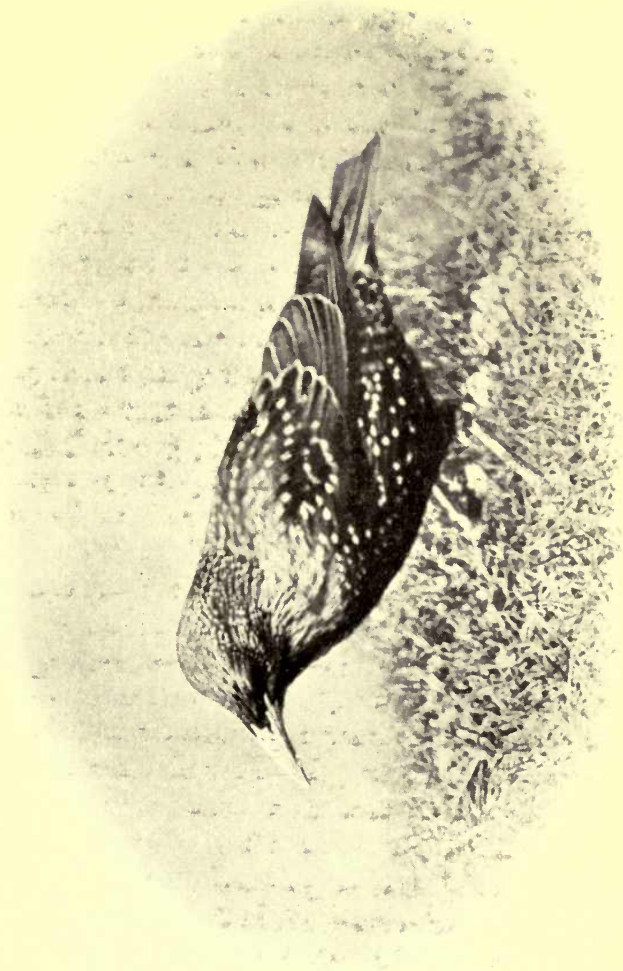
## Birds by Land and Sea

increased in number in the newly ploughed lands, or in wandering parties on the wing. The yellow wagtail left us, but his pied relative remained, following his switchback flight through the air. Of two birds so closely allied in form and habit, why should the one leave us and the other stay? It is as though the swallow should migrate and the martin remain. But both swallow and martin departed, the former having been last seen on the 4th October, the latter on the 19th October.

The tendency to congregate now that all breeding was over was everywhere evident; in the banded pipits, which one moment fared regularly on together, and the next were scattered as by sudden explosion, to regather farther on, and continue like loosely associated elements charged with disruption; in the chaffinches, whose groups exhibited the as yet unexplained separation of the sexes which obtains under these circumstances; in the linnets, which toured the country in high, erratic flight, leaving an impression that they were not particular whither they went, so long as they did not remain too long in one place.

And the starlings—surely the drollest creatures that ever bore wings! How they love a throng, with plenty of jostling on the ground, and sparring in the air. If the starling has no voice of his own, he seems to have borrowed half a dozen or more from various sections of the animal kingdom. Now he clucks like a diminutive hen; now emits the





STARLING



## October

long-drawn whistle, which is perhaps his chief attainment in the musical art ; then follows the wiry wheeze of the grasshopper ; afterwards, just enough of a throstle's note to delude the hearer into the belief that ' he could an' if he would '—the whole punctuated by little self-satisfied clicks and chuckles and abortive warblings, not to forget the ever-recurring hard, bubbling note, as though he were stringing sounds like beads, and they struck one another glassily as they fell in quick succession one upon another.

Magpies are social at all seasons, yet at this time they seemed to be more so than ever. I never walked by the Mersey without seeing them, and upon one occasion counted as many as thirteen in one flock, and nine in another five minutes later. But, then, we can show a score of nests in a mile walk, and the birds are not molested as they would be over the Cheshire border, where there is cover to protect.

Skylarks flitted by twos and threes about the fields in the dull days, or mounted to sing on the sunny ones, at which times the roving pipits followed them up into the air, emitting sundry lark-like notes, and manifesting a certain familiarity with their old ornithological associates, in spite of the fact that more recent classification has bracketed them—the pipits—with the wagtails as nearest of kin.

Upon an early snap of frost a large body of lapwings came down into our grass fields for a few days at the beginning of the month, and then

## Birds by Land and Sea

departed. After this, excepting under such circumstances, we saw only occasional stragglers, or a band flying high and straight for some more distant goal. This latter movement of lapwings occurs during the autumn months, and the lofty, direct flight suggests that the birds are engaged in a regular migration on a large scale. The other movement is a local one, for a snap of frost overnight is invariably followed by the appearance next morning of a large band of lapwings in our fields, where there are usually but few. It would appear that they are the same birds which visit us at such times, for it is always in one or two particular grass fields that they are met with. I have observed that lapwings show a similar predilection for particular fields in the country round about, and in such fields they are always to be found, although they appear to differ in no way from hundreds of similar fields surrounding them, save that they are generally the higher parts of rolling land.

Although I have never known the golden plover to visit our immediate neighbourhood, flocks of these birds yearly descend about this time to certain fields at Bucklow Hill, some few miles over the Cheshire border. Arriving in summer plumage, they frequent the same rolling grass lands and fallows as the lapwings, associating in small bands with the latter in earlier autumn, but tending to separate as their numbers increase. By the end of the year flocks of a couple of hundred lapwings are frequently present

## October

in one field, while nearly as many golden plovers will probably be in an adjoining one. With the disappearance of the bold black of the cheeks and under plumage of the summer dress, and the loss of intensity in the gold-and-black mottling of the upper parts, the golden plover, seen at a moderate distance, then appears of a buffy-brown colour above, the under parts being white. Still, in spite of the sharp contrast it thus offers with the more permanent, heavy, black and white markings of the lapwings, one has but to note their common habit of standing together in motionless flocks for prolonged periods, the quick running gait with which they move, and the similarly attentive attitude both strike when watching an observer, to recognize a mental likeness beneath their outward differences. At times, a small flock of lapwings rise, and proceed in straggling order with rounded, heavily flapping wings to a neighbouring field ; then a small party of the golden plovers get up together, and with sharply pointed, rapidly beating wings, clear the hedge in brisk flight and compact order, wheeling round sharply on skimming wings as they come to earth. The contrast at such times is further pointed by the well-known "*pee-wit!*" of the lapwings, and the slightly modulated and somewhat plaintive musical whistle of the golden plovers.

These birds regularly frequent the fields mentioned except during frost, and it is interesting to watch the fading out of the black summer markings as autumn

## Birds by Land and Sea

progresses. About the end of February they begin to reappear, and at the advent of spring some of the birds have regained, although very irregularly as to the time of their appearance, the gold spottings on the grey black upper parts, the dusky cheeks and throat, and the rich black bib and stomacher with which they return to high northern, even arctic, latitudes to breed. For the plovers, as also the lapwings, which winter with us, are probably all migrants from higher latitudes, although both species breed in the district, the lapwings plentifully, both in lowland and upland country; the golden plover more sparsely and on the moors only, notably in the Derbyshire hills.

In spite of all these prominent gatherings, and but to mention the wandering bands of greenfinches in the potato fields; the bold tits, systematically working the clumps and lines of trees; or the hordes of sparrows which continue to frequent the stubbles; October was pre-eminently the month of the robin. It was his form one saw on every hedgetop, his sprightly bobbings that caught the eye on branch, or post, or rail; his rattling call, and pure, liquid song that sounded on every hand. There was the other sound, too—the twice or thrice repeated thin, piercing note which recalled the times when we approached too nearly the nest containing its young in the earlier part of the year. The robin is not sociable. He never packs. “You keep your place, and I’ll keep mine,” seems to be his motto,

## October

and he applies it even in the case of his own young. The latter naturally look upon the spot where they were hatched as "their place," and, being chips of the old block, when their sire returns from retirement after the moult, they resent even to the point of fighting his determination to turn them adrift in the world to fend for themselves. But in the end they generally have to go ; and it is a moot question what becomes of these young birds. Do they migrate ? it is asked. Up to the present it would appear that only the robins themselves are in a position to give the answer.

The rooks continued in their old feeding fields, the only difference being that jackdaws and starlings now packed with them. When roused, the jackdaws fly with the rooks ; but the starlings fly apart. The jackdaws also frequent the rookery. Magpies, at times, have the audacity to use the avenue of trees, forming the rookery as a perching place. They are generally chased out by the rooks, and I have witnessed several stand-up fights in the fields between Mag and the rooks. The former at such times displays a pluck for which I should scarcely have given her credit, for every hand—or claw—is against her, even that of the crow kind, crow as she is.

An odd snipe or two used to get up occasionally from the reeds in ditch or brook, and parties of black-headed and herring gulls to come up the river to the water meadows.

Of the solitary sort, the kestrel beat up and down

## Birds by Land and Sea

the river, quartering the hedgerows in the adjoining fields, and flying close to the ground in the dull, still days ; or getting up to the wind when there was any movement in the air, with the hovering, poising, and sudden stoop characteristic of this bird.

The month closed without any sign of the arrival of the fieldfare and redwing from the north, which fact, if the wisdom of the countryside might be trusted, augured a mild winter for us.



## NOVEMBER

THE fogs of November are charged to its account with sufficient particularity, but it seldom obtains recognition for days of rare beauty, which, being reminiscent of a more genial time, are set to the general credit of autumn, of whose departed glory they are, as it were, the lingering afterglow. The sensuous flood of summer life ebbs low in creeping sap and songless tree ; the gorgeous opulence of autumn has been drawn aside like a rich curtain, disclosing a more intimate beauty, less pictorial, more statuesque.

Let any one who will, on such a day, stand where beech or birch grove—or but a single tree, for that matter—limns the delicate tracery of its leafless branches on the background of the early evening sky—no flamboyant surf of reds and purples, but a sea of rest, if such there might be, lying without the confines of this world ; a pale green splendour edged with a strand of evanescent gold—he will not sigh that leaves should fall to lay bare such a witchery of form, nor wish to add one touch of colour to the chastened beauty of the scene. Or, look along the

## Birds by Land and Sea

stubble field when the low sun lights this derelict of harvest, burnishing the plain between the dark tree clumps and the tracts of silent cover. Surely, it is well that the land should have borne if but for this late harvest of the eye.

But, in truth, this later beauty of the year makes a subtler appeal than to the senses. The eye cannot rest upon it with that finality with which it was content to dwell on the more obvious charms of summer; it will be glancing aside, to look before and after. For it is a world of half-tones, a reflection of a time past and to come again; and the stubble field, the newly broken furrow, the shut winter buds with their hint of far-off spring, are transmuted in thought into things of memory and hope, and touched with the gentle unrest of the mind.

Such days are not unfrequent during November, and never fail to evoke a joyous response from the feathered world.

On the morning of the 12th November I witnessed what was probably the first attempt of a song-thrush to resume singing after the autumn moult, and for several days I used to encounter this bird practising its song on one particular perch. Several others tuned up about the same time, but although some attained a fairly full note after a few days' practice, the singing was of a desultory, half-hearted character, and was last heard on the 18th of the month, after which it ceased abruptly, wintrier weather ensuing.

## November

It would be interesting to determine what is the cause of this temporary resumption of song by some birds after the silence during the moult. It has been suggested that the spring-like character of late autumn may have some stimulating effect upon such songsters. This, no doubt, is a contributory cause ; but, it would seem probable that the primary one is the constitutional reaction which sets in after the depression which the birds suffer during the moulting time. Convalescence has a keener sense of well-being than rude health.

As I was passing an old orchard on this same morning of the 12th November, I heard a wren rattling out his call with unusual vigour. After he had done this several times, he seemed to feel that this was not quite adequate to the occasion, and, flitting up into a pear tree, sought fuller expression in a sudden burst of song.

As all know, the song of the wren, although an exceedingly fine one, is stereotyped, being always delivered in the same form. After the few repeated, detached notes comes the first trill, then the rattle, then the closing trill. That rattle, devoid of musical quality, yet inserted between the two warbling phrases, is of the same "mechanical" quality as the bird's call-note, which resembles the clicking of a watch when being wound up.

Those acquainted with the vocal utterances of birds will recall the manner in which some of them, having no song properly so-called, yet, at times of

## Birds by Land and Sea

pleasurable excitement, appear to try, by successive repetitions of their call-notes, to run them up into a phrase, no doubt seeking fuller expression for their feelings in the fuller strain.

The rattle in the wren's song partakes of such a nature rather than of the nature of song ; and, in the light of the efforts of songless birds to attain fuller expression as described above, might well be a survival of some older, cruder form of the wren's earlier attempts to sing.

It is hard to believe that song is not an elaboration of some simpler form ; and, if so, of what simpler form if not the call-note ? It may be difficult to reconcile the highly elaborate song of the finer singers with their call-notes ; but this is like comparing the most highly developed form in a series of organisms with its extinct archetype. The affiliation of song to call-note is most apparent in the simpler forms of song. That the call-note was first in order of time, there can be no reasonable doubt ; for, all birds have it at all times ; but only some birds sing at some times. That the song itself is a gradual acquisition is also sufficiently evident from the efforts of young birds, and from the need of practice in mature birds when resuming song in spring and after the moult.

Without some such explanation, song remains a detached phenomenon without a simpler antecedent, which is unnatural ; and such an explanation is not invalidated by the fact that all birds have not

## November

elaborated their call notes into what, in our opinion constitutes song. Their canons manifestly are not ours; and their songs are composed for their own delectation, and that of the lady in the nest. The hen starling very probably has but a poor opinion of the nocturnal vapourings of the cock nightingale.

It might be objected that, if the call-note were worked up into song, it would be superseded by the song; but when it is remembered that the call-note serves primarily to call attention and give prompt warning, it will be seen that, although song might spring from it, it could not replace it.

Whatever might be the theory of the origin of song in birds, of song-birds proper there was at this time none left that sang at all.

For November closed with a week of continuous frost, and the hollow ground rang to one's heel. The rooks, which still visited daily their nesting-trees, used to spend a fruitless half-hour in hammering the frost-bound clods for breakfast, then close in to the houses, and take up their positions on some humble perch, dejection and mute apology written in all their bearing. The rook is too wary to make an efficient beggar, but his impudence entitles him to rank as a capable thief. He spent his time harrying sparrows and other small fowl as they attempted to carry off some scrap of local charity. Like sparrow and robin, thrush, blackbird, and starling, the rook is

## Birds by Land and Sea

glad at such times to subdue his epicurean palate to the common domestic loaf.

The little wren, however, is a rare pensioner, and, when seen at all, is generally engaged briskly searching beneath ledges and in dark corners for the eggs and chrysalids of insects whose progeny is thus untimely cut off. The blue-tit, which was much in evidence about the house in the earlier autumn, absented himself at this time for some unknown reason.

Out in the meadows the gulls were collected in the corner of a large sheet of ice where there was still a little open water, in which they contended with low querulous cries for the right of exclusive search, the less successful ones standing by on the ice with heads drawn in between their shoulders, as if waiting for the moving of this strangely inert tide.

The attitude of one bird, even on the first advent of frost, immediately arrests attention. It is the song-thrush. The missel-thrush seems of a hardier turn, and rattles about the fields in active search for a substitute for the frost-bound worm; but the song-thrush is like one who sees his doom. All the alertness is gone out of him. The sudden poses, expressive of keen attention, which at other times make him so interesting an object to watch, are no longer there. With feathers puffed out, neck drawn in, and set, straight beak, he stands motionless, looking blankly before him. One

## November

grieves to think how many of these fine songsters fall ready—indeed, too ready, victims to the frost ; for there seems to be a lack of moral fibre in the bird, and it may be seen thus cowed and inert even before the berries are gone.

How differently the starling faces the untoward change ! He is here, there, and everywhere, flying high and low, singly or in hundreds, ransacking every midden heap for miles around. He is never too hungry to fight, and if one watches a large group of starlings, scarcely a moment passes but several couples spring up a few inches from the ground to spar on the wing, their sudden rising and subsidence resembling nothing so much as the continuous splashing of raindrops in a puddle. How little cold affects this bird may be judged by the fact that if he chances upon an unfrozen puddle, he forthwith enters it to bathe, laying about him with such energy that others, standing aside to await their turn, get a sufficient baptism as spectators. In fact, the starling is the bird of the month ; for, with the cessation of the robin's song, which made that bird so conspicuous during October, the starling comes to the front by sheer force of numbers and ubiquitous energy, not to mention the cheerful optimism with which he enlivens the dead season by a sort of bronchial wheeze, in which the spirit of song struggles vainly to utter itself through an unpropitious organ.

The pied wagtail remains with us, growing

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duskier in his markings, and only less unattractive than when I used occasionally to come across him during the moult without his tail. What a privation for a wagtail to be shorn, even temporarily, of that expressive member! The yellow wagtail, which had been missing for several weeks previously, was seen for the last time on the 23rd November—a soft, sunny day—on the bank of the Mersey. The yellow-hammer had increased in numbers, and was by far the most brilliant bird then with us. Small companies flitted along the hedgetops, uttering a short note which had the sound of water dripping upon water. The song of the corn-bunting, which was resumed on the 2nd November, ceased for a while after the 23rd November. I scarcely expected when I entered a note to this effect that it would resume singing again afterwards, but such was the fact, and the bird continued to sing through all but the short spells of severe weather which marked the winter of 1902-3, right on into spring. I saw it singing times without number, and in the end desisted from taking any further notes.

The frost continuing for a week, the kestrel was evidently hard up for a meal, for I met the bird at Old Trafford, and in a place (Seymour Grove) where the fields cease and give place to a thickly populated part of the outskirts of Manchester. I was walking down the Grove when I caught sight of the kestrel about twenty yards above the hedge on the right-hand side of the Grove. It was just in the



## November

act of stooping, and so intent upon its object that it dropped with drooping wings, hanging legs, and head depressed, half a dozen yards in front of me, and, just clearing the hedgetop on the left-hand side of the Grove, came to earth immediately behind it. In a moment it was up again with some strange object in its claws, but, sweeping round, dropped it, and retraced its flight, ignoring a starling which circled round it once with excited cries. I had marked the place where the kestrel let fall its cheaply held prize, and, getting through the hedge, found it to be part of a rabbit's leg, which some itinerant vendor had probably cut off in dressing it, and thrown over the hedge. I am indebted to him for the closest view of a stooping kestrel I am ever likely to have. The incident formed a fitting close to the bird's autumn stay in our parts, for it evidently retired at once before the frost, and was not seen again until February of 1903.

The magpie does not shift its ground because of frost. I was startled about this time by hearing its chatter, as I thought, close to a neighbour's house, and concluded that the frost had driven it in. Skirting the garden cautiously under cover of the wall, I came face to face with a small African goat snuffing the cold air at the door of its kennel. The bleat of a goat and the chatter of a magpie resemble one another very closely when heard at a distance or with obstacles intervening; but, heard near to, there is a notable difference.

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On the first day of the frost bodies of lapwings appeared in our fields, but by the following day they had gone ; from which we inferred rightly that the frost would continue. When the land is frost-bound the lapwings swarm to the seashore.

On the 16th November I came upon a small band of fieldfares in the grass fields through which the Mersey flows at Barlow Moor, but it was not until the 7th of the following month that I found the redwing at Millington, some miles over the Cheshire border. If these birds are able thus to winter in the open with the home thrushes, and that without applying for the relief which so often brings the latter into our gardens, it is evident that there are reasons other than those relating to food and climate which take them back to the north precisely at the time when the rigour of winter is abating. In this, as in many other respects, birds are actuated by motives which elude our reasonings.

The redwing is said to return yearly to his old haunt, which fact is borne out by my own observation, in so far as I have never discovered it in my immediate neighbourhood. The fieldfare, on the other hand, is said to be a wanderer ; but I encounter them in varying numbers almost daily in the same fields in their season.

The redwing resembles our song-thrush in size, flight, and markings, but may easily be distinguished from it by its full-coloured orange flanks and the broad white stripe over the eye. The fieldfare has

## November

the build and flight of the missel-thrush, but may also be promptly distinguished from the home bird by the pronounced grey of the lower part of the back—in Cheshire they are called “bluebacks”—contrasting strongly with the dark wings and tail; and by the white underparts, which flash frequently into view during the bird’s wheeling flight.

When feeding on the ground, fieldfares face all the same way, now one, now another, flying forward to secure the first place in the advance. They fly high like missel-thrushes, and, like them, lay back the wings after each series of four or five strokes. Their most characteristic evolution in flight is the broad wheeling movements which they use before settling on the ground, or upon some high tree. In the latter situation, it may be seen that the birds are still all facing in the same direction. Their note, generally emitted on the wing, may be written as “*Yuch-uch-úchut!*” and has in its character a certain consonancy with the chattering of magpies, though less loud and sustained, and I have known magpies to respond to it as a band of fieldfares flew past the tree upon which they were perching. The note is, however, of a more subdued, conversational type, and as the irregular group rustles by overhead, the birds chatting familiarly together, the sound recalls the still gentler garrulity of an autumn band of linnets.

It is a fact worthy of note that the fieldfare, which in its breeding haunts in Scandinavia builds

## Birds by Land and Sea

its nests in high trees, and during its winter sojourn in England shows a decided partiality for perching in such a position, especially toward evening, nevertheless sleeps upon the ground. The redwing manifests no such peculiarity, nesting and sleeping in bushes of moderate dimensions like a true thrush.

I observed about this time that the house-sparrows began to collect feathers, scraps of paper, and the like, and one couple had discovered that the plaster which joined the roof-slates to the base of the chimney-stack in a neighbouring house had fallen out, and were busy carrying in materials to add luxury to the competent warmth thus provided. The house-sparrow is a long-headed bird, but he had evidently failed in this instance to reflect that a gap of this sort with a northerly aspect would probably be plastered up when the first snow-storm had driven in sufficient snow to melt through the ceiling. However, as it was a nice question who was my neighbour under the circumstances, I decided to treat them both alike, and, as I was unable to warn the sub-tenant, so also I would refrain from warning the tenant-in-chief.

## DECEMBER

I AM aware that the civil calendar dates the opening of spring from the time when the sun passes the ascending node at the vernal equinox in March ; but, by a pleasant, if somewhat arbitrary habit, I am able to amplify that delightful period to a degree equal to its whole duration by reckoning its commencement from the time of the winter solstice. It is at that time that the sun is sunk, as it were, in the pit of the south ; and I am conscious that for a week or so it is ploughing its way through the wintry deeps upon a curve so shallow that as yet it gives no sign of reascent. But after that comes the light, first harbinger of the re-opening year ; the heat may follow in its season ; but spring, for me, has begun with the lengthening day. Nature has turned in her sleep ; she will soon awake.

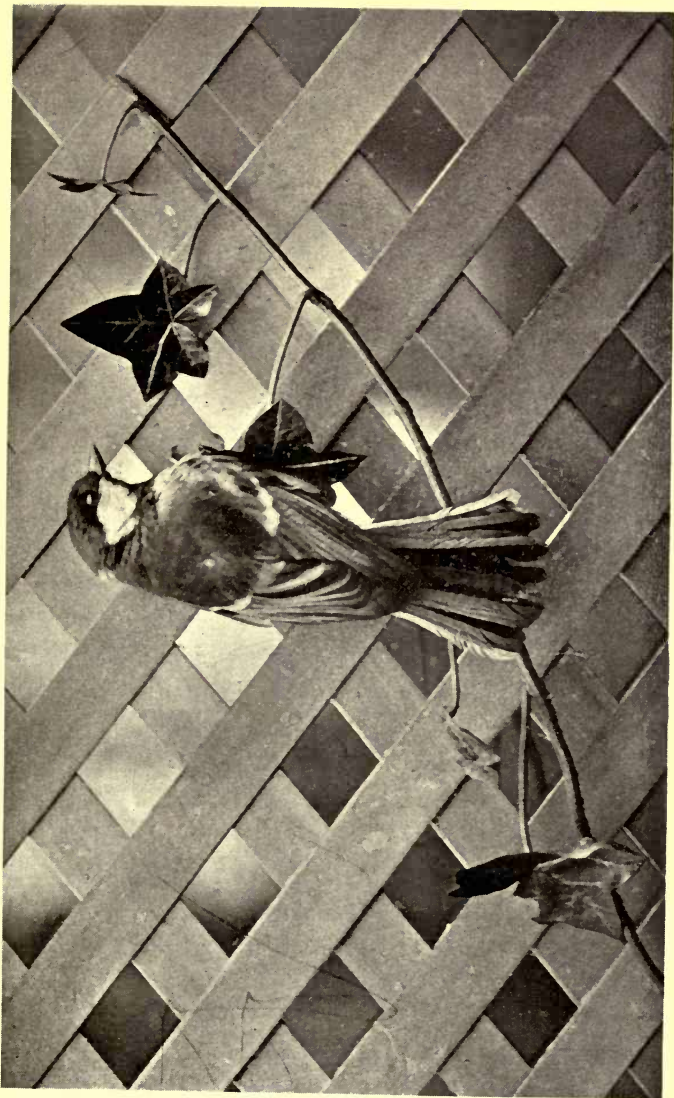
I know that this is all very sad reasoning in these enlightened days ; but "Denmark's a prison," if only one thinks so.

If I am put to it, I will point, in support of my theory, to miles of country with the green wheat

## Birds by Land and Sea

spiking through the snow; to buds which, in certain sheltered corners, tentatively thrust out their white nightcaps, and are evidently "lying awake" with a view to an early rising; to a disposition in the rooks to separate into pairs, and, on the part of the males, to fight off any enterprising gentleman who would fain air his graces before the lady elect. The song-thrush is in full voice again, leading up to the wild shout of his kinsman, the stormcock, which will ere long startle the countryside. The great-tit runs his double-noted song out to inordinate length, and if you stop to interview him, will probably tell you to "*Git along! git along!*" with the accent on the "long," and a cadence which suggests that the "git" is formed by an inward, and the "long" by an outward breath. The roving blue-tit also "pings" away with a note which is almost a word, and falls little short of "*Spring! spring! spri-i-i-ng!*"

Both the blue-tit and the great-tit are daily—almost hourly—visitors to my garden during the winter months. Shortly after peep o' day in the tardy winter mornings the energetic "*ping! ping!*" of the former may be heard as the birds approach in small companies, flitting systematically from tree to tree, and calling to one another as they canvass the bare branches for the minute eggs, chrysalids, and the like, which go to make up their winter bill of fare. As such delicate morsels are often located on the under surface of the boughs, the tits have



GREAT TIT





## December

long ago learned the topsy-turvy tricks of the trapeze, now hanging by both claws whilst they examine the sides of the twig supporting them, now dangling parrot-wise, tail aloft and head below, as they survey the situation beneath them. At such times the birds may be seen to snip off dead leaves, or to strip the bark from a dead bough, when they have cause to believe that they cover any of the small life of which they are in search. It is not often that the blue-tit will come to the ground except to pick up some scrap of food, with which it immediately springs into the tree again, either raising it in its claws to eat it in the manner of a parrot, or holding it down to the branch and hammering it like a hawk. At times it may be seen clinging to the bricks of the wall, and examining the mortar for any small life lurking in the cracks. Not unfrequently I have seen one inside a street lamp, probably looking for insects which had found their death in the gas-flame the night before, and were now to find sepulture in the stomach of a blue-tit.

I do not know why the name of tit-mice has been given to the group of birds of which the blue-tit is such a conspicuous member ; but if the latter bird be compelled to remain on the floor through withdrawal of the perch, often it will put its head down, and move from side to side with the quick, gliding motion of a mouse—a resemblance which it is impossible to overlook at such times.

I sometimes compel one of these saucy little

## Birds by Land and Sea

acrobats to pass a portion of a winter day in my company. They are, as Gilbert White noticed, "vast admirers of suet," and a finch-trap baited with a nice white lump of this delicacy never fails to incite Tomakin to a joyous onslaught. A ringing "*ping! ping! pi-i-i-ng!*" announces the discovery; but "clap" goes the shutter, and the little prisoner is left to compare a frugal freedom with captivity and suet. However, he gets a large liberty for the remainder of the day, and dines like an alderman before being dismissed ere sundown to find more natural quarters. The bird shown in the photograph had dined "not wisely, but too well," and under the circumstances distinctly refused to perch to have his photograph taken, so that I was forced to let him have his way, and go forth to the world hanging by one claw as a warning to all whom it may concern of the depraving influence of beef suet.

Where do blue-tits sleep? I notice often that some of my early morning visitors in the winter have their tails askew, as if their sleeping apartments had not been over-spacious. One which I kept overnight in a sudden frost, stowed itself closely in a corner of the cage until it bethought itself of a small gallipot in another corner, when it entered it and nestled down as if it had been a nest, sleeping embedded in a liberal lining of ants' eggs, which had remained over from supper.

The great-tit likewise is amenable to the attractions of suet, and has also at times to bear me



BLUE TIT



## December

company in recognition of my bounty. He is a bold little man, and takes his stand as a rule on the top of my bookshelves, whence he shouts his churring notes at me in pure wrath. Deeds of blood are set to the account of the great-tit, and one can well credit them as one watches the bird stand, its powerful claws spread, and head drawn up ere it brings it down like a hammer, the stroke of the strong beak on the board sounding like that made by a woodpecker.

Although I am unable to adduce conclusive evidence of the dark deeds of the great-tit, I have good reason to believe in them. Last autumn I picked up from the grass plot in my garden the body of a mouse with freshly trepanned skull, minus the little brain, which had not been smart enough to enable its owner to elude what I have little doubt to have been the savagery of its namesake, the great tit-mouse. The crown had been quartered from nose to nape and from ear to ear, the skin laid back, the skull battered in, and the brain-case picked clean. Save that one of its eyes had started from its socket, the mouse was in all other respects intact.

The coal-tit is a regular, if rarer, visitor to my garden during the winter months, and is readily to be recognized by the conspicuous white patch on the nape. Its weaker, shriller call-note is in keeping with the bird's character, which is less vehement than that of either the great-tit or the blue-tit. Its

## Birds by Land and Sea

antics in the trees are the same as those of the allied species, but it goes oftener to the ground to feed, and remains longer there.

The marsh-tit—common enough in some districts—does not appear to visit us at such times.

Still rarer visitors are the long-tailed tit and golden-crested wren, but on one bright day in December I heard a shrill “zee-zee-zee-ing,” and looking along a plot of low rose bushes, saw what, to judge by the bold light and dark markings of the upper parts and the sudden flashing of the white outer feathers of the extravagantly long tails, might have been a couple of pied wagtails taken to the clambering antics of tits. However, the piercing “zee-zee-zee!” of the restless creatures as they flitted from bush to bush, calling to one another as they went, declared the long-tailed tit. Some dwarf apple trees, which had been plagued with the fly during the summer, next claimed their attention, and I was able to watch them unseen for a long time from a window a few yards above. Their topsyturvy antics on the branches stamp them at once as tits, and it scarcely requires a second glance to distinguish them from the shorter-tailed tits which visit us continuously through the winter days. If one should fail to recognize the bold “five-barred” pattern of alternate black and pink into which the colour scheme of their upper parts roughly resolves itself, the tiny bill, or the crown slashed with white between black edgings, there is nothing among the

## December

tits resembling the delicate rose of the under parts, or the inordinate length of tail, which constitutes three-fifths of the total length of the bird itself. Black, white, and pink are the colours of the long-tailed tit, and they make it as striking as a chaffinch when seen on the wing ; but when it dangles from a bough, applying its short bill closely to detach its minute insect food, the delicate flush of pink below has a wonderfully softening effect.

The long-tailed tits had scarcely established themselves when a "zee-zee-ing" seemed to announce the coming of a second contingent. But the long-tails and gold-crests are travelling companions, and as a small company of the latter arrived, one might note the shriller, less vibrant "zee" which the gold-crest emits either when perching or flying. The golden-crested wren is the smallest of European birds, but makes the most of its little person by puffing its feathers, and holding its wings, so to say, akimbo. It forms one of that indefatigable band of winter wanderers which includes the great, the blue, the coal, the marsh, and the long-tailed tits, the tree-creeper and nuthatch. Although as capable of acrobatic feats as any of this agile company, the gold-crest in its habits more nearly resembles the long-tailed tit and the tree-creeper. Like both of these, and the little common brown wren which it further resembles in its habit of creeping through low shrubbery, it limits its fare to the minute insects and larvæ which it finds tucked away in the chinks

## Birds by Land and Sea

and crevices of the bark of trees and shrubs. As restless and erratic as the long-tailed tit in its topsyturvy searches among the branches, it has paid the tree-creeper the compliment of imitating his methods also. But the gold-crest, in keeping with its sprightlier character, creeps with a difference. The tree-creeper walks up a tree-trunk with the methodical sobriety of a woodpecker ; the gold-crest is for ever fluttering as it creeps, like some great moth not sure of its footing. Very moth-like, too, is the general scheme of the gold-crest's colouring—olive above, with a conspicuous black patch on each wing below white wing bars ; under parts, yellowy white ; the crest, a bright yellow slash along the crown between black bands.

In the afternoon of the same day a tree-creeper appeared upon some pollard poplars in the same place. The tree-creeper does not often visit us, being even far rarer than the long-tailed tits and gold-crests. He is the silent brother of this loquacious fraternity. He seldom speaks ; and when he does, it is with a thin, querulous voice. He is equally unobtrusive in his movements, but it is hard to believe that any one, seeing a tree-creeper, could fail to identify it. The tree-creeper is always creeping ; he is always creeping on trees ; he is always creeping the same way—upwards. Seen from some distance, he is like a little, drawn-out, ruddy brown mouse, running in jerks, now zig-zag fashion, now spiral-wise, up the bole of a tree, or along one of its



## December

main branches. As he comes round the bole from the back, you catch the light on his silky white throat and breast; and as he creeps over the front of the bole, you may observe, if near enough, the thin white stripe over the eye. The tree-creeper's distinction, however, lies in his bill; it is long, and curved sharply downwards. He applies it unerringly in extracting from the crevices of the bark the minute insects, larvæ, etc., upon which he entirely subsists.

Whilst I have proved by marking them that some of the great- and blue-tits which visit my garden at this season do so regularly day by day, a curious circumstance in connection with the visits of the long-tailed tits, gold-crests and tree-creeper is, that they seem to come in "rushes" at wide intervals, so that for weeks none of them is seen, and then, suddenly—generally upon some genial day—they all appear together, and are much in evidence during the day, but upon the morrow are no more to be seen.

December is a cheerful month, not in actuality, but in prospect; and, after all, that part of a man's life which matters is less what he is and has done, than what he hopes to be and to do. December is a grey old mountain-top—the Mount Prospect of the year. A month or two hence the missel-thrush will be prospecting for a building site, and the rooks return permanently to their summer seat. From then until the advent of the chiff-chaff—that tiny herald

## Birds by Land and Sea

from the South, who comes in the teeth of March winds with the royal mandate of spring tucked beneath his struggling wing—is not an over-bold thought for one who knows that the chaff-chaff is no loiterer by the way.

## JANUARY

**J**UST as the robins made October their own by the universal burst of song with which they notified their return in renewed vigour from songless retirement during the period of the moult, so the song-thrush, having gradually relearned his art, in spite of occasional relapses into silence during frost-chequered November and December, sets the stamp of his renovated life upon the first month of the opening year. Early and late he takes his stand boldly upon some prominent branch, and facing the rising or the setting sun, pours himself out in an ecstasy of song to this—as it would seem—the source of his inspiration.

Is this the bird, one is prompted to ask, which a week or two ago stood inert and spiritless, like a stuffed bird, in the frost-bound fields, admitting of the closest approach, as if careless of his life?

Now, also, one may come very near to him, but for an entirely opposite reason. So intent is he upon his singing, that he is careless who stands to watch or listen; or, if he observes, he flits only

## Birds by Land and Sea

to a neighbouring tree, to resume with unbroken ardour the interrupted melody.

There is something of the poet in this bird—a shiftless, thriftless creature in the hard ways of a wintry world; but let the frost-bound clods be loosened by a genial thaw, so as no longer to resist the soft, probing bill, and he will have broken his fast ere the light is fully on the land, and taken his stand to waken the lazier hard-bills with his morning song. A wild, ecstatic creature at such times; seeking out all manner of strange phrases of song, which he will repeat time after time with scrupulous unction, as if well pleased with his inventions.

And well may the song-thrush sing in this January of 1903! For, save for two separate weeks of frost, south winds have made an open winter, and already the hawthorn buds are reddening, elder and japonica are in leaf, and life is everywhere stirring in response to a mean temperature for long past well over forty degrees in the shade.

The thrush's song is a provocation to the robin, and the latter seldom lets the challenge go unanswered, trilling out his silvery lyric in the pauses of the thrush's fiery declamation.

There is another song becoming increasingly frequent as the month advances, and recalling summer days, when the ease-loving corn-bunting sat by the hour and called, "*Duc! duc! duc!* *tr-r-r-r-r—ee—ye!*"

## January

If the blackbird, unlike his fellow thrush the throistle, has not yet found his singing voice, he fills the air at sundown with his noisy alarm note. I have heard the bird continue to utter for minutes, without a break, his sounding "*Pink! pink! pink!*" until one might have imagined that all the cats of the countryside were besieging him in his lonely ever-green citadel.

On the last day of January I observed a pair of robins paying one another marked attention. There were three of them in a low thorn—an unusual assemblage for a bird of such solitary habits. Two were cocks, the other a hen. One of the cocks, perching on a twig a few inches before the hen, was going through a performance of bowing and flirting up his tail at all angles to his lady spectator in the manner usual with this bird, but with more than usual excitement in his movements. While he was thus employed, the hen, without changing her position, continued to sway her body from side to side, with a dreamy balancing motion, facing the gesticulating cock. The second cock, perched a foot behind her, had evidently been "cut out" by his rival, and these amorous antics had been going on for some minutes, when the successful cock darted suddenly round the hen, and after a short scuffle, rid himself of the embarrassing company of the superfluous witness.

On the same day I noticed that a gallant hedge-sparrow had come to make things rosy for a highly

## Birds by Land and Sea

domesticated young hen, which for months previously might always be found on one side or the other of a secluded strip of hedge, as lonely as Marianna in her moated grange. These hedge-sparrows have beats as defined as those of robins, and often more restricted. Dressed in sober greys and browns; quietly diligent and stay-at-home; with no more coquetry than the continual flirt of the wings, which has earned for them the title of "shuffle-wing;" and with a characterless little song, of which one would fain speak charitably, because it is one of the very first to herald the oncoming spring, the hedge-sparrow reminds one of the good folk in whose fields it so often makes its home—grey, uneventful lives, which seem to spring from the soil they are born to till, and from which they depart as little as the dunnock from its hedge, until, having known laborious days, and the cares of an offspring too numerous to be an unmixed blessing, they sink back in the end into the last furrow of all, and become, indeed, part of it.

One might well have expected to find missel-thrushes, which usually pair early in February, anticipating the time of building in so mild a January; yet I observe them still flying in flocks—an indication that birds observe times and seasons, apart from the question of the conditions prevailing at the moment. Although the song-thrush is in full song again, the missel still wanders about, uttering its harsh rattling note, and up to the close of the month has not



HEDGE-SPARROW



YOUNG HEDGE-SPARROWS





## January

assumed the *rôle* of the stormcock, an appellation to which he usually lays claim in the early part of the year by the wild, stirring song to which the blustering winds and driving rain, usual at that time, seem to rouse him.



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## FEBRUARY

**W**ITH the advent of February one felt that the period of spring's probation was drawing rapidly to a close. The bare black boughs of tree and shrub were suddenly bedewed, as it were, with whitening buds; green of the greenest flecked the hawthorn here and there, in spite of the fact that last year's berries still hung above it unconsumed; the bright young privet leaves peeped out on the dark old ones; the resinous points of the chestnut showed like brushes freshly dipped to paint a summer scene; the almond stood between shut and open, as if knowing that, once open, it must lay its whole freight of blossoms bare at one flush; and although the red on the holly still made a brave Christmas show, rose and lilac, elder and japonica, were in leaf; jessamine starred the cottage wall; whilst snowdrop and yellow crocus, the wallflower, and here and there a daffodil, repaid by early blossoming the careful hand which had planted them under shelter from the winds.

And out in the fields, striped with the fine green vanishing lines of the young wheat, a jubilant cry of quickening life!

## February

For on the 5th February, the hedge-sparrow struck the first distinctive note of spring, a song consisting of two notes repeated four or five times in hurried succession. There had been other songs during the hard months—songs which were a presence rather than a promise ; but the gentle hedge-sparrow, although also one of the brave little band which shares the winter with us, has not the proud defiance of the robin, nor the irrepressible vitality of the wren, which prompt them to fling a song in the face of winter whenever they get a chance. Nor has he the emotional temperament of the throstle, which overflows in song throughout the winter, provided only the earth be left unlocked to his soft bill, so that he may eat and live. No ; the hedge-sparrow is just a plain, methodical little spirit, with sufficient prose in him to save him from singing to bare fields and hedges, but ready to recognize the very first peep of spring, and to herald it forth to the world at large to the best of his limited powers. So it comes that his is ever the distinctive spring song—the song that springs up again after a winter lapse. He may now be seen with his mate in the hedgerows, hopping from twig to twig about her, and making his court with a continuous shuffle of his wings. This same shivering of the wings is used by young birds when clamouring to be fed, and in the act of receiving food. Eating is probably as exciting to young birds as wooing is to their elders.

On the 7th February the stormcock justified his

## Birds by Land and Sea

title by shouting defiance to a not too aggressive sou'-wester ; and the blackbird, emerging from months of indolence, made mellow music with his low fluting all day long. The song of the blackbird is just such a one as this lover of quiet and seclusion might be expected to give utterance to when taking his ease free from alarm. Some birds, such as the masterful stormcock, sing to half a mile of country at once ; others sing to each other like answering *cantori* and *decani* of the grove ; the blackbird sings to himself. Mellow, leisurely, easeful, with no more sign of effort than the dreamy gurgle of some slowly gliding brook, the low fluting notes have the richness of a fine contralto, of a great singer not over-careful in her phrasing, singing alone, unconsciously, distraught. The blackbird holds a unique position among the finer singers ; no other has, like him, the right soothing note.

But the song of the throstle dominated all, bird answering bird in joyous emulation, so that it seemed strange that the roving bands of fieldfares, encompassed on all hands by the spring song of their congeners, should escape infection, and fail to be drawn into the general chorus.

The robin could not well fail at such a time ; but there is now less contention, and more contentment, in his song. He is less in evidence than before, but when found in some secluded corner, starts up, and from gatepost or fence-rail bobs his head and flirts his tail, with a vigorous "*Tet-tet!*" the

## February

while, as who would say, "Shoo! Begone!" This demonstration is watched from the rear by a bird of slimmer build, with a brick-red breast as it flutters nervously about the undergrowth, emitting an acute, inward, whining note, familiar to all who have at any time approached the nesting hen. For the robin has paired—I saw my first pair on January 28th—and although the nest is probably not yet begun, coming events cast their shadows before, and the cares of two, perhaps even three, prospective broods are upon her.

It is now certain that the yellow wagtail has left us, in spite of the fact that I saw one as late as the 23rd November by the water's edge on the Mersey bank. If it were not so, he would be following the plough with his kinsman, the pied wagtail. It requires three to plough a field—a man, a horse, and a wagtail. The last follows in the furrow last cut, and eats the grubs.

As usual on fine open days at this time of the year, the skylark seems to start out from nowhere, and, spiralling up into the blue, carries one's mind ahead by the impulse of his carolling to days when, by its natural fitness with the season, it will fail to arrest the hearer's attention as it does now. Even if the lark had no song, its movements on the wing are so characteristic that they alone would serve to identify it; first, the broad spiralling curves by which he lays the base of his tower of ascent, becoming narrower and narrower as he rises, until, with

## Birds by Land and Sea

concentrated energy, he mounts in a direct line, pausing now and again to circle out and gain fresh strength for his upward flight; then, just as he ascended by stages, so he descends, partially folding his wings and inclining his head as he drops from stage to stage, like a spider on suddenly lengthening thread, until, at last, with wings laid closely back, legs hanging loosely, and body abandoned to the full pull of gravitation, he falls like a stone, recovering himself when within a yard of the earth by expanding his wings and flitting forward close to the ground for some distance before he alights.

With "morning at seven" I am abroad by the time that the rooks arrive from their distant sleeping quarters, which they do in small detachments, flying high on a straight line, especially high when there is a mist on the land. They go at once to the rookery, and throw themselves down with tumbling antics through the air, darting this way and that with a violent zigzagging motion. As each new contingent arrives, the whole rookery utters an objurgatory "*Caw!*" as much as to say, "Late again, Lazy Bones!" When the sun is coming up, the birds often rise in a mass, and with vigorous cawing describe mazy circles above the tree-tops—a delightful picture as the cloud of black shifting wings weaves its airy web upon the yellow background of the dawn. After this they betake themselves to the adjoining fields to feed.

One of the birds has, at the time of writing, a





SKYLARK



## February

large, greyish white patch on each wing, giving it to some degree the appearance of a magpie. This is due to faulty secretion, and sometimes rooks are wholly white from this cause, as well as jackdaws, and that contradiction in terms, the white blackbird. Sparrows also may at times be observed with a white patch in some part of their bodies.

After breakfast, some of the more meditative spirits perch alone, preferably on a high dead branch, a habit I have noted in birds of this kind in various parts of the world.

It is at such times that the rook, feeling, possibly, that he is beyond the reach of criticism, breaks forth into song! Whatever may be thought of the song of the rook from the point of view of art, the bird itself evidently finds no small satisfaction in it. From his solitary perch he delivers himself, with sundry antics, of a series of little consequential gabblings, punctuated from time to time by a strident "Caw!" as he dips his head and cocks his tail to one of the black colony sailing past his singing perch. Genial weather, and probably a well-filled stomach, are accountable for this lapse from corvine gravity; and when the inspiration is on him, a rook may be approached more closely than at more prosaic moments, as is the case with many other birds with equal pretension to wariness.

After weeks of unusually mild weather, with a temperature between fifty and sixty degrees Fahr. in the shade, there came a sudden snap of frost on

## Birds by Land and Sea

the night of the 12-13th February, and when I went out in the early morning, a low mist covered the meadows.

As I approached a tall, bare elm, there slipped from the upper branches two kestrels, which I was near enough to identify on the wing ere they glided into the mist. I had last seen the kestrel—alone, as usual in the autumn—on the 16th November. The frost then drove it away. It was strange to meet the bird again—to all appearances paired—immediately an unexpected snap of frost came to put an edge on the soft, springlike weather which had preceded it for some weeks. For the same reason that frost drives away birds from a given district, it will bring strangers into that district, receding before a similar visitation in the surrounding country.

So unusually mild a February was not allowed to pass out peacefully. The south-west winds, which had characterized the winter throughout, developed into a terrific gale in the early hours of the morning of the 27th, the wind running for three hours with a velocity of sixty-six miles an hour, and at times attaining ninety miles an hour.

I was out in the meadows at the height of the gale, and was struck by the behaviour of the rooks under the unusual circumstances. About a hundred and fifty birds, all facing windward, and packed in a serried mass upon an area which at ordinary times would have afforded elbow-room for no more than

## February

half a dozen, cowered in a sheltered corner of the field, formed by the cross hedges. From time to time one of them essayed to skim the hedge, but was immediately hurled backward, and fell in again crestfallen at the rear of his less venturesome comrades, only a few managing to get over during temporary lapses of the wind. These worked their way forward by short flights, hugging the ground closely, until they skimmed up the lee side of a high railway embankment, when, caught at the top by the wind rushing up the farther side, they were whirled aloft, and only saved themselves by wheeling out in great arcs across the wind, tacking from point to point, as if feeling for openings between the currents of air. Strong flier as the rook is, he carries too much sail for a gale, and the missel-thrushes, flying high and straight in the wind with short, strong, rapidly beating wings, showed themselves better equipped for the emergency.

The river Mersey, which is a stream of some twenty to thirty feet in breadth in my neighbourhood, carried white-crested waves a foot high, and the wind whipped the spray up in clouds as it drove round the bends. For a few moments the gale was terrific. I had just put up my glasses to watch a pair of skylarks in the meadow below the river embankment, when I was carried off my feet by a furious gust, the larks were swept splashing along the water meadows for fifty yards, dead timber flew out straight from the trees like so much paper,

## Birds by Land and Sea

and in a distant orchard a fine old tree, which had seen generations come and go, stooped slowly to earth as if with the dignified deliberateness of age; but when I passed it later on my way home, I found that it had been snapped clean across a yard above the ground.

All this hurly-burly was enacted beneath a blue cloudless sky and a brilliantly shining morning sun.

## MARCH

**M**ARCH is true to its derivation in bird-world ; it is a month of fighting.

When you look over a hedge in early March, and see three missel-thrushes tacking about as if they were quite unconscious of each other's presence, it may be concluded that two of them are lusty swains about to take their coats off to dispute the possession of the indivisible fair. The courting of the missel is very human. When two birds espy one another at some distance in the field, they both start aside and strike an attitude of attention. This manœuvre may be repeated fifty times ere the birds come within speaking distance, so to say. Then the hen turns tail and hops deliberately away from the cock in the "first-she-would-and-then-she-wouldn't" manner. Having done this, she stands, with neck craned up, apparently looking ahead into the empty field ; but when the cock again starts aside and renews his antics, it is seen that she was following him with a backward glance, for she immediately responds by imitating his action.

## Birds by Land and Sea

And so it goes on—the endless short tackings and attitudinizings—until the rattle of a second cock causes both to start up and eye the erect figure seated defiantly on the hedge-top, flirting his tail excitedly. The invader does not deliver the attack offhand, but dropping quietly into the field, like the other two goes through a performance of running hither and thither, observing and pretending not to observe, varying his tactics by feigning to pick impalpable nothings from the grass as he works his way up. But these antics are well understood by the gentleman in possession, and he struts angrily to and fro, going halfway toward the intruder, and then returning to the hen, as if he were afraid that while he was winning the battle, the prize might vanish. However, after a great deal of skirmishing, the invading cock charges home in full flight, and the two birds flutter up in a sparring contest on the wing in the manner of starlings. Whilst this is going forward, the hen, as a rule, takes wing ; and, with a final peck or two, the two cocks, sounding their rattles, follow her in hot pursuit, probably to renew the battle elsewhere.

In the opening days of March it is plainly to be seen by the distribution of the rooks in their feeding-grounds that they are for the most part paired. Now and again a cock spreads his tail, and struts about before his lady, sweeping the grass with drooping wings like a turkey-cock the while. Then the pair face one another, and bow low repeatedly to each



## March

other, so that their beaks all but meet on the ground, whilst their spread tails are erected symmetrically in the air. During this grotesque seesawing, the male emits a low guttural sound, not unlike the "laughter" of the "laughing" gull. If any too attentive gentleman strays undesirably near his "charmer," the rook, unlike the missel-thrush, wastes no time in idle finesse, but just "goes" for him, gets his beak fastened in the intruder's poll, and pins him to the ground. The cries of the chastised one cause a crowd of rooks to rush up, and these stand round, not fighting themselves, but cawing wildly, with necks and wings outstretched, to those so engaged.

Such of our rooks as have old nests returned to roost permanently by them during the first week in March, and the male may now be seen occupied the day over bringing sticks for the repair of the nest and food for his mate, whom he leaves in charge during his excursions. The twigs are for the most part gathered from the surrounding trees, being broken off by the male with considerable force. He then presents them to his partner with a self-satisfied caw, and after helping to fix them in position, sets off again, leaving her on guard. For there are thieves among rooks, and the verb "to rook" was not coined for nothing. A sudden caw recalls the cock if a marauder approaches the nest, and he comes sweeping back, getting above his adversary, if possible, and, dropping upon him,

## Birds by Land and Sea

seizes him by the feathers of the nape, and "sinks" him hurtling through the branches.

There is another source of anxiety for the old birds when repairing their nests—the young birds of the former season. The latter persist in claiming a right of approach to the nest in which they were reared, despite the fact that they generally have with them sons or daughters from neighbouring nests as prospective consorts. We have many such young birds in our rookeries, where the practice of yearly shooting them off just before they are ready for flight is little observed. The consequence is that, while the old nests are being repaired, several couples of these young birds sit around, occasionally mobbing the old lady on guard, whom they no doubt regard as a most unnatural mother. Then the father returns, and deals out rough justice; and any one who has heard him fifty yards away snap off stout twigs for the nest, can well imagine that when he tweaks their feathers with his strong beak, the sting at the other end must gradually convince his discarded offspring that home is not the place it used to be. But the lesson is hard to learn, and for days these young birds take their punishment, only to fly around and alight again on the same branch, there to indulge in idle revilings of the parents who have cut them adrift.

From time to time one of these young birds gets a stick of his own, and there is a tremendous flutter of excitement among the young couples at this

## March

first attempt at housekeeping. But it is evident from the stupid manner in which he perches, twig in beak, beside his mate, that he is at a loss what to do with the wonderful acquisition ; and as she appears equally inept, they sit together, congratulating one another, until it falls from his mouth. However, neither Rome nor a bird's nest is built in a day, and before they are many weeks older this inexperienced young couple will probably have more than a nest on their hands.

Although part of the birds have returned to us, a considerable number still continue to leave in the evening for their winter sleeping quarters, which lie to the west. Before the breaking up of Trafford Park by the cutting of the Ship Canal, they used to fly northward to roost there during the winter months. For how many years—or, more probably, centuries—had the ancestors of these birds gone backwards and forwards on this north-and-south line between Stretford and that ancient estate? What must have been the consternation among birds of such rigidly conservative habit when they found their old roosting haunt invaded! And how did they fix upon their new one? In short, who leads among rooks? For, a head of some sort there certainly is. One may watch a field full of rooks coming and going all day long, each bird at its own prompting. Then suddenly, and apparently at the instigation of one or two birds, the whole field rises as if by a common understanding, and the

## Birds by Land and Sea

flock makes off without exception. That this is not due to alarm will be readily believed by those acquainted with the way of rooks. For there is a decided individuality about this bird ; and if a flock gets up at one's approach, a few will often refuse to rise, or, even after jerking their wings preparatory to flight, settle down again as if they consider it to have been a "false alarm." Be that as it may, those in authority among the rooks have changed their sleeping quarters, and they now fly east and west daily in the winter between their sleeping and their nesting quarters ; and, although they dribble in in the morning and dribble out again in the evening, the straggling line of slowly moving black wings touches a sympathetic chord as it comes up, cawing from afar, to the kindling east, or as it passes and fades away at evening in the reddening west.

All rooks do not daily visit their nesting haunts during the winter as ours do, but some forsake them when the young have flown, to return again only in the following spring. It must have been such a return which I witnessed on the 3rd March. I was in the heart of the city of Manchester at five o'clock in the afternoon of that day, and, looking up, beheld at a great height, immediately over the Exchange, a flock of about a couple of hundred rooks flying straight on roughly a south-and-north line. I hurried on, and watched them pass in high flight between the Cathedral and the Exchange

## March

station, finally losing sight of them behind the buildings lying beyond. I should be interested to know in what district on the north side of Manchester the rooks returned to their summer haunts in the evening of the 3rd March, 1903.

On the morning of the 29th March I passed the spot where I had taken leave of my last wheatear during the autumn migration at the close of September of the preceding year. A sudden flash of white on the freshly turned clods revealed the wanderer returned to the old field-corner, where a huge dung-heap forms, as it would seem, a baiting-ground for the birds—one could well believe them to be the same birds—in their passage to and fro at the spring and autumn migrations. Whither these particular birds go from here I do not know, unless it be to the Derbyshire hills, whose grey forms rise boldly on the horizon to the south and east; but if such be the case, they may well be content to spend a day or two with us in the lowlands, as is their habit, with the goal of their wanderings so nearly in view.

There are few sights more welcome to the bird lover in his early spring rambles than that of the wheatear as it flits from clod to clod in the bare fields in the later days of March. A rival of the chiff-chaff for the primacy as spring's earliest herald from overseas, he delivers to the eye in the open plain the message which the

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tenderer little warbler conveys to the ear from the safer shelter of wood or copse.

If one could give to the robin a buffy white waist-coat, draw a blue-grey coat over his olive-brown back, and deepen the wings to black, he might, in spite of the wheatear's slimmer build, counterfeit the latter with some success. The same exquisite sleekness of plumage is found in both; the same habit of drooping the wings; the same sprightly duckings of the head and flirtings of the tail; the same love of perching on some slight eminence, be it clod, or stone, or post; the same pugnacious exclusiveness in chasing other birds, especially those of their own kind, from the spot of which they have taken prior possession. But, even if the "*Tet! tet!*" of the robin could pass for the "*Tac! tac!*" of the wheatear (a note common to all the chats, and imitated by striking together two pebbles), the first true wheatear which came along with flashing white tail deeply barred with black at the extremity would betray the counterfeit, and reveal the bird which, from this, its most distinctive marking, our forefathers named with Saxon directness *hwitears*, since corrupted into the euphemistic "wheatear," but really meaning "white rump."

Despite such points of resemblance in form, motion, and habit, which may serve to assimilate two birds so diverse in their markings as the robin and the wheatear, in other respects they stand in the sharpest contrast. For, whilst the one

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has ingratiated itself among many peoples by the trustful or, perhaps, bold familiarity of its ways, and is ever found in close association with man and his works, the other shuns such contact, and flees beyond the last furrow of the plough to the waste uplands or rocky seashore, where it may live its wild solitary life. Already during its temporary sojourn in the plains one observes that the wheatear does not perch on trees as robins do, but flits from clod to clod and from post to post, just as it is wont to fly from rock to rock along the seashore, or from one prominent object to another on the lonely moors which its presence serves to enliven. Both, as a rule, fly close to the ground, although the robin will at times perch high to sing. Both are solitary birds, the robin never packing, and the wheatears doing so only when migrating. In spite, however, of all points of difference, there remains a striking likeness in the "personality" of these two birds, the more worthy, perhaps, to be noted here, since such facts are of too elusive a character to enter as elements in classification.

These birds continued to drift singly across our fields until the 16th April, the first male being seen ten days later than the first female. After a lull from the 16th April until the 3rd May, other larger wheatears began to drift across, and among these were some apparently already paired. The last birds of this second migration passed on the 12th May.

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Close observation of a comparatively limited area thus afforded evidence of the two successive migrations of wheatears—first the smaller form, which is our British breeding-bird; then the larger one, which is known to pass as far north as Greenland for nesting purposes.

Although the chiff-chaff was announced as having arrived on the 27th March on the other side of the Cheshire border, he was not yet to be found in some of his usual summer haunts on the Lancashire side.

All our winter stay-at-homes, however, were then in full song again. The yellow-hammer opened with his “little-bit-o’-bread-and-no-che-e-s-e” note on the 4th March, and, although rather weak in the “cheese” for some days, afterwards made up for the deficiency with characteristic industry.

The corn-bunting had now completed his remarkable record of winter singing, and carried it on into spring with increasing energy. The greenfinch struck up its somewhat similar “rag-tearing” scream on the 29th.

Cock chaffinches only occasionally favour us by their early company, but the rattling song which was first heard at Stretford on the 22nd March, must have caused a flutter among the numerous mild-mannered females who had been playing the part of grass widows in the neighbourhood since the fall of the preceding year.

The courting of the missel-thrushes still continued





CHAFFINCH'S NEST



## March

to be a terribly earnest business, and appeared to have reached that stage when the hen was determined to put the cock's devotion to the final proof of touring the countryside in ceaseless flight with her suitor at her tail.

Whilst sitting under a hedge in an orchard about this time, I was startled by the outrush of a couple of furious song-thrushes, one pursuing the other until both suddenly settled on the boughs of the same tree at a distance of a few feet from each other. Then both sang wildly together, interjecting excited squeaks and gabblings such as starlings use. It was manifest from the gestures of these birds that their song was prompted by anger. I have known a robin respond by vigorous singing after flitting aside in order to avoid an experimental pass I had made at him with my stick.

Magpies are now moving in pairs. These birds are always with us in considerable numbers, so that I seldom go out either in winter or summer without seeing or hearing them. They affect more particularly the high beeches and elms which stand either singly or set widely apart in rows in the open fields on each side of the river Mersey. After the leaves had fallen in the autumn, the nests, placed centrally against the trunks and near the tops of the trees, could be counted to the number of a score in a mile walk—large domed aggregations of sticks and twigs, showing black against the sky. They vary in size ; for this bird, which pairs for life, continues to

## Birds by Land and Sea

use the same nest in successive years, making additions at the beginning of each breeding season. The birds commence nesting operations long before the spring leaves appear, and already early in March nests were in course of construction. It remained, however, to be seen if they would be completed ; for the magpie is a fastidious builder, and frequently abandons, for some unapparent reason, the site it has first selected. This bird's note—a grating sound shaken out loosely five or six times in succession—resembles in its quality the noise made by a rattle, but in the form of its delivery is similar to the bleating of a goat. It is generally heard before the bird is seen, for the magpie, so wary in most respects, no sooner sights a possible enemy than it betrays its whereabouts by its alarm note, further exposing itself by starting upon a long flight to some distant tree, during which it often emits another more acute and querulous note. Seen from below on the wing, the bird roughly resembles a dragon-fly in form, the long graduated tail causing the short wings to appear as if set disproportionately high on the shoulders. The flight is generally directed upon a straight line, and is slow and laboured, as if the bird were being held back by some invisible thread attached to its long tail. When it alights, the body is swayed forward on the branch as the unmanageable tail shoots upward, so that one cannot but wonder what natural process has evolved and perpetuates such an obstructive member.

## March

Whatever be the value of a magpie's wings and tail as a means of locomotion, as adornments they go to make up a singularly elegant and striking bird. A bird of eighteen inches from beak to tail, of a lustrous black, contrasting strongly with the white underparts, the bold white scapulars, and the flickering black and white of the primaries, it is by far the most conspicuous of our inland species. The magpie's good looks, however, go with a bad reputation for egg and chick stealing, and its bedraggled form may be found in any gamekeeper's "museum" in company with the mortal remains of weasels, stoats, hawks, crows, jays, and similar malefactors. What a fine set some of these same malefactors are—the fleet, the strong, the cunning! And in the interest of what are they thus cut off? Principally of an imported creature which degenerates (as it could not but degenerate) in proportion to the degree to which it is protected, so that men must go round and collect its eggs, and bring them in for incubation by a farmyard fowl. Game birds probably suffer less from the depredations of the magpie than small birds generally. I observe that the rook—so partial to his corvine relatives, the jackdaw and starling—will not suffer the presence of a magpie, although a bird of the same stock: and the rook should know; for, although he has managed to ingratiate himself with the lord of the manor, he is not above a fresh egg himself, nor even a chick, for that matter.

## Birds by Land and Sea

There was once a pheasant which had partly hatched off its eggs in the middle of a grass field. When the hay was got in, a small patch was left uncut out of consideration for the sitting bird. The rooks from a neighbouring rookery developed such a strong attachment for the spot, that it was with surprise that it was noticed one morning that they had all disappeared. So had everything else—except the shells!

Whatever lapses the magpie may be guilty of, she procures her food principally upon the ground, and when thus engaged searching for grubs, worms, and the like, is a very interesting object. Her antics while feeding are often such as to convey the impression that the bird is showing off before some unseen onlooker, and it is only when one afterwards reflects that they are the spontaneous expression of its own character, that one realizes how extremely capricious that character is. For there is, in fact, an intensity in its waywardness which makes it something more than mere caprice. It recalls the wagtails by its sudden tackings to right and left; by the manner in which it darts forward a short way, then draws up at once, and as rapidly swings round to the rear, as if it had been startled by something seen through the back of its head. The vicious dig of its beak into the ground is truly corvine, but the long tail that rises simultaneously and is sustained at an acute angle, reminds one of the blackbird recovering his balance after alighting on a hedgetop. Not

## March

a moment is the bird still ; it seems to be working against time ; and when it rises, even though unalarmed, it makes off abruptly and at top speed, only to drop on the farther side of some hedgerow and resume its erratic performance.

During the month there has been a good deal of "sound and fury" in the partridge haunts, where early morning assemblies have been held to settle matrimonial matters for the ensuing season. Cocks have strutted and fought, the brave and the fair retiring from communal life into domestic privacy. A snap of uncongenial weather may yet throw them back into the looser relationship of the covey ; but, as the month closes, paired birds dot the fields, lying low and moving slowly, with very little action of the head as they feed, so that an inexperienced eye would pass over them without being arrested. By popping up suddenly from behind a hedge, I came upon a pair feeding in the fallows at a distance of no more than half a dozen yards from me. Instead of taking flight, they crouched down motionlessly among the clods, their low, rounded backs and little peeping heads reminding me of tortoises. Immediately I descended behind the hedge, they were off with a whirr that was an amusing commentary on their former inaction. As night falls, the birds begin to cry in the grass fields—a cry in its quality not unlike that of the lapwing, but inverted, the partridge opening on the higher, and closing on the lower note, whilst the lapwing does the reverse. Ere calling,

## Birds by Land and Sea

the cock runs half a dozen yards or so ; then, drawing himself up, delivers his somewhat querulous challenge in the quiet dusk, and stands as if waiting for reply. Receiving none, he runs again in another direction, and renews his call. After this has been done several times, the female may be seen running, with lowered head, to join him, and upon reaching him, she squats low at his tail, the cock remaining upright. If disturbed, the birds use a noisy "Rit-tit-tit-tit-tit-tit!" as they fly to some safer part of the field.

Hearing this note one evening last summer, I was able, by the aid of the glasses, to obtain sufficient light to observe the cause of the disturbance. In the middle of a grass field was a little knoll, such as partridges delight to "jug" upon, but seated upon it was a hare. Madam Partridge stood at the base of the knoll, nagging at the moody quadruped ; but, getting no reply, worked herself up into a naughty temper, which she sought to relieve by running to and fro excitedly between the knoll and a group of birds, consisting of her husband and six children, who remained a short distance from it. In the end, the cock went forward with her, and the two old birds kept running about the knoll with excited cries, pausing from time to time to stand bolt upright before the hare, as if to intimidate him. The hare seemed to be a philosophic sort of creature, and having probably chosen the spot on account of its peace and quietness, seeing these were gone, betook himself off also, and the covey camped on the knoll.





SONG-THRUSH



MEADOW-PIPIT'S NEST



## March

The hare's retirement seemed a singularly virtuous act, and I was therefore less prepared for the sequel. Slipping through the hedge, he came out on to the road, but immediately fell foul of a couple of his kind, who had been sitting quietly on the grass at the roadside. Without more ado, the three were up on their hind legs, boxing one another with their forefeet in a ludicrously human manner. Round and round they waltzed, seeking for an opening, and I caught the crack of their pads as one or another got home. They do not hit out, but use a downward, clawing stroke. The psychological import of the episode seemed to be that the hare had bottled up his futile wrath in presence of the partridges, but yielded to sudden temptation upon falling in with something of a more fightable quality. After all, virtue is probably as elastic among quadrupeds as with men, and what is temptation to the hare may well be the salvation of the tortoise.

The cock pheasant is at this time as demonstrative in his attentions to the brown lady who happens to have caught his passing fancy, as he will probably be to a score more before the season is out. Carried away by his amorous ardour, he breaks off feeding, swings round with a sweep of his fine tail, and runs rapidly up to her. She anticipates his overtures by laying her chin to earth, and remains so whilst the cock, standing close before her, bows repeatedly, so that when his head is dipped, his beak almost touches hers. Then follow a few minutes of

## Birds by Land and Sea

more prosaic feeding, until he feels impelled to renew his protestations, when the performance is gone through again. It is probably to the fact that cocks are shot off more freely than hens that we must ascribe the lapse of the pheasant into polygamy, since, in its wild state, the bird is monogamous, and discharges the duties of a parent in aiding the female to attend to the young.

Dunnock, thrush, and blackbird had by this time built their nests to the sound of their own singing, and the house and tree sparrows had woven their summer dwellings with more chirps than straws. Great-tit, coal-tit, and blue-tit were hunting in pairs, the last singing on the wing as he followed his little mistress from tree to tree. Many of the rooks had got over the twig-breaking stage, and were gathering tufts of dead grass with which to line their nests; whilst here and there a still, black tail, projecting over the edge of the nest, attested the even more serious occupation of the sitting hen. And the skylark was everywhere, early and late pouring out a rain of song upon the green meadow beneath him. The reed-bunting, with velvety black head and white neck-band, and the meadow pipit and pied wagtail—the latter, startling in his pure white plumage pied with lustrous black—flitted in pairs by the river and over the water meadows, calling to one another as they went. The great bands of lapwings broke up at the middle of the month, some departing northwards, others remaining to toy like pairs of great



BLACKBIRD'S NEST



## March

strong butterflies, as they dashed about their breeding fields, uttering their strenuous "*Pee-wit!*" which became more querulous as the time drew near when the four earth-brown eggs, laid on the open ground, disposed their owners to regard every passer in a neighbouring field as an invader of their domestic privacy. The golden plovers, of which one attained summer plumage as early as the 22nd February, and a score out of some hundred and fifty birds exhibited the black markings in every stage of development at the time of departure, left during the last week of March the fields where they might be seen almost at any time since the preceding October. Bands of starlings, each composed of several hundreds of birds, passed over during the last week of the month, leaving our local birds to hail one another in detached pairs from the chimney-pots. Fieldfares were present in unusually large bands at Barlow Moor, and in a spot—in fact, in a few particular trees—to which they return, and in the neighbourhood of which they remain, every winter.

The "early" cuckoo was announced in the local prints, as usual, on the 11th March; but cuckoos, like men, were "deceivers ever;" although, unlike men, they are probably not often self-deceived.

March closed with the wheatear and chiff-chaff at home again, and already in mind one heard the sound of many wings. We were still able to count our wanderers as they returned; but in a short while we should have to throw up our hands, and fall back

## Birds by Land and Sea

upon the limited arithmetic of the Australian aborigine — “One, two, three, and—a great many!”

It is not long since men used to wonder *if* birds migrated: shall we ever know enough to cease to wonder *that* they migrate? For, if it be held that birds change their ground because of climatic changes, surely the birds that quit the north to winter with us when food is scarce, should not leave us with the advent of spring and a sufficiency of food. But if it be argued that failure of a supply of food of the right kind impels our summer visitors to migrate in the autumn, how should they know that after a long and sudden passage to the south they would find at the end of their journey what was lacking here? For birds, when they migrate, are not urged forward by a famine line, so to say, forcing them farther and farther south as the northern winter closes down behind them; but, as if by a common inspiration, enter at once upon a long and arduous voyage, during which thousands of them perish, and such as arrive at the distant goal do so exhausted and emaciated by the violent effort. Climate and food undoubtedly influence migration, but, as is often the case in reasoning about birds, there is still an unexplained remainder; for, as Warde Fowler truly says in his delightful book, “A Year with the Birds,” “Birds have ways, and reasons for them, which man is very unlikely ever to be able to understand.”

This year the migrants put in an appearance very early in the south of England. The wheatear was



## March

advised on the 18th March; the sand-martin was reported from Hampshire on the 23rd; the house-martin from Gloucestershire on the 22nd; the swallow and redstart from Hythe on the 21st; and a whinchat from Ludlow on the 20th. These were early dates, and would once have been ascribed to the mildness of the winter just past. Both the mild winter, however, and the early arrival of the migrants were more probably due to the same cause—continuous south-west winds, which had rendered the winter exceptionally mild, and were ready to lend powerful aid to migrants faring northwards as soon as the first impulse to return was felt.

## APRIL

**A** MERRY month is April, a month of shadow and shine that chase each other endlessly over the land, with now a keen backward cut from winter, sore to quit ; now a forward glance of summer, eager to arrive. Not a tree but now has leaf, if not flower ; and he who should set himself to record the happenings in wood and hedgerow, and on field and moor, must needs be a ready chronicler if he would finish his tale ere winter comes round again. Better to be part of oneself ; to be shone on and rained on ; to tramp the plain and roam the moor ; to know the joy of the quickening year, which is for every man for himself, and as little to be passed from one to another as the song of a bird or the scent of a flower.

There is one bird which at this time comes prominently into notice, whether on hill or plain—the lapwing ; for, a slight depression in grass field or fallow in the lowlands, or among the heather and ling of the moor, serves to receive the four blotched brown eggs which this bird lays in early April, open to the sky, as a lapwing's eggs should be.



LAPWING'S NEST



YOUNG LAPWING

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## April

For, of all the birds that roam the air, there is surely none more grandly free of it than the lapwing. These birds, it is true, whose flight is so sustained as seem perfunctory, and the names of wift and swallow and martin call up sunny scenes wherein these summer visitors weave their mazy web of flight from dawn to dusk with a regularity which would become monotonous, were it not that just this feature serves to set them in relief against the staid habits of other birds. But the flight of the lapwing is the pure joy of life on the wing. It is the gull of the dry land. Just as the sea bird exults in the rush of the wind over the crested wave, so the lapwing delights in the wind-swept moor. Although so differently formed, both gull and lapwing have the same slow beat of the wing when bent on some definite errand ; both have the same habit of standing for prolonged periods almost motionless ; and if they differ in the elegance of their movements on the land, it is that the statelier carriage of the lapwing at such times is matched by the gull only when it rides the wave. But, after such periods of quiescence, the lapwing rises as if seized by a sudden fury of flight. At a height of forty or fifty feet, it suddenly snaps the line of its ascent, and, with a violent doubling movement, which has the appearance of a somersault, precipitates itself to earth, upon which it must inevitably dash its life out, were it not that almost at the touching point it spreads its broad wings, and sails

## Birds by Land and Sea

upwards, to repeat the feat again and again. All the while the bird utters its wild cry, a long-drawn nasal sound, followed by the more distinctly articulated "*Pee-wit!*" (Birds have no labials—for obvious reasons—among their approximations to consonantal forms; and the French form of the bird's cry—"*Dix-huit!*" is instructive, as showing the different rendering of the consonantal, but the similar rendering of the vowel, form.) Then it dashes along in low straight flight, and, as it passes, the deep hum of its wings attests the stress of motion.

Besides its name of pewit and lapwing—the former taken from its cry, and the latter from the slow flapping of its wings during its ordinary flight—the bird has its name of plover from "*pluvier,*"—the "*rain-bird,*" as it might be translated, although this name was more distinctively applied to the golden plover on account of the great numbers of these birds which appeared migrating at the time of the spring and autumn rains. The term, however, has a certain appropriateness as applied to the lapwing or green plover; for, I have been struck by the restless, excited evolutions of the lapwing when skies were heavy with rain; and as the underwing and body flashed white against the lowering clouds I have seemed to see the glint of gulls' white wings on a black horizon as they wheeled and hovered mewing, presageful of storm, over a leaden sea.

The lapwing's cry may be heard often quite late

## April

at night, and I recall one occasion when, the low meadows about Stretford being flooded for miles and a high moon whitening the thin mist that lay on the water at night, lapwings were astir at midnight, chasing wildly over its surface, their strenuous "pee-wit" sounding eerily as they rose from the mist, and, with a glint of white as their underparts were exposed for a moment to the light of the moon, broke back with tumbling motion and drumming wings over the misty waters.

There are few more poignant cries than that of the lapwing when its breeding haunt is invaded. At such times, the cock bird, who generally does sentinel duty at some distance from the nest, rises promptly on the wing as soon as the intruder approaches. The hen, taking the signal, runs with lowered head from the nest, and not until she is some distance from it does she rise and join in the wild demonstration of her mate. The cry becomes a long, anxious "*Pee-ee!*" as she circles above the intruder, upon whom she will at times all but precipitate herself in her fury, checking her descent when a few yards from his head, to rise and swoop again. The young fall flat by any tuft or clod at the warning note, although, like the young of a nobler species, they soon begin to think that they know better than their elders; and it is comical to watch a fledgeling appease his conscience and his curiosity at once by alternately ducking down in some ineffectual hollow in the ground, and craning out his small neck to observe

## Birds by Land and Sea

the human bogey concerning whom so much is written in the code of bird morality.

The four eggs which the lapwing lays are highly conical at one end, and it is a law of ploverdom that the four points shall meet at the centre of the nest. One might spend a whole day placing them outwards; the bird would reverse them at each return.

I have frequently seen lapwings attack gulls and rooks on the wing; for it will tolerate no bird near its nesting quarters. But the lapwing's ire is especially aroused by the appearance of the kestrel. The latter moves, circling and hovering by turns, above the moor, until the lapwing, which has been watching the marauder with gathering wrath, darts up in perpendicular flight at surprising speed, and, buffeting the hawk in passing, rises above him, then swoops at him again; but the latter, laying his wings out like a pickaxe, wheels broadly aside on the wind, and leaves the lapwing to descend, content, no doubt, to have cleared the field of the vagrant enemy.

Another bird which the buoyant spirits of the breeding season urge into unusual prominence is the common snipe. About the pairing time, at the beginning of April, he may for some weeks be observed on the wing frequently throughout the day. At such times he describes great circles in the air at a considerable height, the rapidly beating wings carrying him round at a high speed. At regular intervals during this great circling flight, the wings are laid out flat, the one inside the great circle



## April

the bird is describing being tilted up, and that outside depressed. At the same moment the tail feathers are opened out, so that the sky may be seen between them as through the fingers of an open hand. Immediately the wings and tail are so set, the tips of the former begin to vibrate, the tail feathers remaining rigid, and the bird strikes off at a tangent, curving outwards and slipping downwards from the normal path of its circular flight. It is this recurring tangential deviation which causes the circle of the snipe's flight to become so vast. During the outward-curving, downward flight, the snipe's strange humming note is heard, synchronizing precisely with the vibration of the tips of its wings. The bill is closed when the note is being emitted. The bird's great circular flight is thus made up of two subordinate flights—the plain flight and the humming flight, in regular succession. After having described three or four great circles, the snipe reverses its course, and proceeds in the opposite direction; but it is to be observed that in its "humming" flight it still works always on its "outer edge," the wing outside the great circle being invariably the one to be depressed, and the one upon which the bird turns in performing the tangential, outward-curving, downward flight. The sound made by the snipe may be nearly imitated by laughing in the throat with the lips closed, and associates itself in my mind with that made by the puffin when returning laden with fish to his burrow. It is like hollow, mirthless laughter;

## Birds by Land and Sea

the expression of a wild, earnest joy by sounds which to human ears seem mournful rather than joyous, and therefore unnatural, uncanny, weird. The snipe has another amusing trick in flight; he will suddenly jerk himself to one side, throw his wings halfway back, and allow himself to fall like a lop-sided shuttlecock, until, as suddenly recovering himself, he sets off again on his circular career.

The nest, to be found on low, marshy ground, exhibits as little skill in the making as that of the lapwing, consisting of but a few dry grass leaves placed among the rushes or in the shelter of a coarse tuft, and upon these are laid the four eggs, the number of which appears to mark the limit of the reproductive powers of so many of the snipe's kindred. When the nest is approached, the snipe crouches low until the intruder is almost upon him, then starts up with a harsh, rasping cry, and with a violent zigzagging flight mounts aloft, where it continues to circle and repeat its cry until danger is passed.

On the 11th April I found the yellow wagtail back again on the bank of a Derbyshire stream. On the 12th of the same month I saw the bird newly arrived at Tatton in Cheshire. On the latter occasion I was watching a pair of pied wagtails tripping in conjugal complacency about the border of a secluded pool, when the yellow wagtail alighted about a couple of yards from his pied congeners. Madam immediately faced about, thinking,

## April

probably, as we thought, what a gay young spark he was in his sulphur waistcoat. The situation was interesting as the dainty little black and white lady and the gorgeous new-comer faced each other, and one waited curiously to see which would "speak" first. But there was a spectator even more interested than we, and with a rush, her indignant spouse placed himself between them. We expected to see him attack the yellow wagtail, but, running from side to side like a collie driving sheep, he caused the lady to retreat around the edge of the pond, while the gay intruder betook himself to a neighbouring field.

It was during the third week of April that the main body of the yellow wagtails arrived in Stretford with a rush, and some fifty or sixty birds remained upon a limited stretch of the Mersey bank until the end of the month, from which time until the middle of May vigorous pairing went on. Somewhat contrary to their usual habits, these birds at this time were much given to perching on trees, bush-tops, or stems in the grass fields, an aberration in which they were followed at the same season by those duller members of their family—the meadow pipits.

Unlike the gay, but almost silent wagtails, the meadow-pipit finds in song a free vent for the exuberance of its feelings. Since the first week in April the sudden "*Sing! sing! sing!*" of its song became more and more general, the bird mounting in steep flight, singing as it rose; until, at the culminating

## Birds by Land and Sea

point, it laid its wings back stiffly, and with tail expanded and erect, and dangling legs, glided slowly down a long curve, its quickening "*Sing! sing! sing!*" crushed up into a prolonged trill, which ceased as it reached the earth. At times this bird will sing whilst perching on a tree, on some low object on the ground, or even upon the ground itself.

Now that we may well be considered to have entered spring, I should, perhaps, advert to the remarkable fact that the corn-bunting has continued to sing in our meadows throughout the winter months. I first noticed its resumption of song after the autumn silence on the 2nd November. From that time onwards I have continuous records of the bird's singing throughout the winter until now, when its note is only less frequently heard than the somewhat similar long-drawn scream of the greenfinch. Although the winter has certainly been exceptionally mild, and although, during two spells of rather severe frost, I failed to hear the bird's song, still, I have known it to sing in weather sufficiently severe to silence any bird. I remember standing by the Mersey one bitterly cold morning with the bird before me on the hedge-top, and its note was then the only one to be heard in the silent meadows around me. Still, the sun was shining, and sunshine, even in very cold weather, seemed always to provoke the corn-bunting to song.

The corn-bunting's song—if song it may be called—opens with a few detached notes, exactly

## April

repeated, and delivered as if the bird were stuttering musically. These notes are followed by a long trill, delivered in a shrill voice, the whole resembling—“*Duc! duc! duc! Tr-r-r-r-r-r-ee-ye!*” The trill, apart from the modulated, somewhat tinkling note running through it, resembles the multitudinous grating sounds which might be made by crushing together a handful of minute particles of glass.

Is it not remarkable that a bird capable of singing throughout the winter should be almost the last to build its nest of all birds which remain with us through the year? The corn-bunting builds late in May.

By some strange perversity the north wind, which had scarcely visited us during the winter, opened at the middle of April, and snow, hail, and sleet, in the form of violent showers, took the place of the gentle rains which the season might have led us to expect.

It was on the 16th April that I first detected the song of the willow-wren in our meadows, although I had seen the bird and heard its song in a sheltered valley in Derbyshire on the 13th. On the occasion first mentioned, the bird was singing bravely from a beech beneath a blue sunny sky, but one which owed its clearness to a biting north wind, which must have seemed a churlish welcome to the little singer from the South.

It reads strangely to-day that the song of the willow-wren was “discovered” by Mr. J. Burroughs,

## Birds by Land and Sea

the American ornithologist. Such a discovery would say little enough for the discriminating powers of any person of intelligence, but if the song had not called for special remark on the part of British observers until then, it argues a strange callousness in them. It is a song which it would seem impossible to overlook. Burroughs naturally compared it with the songs of American birds, stating that the willow-wren was the only British bird which "exhibited to the full the best qualities of the American songsters." White, of Selborne, however, in his accurate, if brief way, had described the song as a "sweet, plaintive note," and in doing so showed that attention to essentials which marked all his work. Sweet and plaintive it is; sweet with the purity and refinement of the song of the robin; and if the willow-warbler lacks the versatility in phrasing of the latter, its song is also free from the abrupt, hesitating manner which often marks the robin's delivery. The willow-warbler, however, has but one song, repeated time after time without variation. Beginning with a few detached notes, exquisitely pure and penetrating, it descends through a series of more subdued ones, which press gently one upon another in a true warble-like limpid wavelets of sound, until it passes into silence as if it were the natural continuation of its gradually expiring notes. Some of the plaintiveness of the song lies in this perfect passing away of delicately modulated sound; some in the song itself, which has in it that wistful



NEST OF SPOTTED FLY-CATCHER





## April

turn which seems to contradict the spirit of song ; and part, perhaps, comes as an afterthought that a thing so sweetly perfect should be so fixed, so set, as if the little heart were bound to one expression wherewith to make known at once all the gladness and the sadness of its life. After this, one found a touch of obtrusiveness in the shout of the song-thrush, and the mellow turns of the blackbird seemed little more than curious. Only the robin still might rank.

Two days later—on the 18th April—I all but failed to discover the chiff-chaff. The same north wind was blowing, and the north side of every tree and furrow was white with a thin coating of snow. As I passed beneath a row of budding beeches, I just caught the new voice—a whispered “*Chiff-chaff-chirry-churry!*”—the diffident message of an all-but-discredited herald of a halting spring. Poised on one leg on the frosted bough, he seemed to survey the strange white fields as if doubtful of his mission. There was none of the energy which marks the ceaseless repetition through spring and summer, and well on into autumn, of this tiny warbler’s monotonous cry ; but if, in fairer days, with the more melodious tones of later comers in one’s ears—warblers in song as well as in name—one should be tempted to grow impatient of the chiff-chaff’s balder note, one will not forget that, while they still clung to the south, the chiff-chaff was with us—a brave little pioneer, who dared the north while the field-fares still lingered in our fields.

## Birds by Land and Sea

For the fieldfares were still plentiful in our district, although the swallow was credibly reported to have been seen a couple of miles west of us.

Both chiff-chaff and willow-wren vanished at once before the steady north winds, probably to the shelter of some kindly wood, such as we, in our open wind-swept plains, are unable to offer them.

On the 23rd of April the gentle wood-wren was with us again. "*Tui-tui-tui!*" he said, in that sweetly familiar way of his, as I stood within three yards from the hedge on which he was searching for an early morning meal. There he was again, this gentlest of warblers, fresh from his voyaging, tired and hungry, no doubt, but dainty and confiding as ever. If there is a bird one can really love for itself, surely it is the little brown and white wood-wren. And yet not merely brown and white. A bird of the woodland, it seems to have caught in the olive brown of its head and back the green reflection of leafy haunts, and the light of subdued sunbeams has become entangled in the yellowy white of its under parts. Something, too, of the quiet spirit of the woods has passed into the bird, and, like one used to solitude, it appears to regard the human form as strange, rather than as one to be feared.

He, too, was only a passenger, and the next day was gone in search of some more sylvan spot than ours; but there is no wood where I shall not find him all the summer through—a wandering song in the high tree-tops; or, better still, an anxious

## April

loiterer whose innocent arts all but lead me where his mate is nesting on the ground.

On the 16th April I observed the first pair of white wagtails in our water meadows. This bird is the Continental form of the pied wagtail, and resembles it closely in all particulars save the colour of the back. The latter is of an even grey both in the male and female birds, whereas in the male of the pied wagtail the back is black, and in the female the grey back is irregularly blotched and streaked with black, the grey itself being dingier than in the white form. The white wagtail occurs on migration both in spring and in autumn, but as at the latter period the young of the pied wagtail also have grey backs, it is easier to distinguish the white wagtail on the spring passage, the young pied wagtails having by then acquired mature plumage.

The white wagtail was continuously in evidence in our water meadows until the 3rd May; then it became rarer, but as one was seen as late as the last week of June, it would seem not improbable that it had remained to breed. These birds are well worth close watching in the spring, for, to judge by the lagging manner in which they move on at that time, I have small doubt that some of them settle down in favourable spots to breed.

The tree-pipit announced his advent on the morning of the 28th April. Yearly he returns to some high elms that shelter an old orchard in their rear, but face an open grass field, where his mate

## Birds by Land and Sea

necks, and his summer days are spent. The tree-pipit is essentially a bird of the trees, and as the meadow-pipit rises from the ground to sing, so the tree-pipit ascends from his favourite perching tree in all but perpendicular flight ; but, whilst the meadow-pipit usually sings in rising, the tree-pipit as a rule mounts silently. Having reached a height of some fifty feet or so, it opens its song, and with wings and tail set stiffly back, glides slowly down through a long curve or spiralwise, continuing to sing until it reaches its former perching-place in the tree. Arrived there, it is not silent, bird answering bird with a song which is at once very beautiful, varied, and delivered with the vigour of a chaffinch. The usual song given from the perch may be written—*“Tiu-tiu-tiu-tiu-tiu-tiu-tree-tree-tree-tree-tree-tree !”* the “tree” being more highly pitched than the “tiu,” and having a highly metallic ring. Sometimes the “tree” is replaced by an incisive *“Wheet-wheet-wheet !”* and at others a mechanical rattle, similar to that used by the common wren, follows the “tree” note, to be succeeded in its turn by a thin, long-drawn, acute note that may be written as *“Whee-e-e-e-e-ew !”* These four elements of the tree-pipit’s song are used to make a highly diversified strain, leaving the plainer performance of his fellow pipit of the meadows far behind. Still, like the latter, the tree-pipit is but a plain brown bird with speckled breast ; but such are many of the royal line of song.

The mallard, or wild duck, breeds so generally



DRAKE MALLARDS



## April

where suitable waters offer that it may suffice to state that its absence as a breeding bird from Stretford is due to the fact that we have no such waters to attract it. Still, when the mallards move northwards on the spring migration, some invariably use such waters as we have as a resting or baiting ground. It was the 6th April this year when the first pair appeared ; and mallards, generally paired, continued to come, and pass on, until the 16th of that month. The two drakes, and the duck with a young one, shown in the pictures, were photographed at their breeding quarters near Beaumaris at the middle of May.

Two other birds, closely resembling in many ways the redbreast and wheatear, arrived on the 15th April—the redstart and the whinchat. Both are redbreasts in their way, the redstart having bright bay on the breast, and the whinchat yellowy red. Although the redstart may at this time be seen in the open, perching on the clods in the ploughed fields like a chat, he reveals his closer affinity to the robin by more frequently appearing in some woody nook, or flitting about some tumble-down outhouse in a neglected garden. In its form, its blue-grey back and dusky quills, and the frequent rocking of its tail, the redstart recalls the wheatear ; in its flight and gestures generally it more nearly resembles the robin, flitting restlessly from some low perch to the ground and up again, or posing on post or rail to eye the intruder with all the robin's haughty mien.

## Birds by Land and Sea

Seen thus, his white forehead and black cheeks and throat scarcely suffice to defeat the thought that in the redstart we have but an elusive mingling of robin and wheatear ; but, as the bird flits, expanding its brilliant bay tail-feathers, and exposing the coverts at their bases, we recognize in the sudden flash of colour the distinctive feature which has earned for it the name of redstart, or firetail. This bird is a passenger only in our parts, and was last seen on the 28th April.

The whinchat, however, comes to stay. Always a bird of the open, he is at first more frequently to be seen in the ploughed fields, where his low, flitting flight, his abrupt pauses and poses, and the flash of the white outer feathers of the tail, with its dark terminal band, recall his fellow chat, the wheatear. Unlike those of the wheatear, however, the central feathers of the whinchat's tail are dark, and a prominent white patch shows on the wing as it flies ; when in repose, if the ruddy yellow breast should not suffice to distinguish it from the buff-breasted wheatear, a broad white stripe over the eye of the whinchat remains an easily seen and definitive test-mark. Like the redstart, the whinchat has his points of affinity to the robin also. The suddenness with which he mounts and vacates his perch—generally some low post or branch—and the sprightly bobbings of the head and flirtings of the tail, remind one of the redbreast. His point of closest resemblance, however, is in his song. The opening notes,



## April

tender and "*triste*" as those of a winter robin, are delivered with startling exactitude ; but, as if spring resented the reminiscence, he slips at once into the garrulous gabblings of the whitethroat, now all but due ; and, to complete the illusion, throws himself up into the air like that bird, and fluttering or snapping at some passing insect, breaks back to his perch to utter his "*U-tick-tick!*" a variant of the double-noted call common to all the chats. More peculiarly his own is his partiality for rummaging in the grass and clinging to some upstanding stem, foreshadowing nesting and feeding habits which he shares with neither redbreast nor wheatear.

On the 11th April I found the ring-ousel on Cown Edge in the Derbyshire hills, and watched it as it sang from a jutting crag to the wide valley below. At the same spot, on the 18th April, a pair of these birds went through a protracted courting performance almost at my feet.

The pure white crescent which hangs at the throat of both the male and female ring-ousels serves to distinguish them from the blackbird, even at a great distance, although, save for the orange bill of the blackbird, there is little else to discriminate the two species upon a general view. The ring-ousel, however, has none of the excessive timidity of the blackbird, and upon nearer inspection the general black of his feathers is seen to be relieved by greyish edgings.

My attention was called to the two birds as they

## Birds by Land and Sea

were going through their strange antics on a small grass bank on the hillside. The female would advance a few inches with head erect, upon which the cock, with head equally erect and facing the same way, would follow, stopping close to, and almost abreast of, the female, as if in position to whisper in her ear. Then the female would advance a few inches further, and the cock follow again in the same manner. In this way they paraded up and down the bank, along and across it, the cock emitting throughout a subdued, twittering song, to which the hen appeared to listen with becoming circumspection. At times the male bird would hop quickly in advance of her, swing round, and face her from a distance of a foot or so, continuing to utter his excited serenade the while. Then, crouching, he would suddenly fly at her, but she, with feminine foresight, flew to the right as he came by the left, the result of the double movement being that they had merely changed places without touching one another. At times they would flutter up together a short way from the ground, only to drop again and resume the endless strutting and twittering, the sudden volte-faces and cross-flights, until in the end the lady gathered herself up, and made off for the higher slope, the male in hot pursuit; and when we last saw them, he was plying her with a torrent of excited twitterings, meant to assure her, no doubt, of his eternal devotion until the autumnal equinox, by which time ring-ousels



SONG THRUSH'S NEST



## April

have abandoned the domestic state, and packed for migration, leaving the reshuffling of the matrimonial cards until their return in the following spring.

Nests of the blackbird, song-thrush, and hedge-sparrow were now to be found in every hedgerow—alas! too frequently robbed of their contents. I had marked down several for the camera just before Easter, but found them all empty a few days later, if not bodily removed. Even a magpie's nest in a high tree, which I had photographed on the Friday, on Monday following lay at the foot of the tree—a heap of dislocated twigs. The trail of the serpent was but too evident; a ladder had been formed by driving large nails into the bare trunk of the tree until the lowest branches were reached, and from this act of insensate vandalism it is probable that not the magpie only, but a fine tree also will suffer irreparable damage.

Although the blackbird and song-thrush are two of the shyest birds, skulking habitually in dark corners, both, strangely, often choose the most exposed situations in which to build their nests; and that at a time when the leaves are not yet grown to afford them cover. As a rule, the thrush builds in what at the time is a naked hawthorn, whilst the blackbird, in keeping with its stealthier character, generally chooses a holly or other evergreen. Any advantage, however, which might accrue to the blackbird from such a choice is discounted by its excessive timidity; for, whilst a thrush will watch an

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intruder, rigidly attentive, until he be within a foot of the nest, the blackbird starts out in rushing flight with vehement cry long before one suspects its presence. From one cause or another the boys of the countryside levy a heavy toll upon the first brood of eggs of both species, and only the fact that in breeding matters these birds follow the rule of "early and often" enables them to maintain their numbers against such wholesale spoliation.

Approaching Bowdon on the 12th April, we found the nest of a blackbird built about a foot from the ground, where a low hawthorn adjoined the trunk of an old beech. This nest was but half a nest, built against the bole of the tree, and without any lining where the surface of the trunk exactly bisected what would have been the circle of a normal nest. Here there seemed to be a departure from the uniform work of instinct, and one looked for some evidence of an attempt to adapt the abnormal structure to its surroundings. But, in truth, the work was instinctive to the point of stupidity. The nest was just half of a blackbird's ordinary nest, with no attempt to increase its proportions to make up for the missing half. No blackbird could possibly have got into it, and had the bird persisted in laying her eggs there, strange contortions must have resulted ere she could make ends meet. Shortly afterwards we found the nest destroyed.

An instance of similar fatuity on the part of a



SONG-THRUSH ON NEST





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song-thrush came before me at Millington in Cheshire about the same time. The bird had built its nest upon the stump of a broken tree over a pond at the edge of a wood. The nest was built about half a yard above the surface of the water. It contained material sufficient for the construction of four nests, and a large quantity had fallen into the water ere the foundation could be laid. The bird had then continued to erect the enormous column of hay, as if, after choosing so exposed a situation (although on the border of a wood), it sought to thrust the object still more prominently upon public notice. The thrush is a gentle, inoffensive bird, but its best friends cannot claim consideration for it on the score of sagacity.

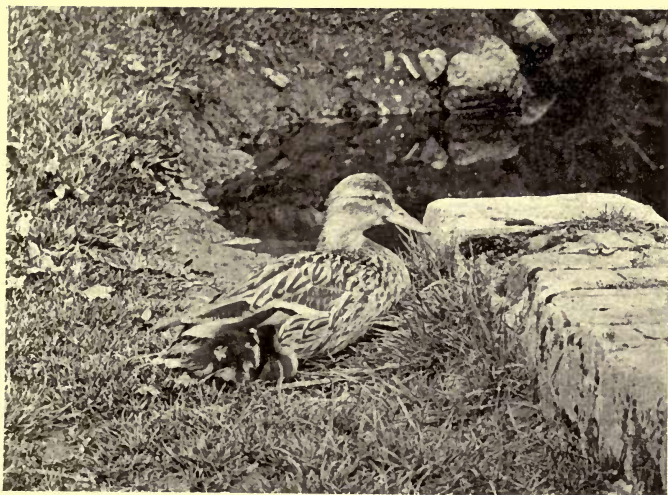
Allied to this strange fatuity, which seems to possess the thrush family generally at nesting time—and not to exempt the missel-thrush, usually the wariest of his tribe, and yet at such times equally incautious—is an eccentricity in the choice of a nesting site amounting almost to insanity. As I write, I know of two nests of the throistle placed in the porches of houses, one on a low, open ledge exposed to the view of every visitor. I have found a nest slung in a whisp of straw at the side of a brickstack. For two years successively a thrush similarly slung its nests from two or three stalks of dead bracken overhanging a peat ditch on Barton Moss. I remember finding a nest full of squab young thrushes on the top of a fence post on Chat

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Moss, without a rag, so to say, to cover them, except the wings of their ill-advised mother. A Cheshire farmer's daughter showed me a missel-thrush's nest (she called the bird a "shellcock") in the fork of an apple tree no higher than myself. In fine, every one who spends any time among birds knows—to use a Hibernianism—that the most likely place in which to find a thrush's nest is the least likely, being usually one in which every consideration of safety should have deterred the bird from building. And the bird itself seems to know it. She continues to sit until one could almost touch her, with a helpless appealing look in her soft dark eyes. She is only a common brown thrush, she seems to say, with common blue eggs. She supposes she ought to have built elsewhere; but where was there to build? It is hard to understand how any human being can clear a thrush's nest who has paused for a moment to look at the bird itself.

When the young are out I sometimes amuse myself by making them open their mouths for me, especially if I wish to embellish a picture with those portentous structures. Standing over the nest, I whistle to the flabby, goggle-eyed little monsters sprawling in the bed of the nest, and immediately each skinny neck is extended, and all mouths are set widely agape, to receive the meal to which they evidently believe themselves to be summoned. This method answers with the young of many singing birds.

If a fairly substantial stone be found near a



MALLARD DUCK AND YOUNG ONE



YOUNG MISSEL-THRUSHES CRYING FOR FOOD



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hedgerow, or especially if the stone be supported in the hedge itself, a song-thrush's nest is all but certain to be found near. This stone the bird uses as an anvil, bringing to it any devoted snail it encounters. One I recently watched took the shell in its beak, by the opening, and repeatedly dashed it sideways against the tiles lining the garden walk with such force that the sound reached me at a distance of forty yards. I have seen stones among the sandhills at St. Anne's-on-the-Sea (where snails abound) which were veritable shambles from this cause, the ground around them being covered with the fragments of hundreds of shells.

A certain company of wrens which was always to be found among a tangle of bramble and dead wood in one of our lanes, have just returned to their old quarters, and the cock has notified the fact by the vigorous song which I had missed for several months past. Whatever wrens in general may be supposed to do during the winter months, these wrens changed their quarters late last year, and have reappeared in them on the 23rd April.

If Dr. Watts' "busy bee" ever chances upon the common wren, the latter will probably open his mind on the subject of short cuts to immortality, and the obvious advantage of bearing a name beginning with an alliterative "b." I would not be held to begrudge the bee his well-earned distinction, but only to claim for the little, homely, work-a-day wren the merit of improving each hour—shining or otherwise—with

## Birds by Land and Sea

equal industry. Take him at what season of the year, at what hour of the day, you will, the wren is always busy, the tiny brown body threading the intricacies of the hedgerow, or the darksome thoroughfares of labyrinthine brambles, with easy dexterity. The wren has the further desirable qualification in an exemplar—he looks his part. He belongs to the clock-winding fraternity, his note, like the robin's, closely resembling the sound made by the rapid clicking of the cogs of a clock-wheel during winding ; and when he emerges for a moment at the hedge-top, his tail cocked back over his body to breaking point, one could well imagine that that energetic member had been engineered into position by some internal mechanism, and that all the winding went to keep it there.

In spite of the prepossessions which may linger with one who was once a profound believer in the espousals of Cock Robin and Jenny Wren, I shall probably be borne out by most observers when I state that the autocrat of the red breast has at least issued an edict of toleration in favour of the latter within his domains. As an instance of this I may state that I was aroused early one morning by the very vigorous "language" of a robin who probably regards himself as the owner of my garden, and, upon looking out, I saw him standing at the end of a birch bough, apostrophizing a missel-thrush which had had the hardihood to perch upon the cornice of the house.

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“*Tet! tet! tetera-tet-tet!*”—“Leave that house instantly, you great, spotted, worm-catcher, will you?” One could interpret the speech instinctively.

The missel-thrush eyed the irate, bobbing figure, first from one eye and then from the other, with some interest; but after several attempts to “take no notice,” finally abandoned the position to the insular jealousy of the redbreast rather than continue to hear such shocking language from one so small.

This prelude only served to lend point to what followed.

Whilst the robin was haranguing the missel-thrush, a pair of wrens invaded the birch where he stood, and as soon as the thrush had flown, the robin turned his attention to the new, and nearer, comers. He flew toward them, and followed them closely and curiously about the tree as they wandered from branch to branch stoically searching for breakfast. The wrens took no notice of him, and, beyond a succession of demonstrative bobbings and bowings, and a rare “*Tet! tet!*” which may well have been consistent with perfect urbanity, the robin gave no sign that might be construed as a manifestation of even mild displeasure at the presence of the wrens.

The little three-and-a-half-inch wren has a good many virtues stored about its small person. It makes a good nest, beside supplementary or so-called “cocks’ nests” to the number of two or three, supposed by some to afford accommodation for the

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growing brood ; by others to be tentative structures ere the real nest is built. All these nests are globe-shaped, with a small round opening at the side, and may be formed of grass, moss, or dead leaves. Whatever be the theory concerning the "cocks' nests," they are never lined ; only the principal one being lined, usually with moss, hair, and feathers. The nest is placed in a great variety of situations, advantage being taken of any natural hollow. The birds show no more than ordinary adroitness in concealing their nests, and the habit attributed to them of assimilating the latter to the character of the surroundings probably rests upon the fact that they are formed of what comes handiest on the building site, it being evident that what is taken from the surroundings is likely to harmonize with them. The nest shown in the photograph was situated in a low thorn hedge enclosing a small wood at Agden. The branches had been interlaced horizontally, and the nest was tightly packed in a triangle formed by some of them—a beautiful structure of dead hawthorn leaves, lined with hair and a few feathers, the entrance being centred in the triangle.

Although the wren builds a large nest for the size of the bird, it proves none too large in the event ; for a brood consists of from four to nine young ones, and two broods are hatched in a season.

The cock has a brilliant, if stereotyped, song, consisting of a thrice-repeated, high-pitched note, followed by a resonant trill, into which, just before



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finishing, he never fails to introduce his characteristic rattle. It is a rousing, manly performance for so small a bird, and if it lacks the inventiveness of the robin's song, it is, like his, restricted to no time or season, but is readily raised to greet a winter sun, besides serving to alleviate the great silence which falls upon the finer songsters as autumn approaches. In summer his is ever the first song of the day, delivered with startling vigour and completeness at the first streak of dawn.

The wren is widely distributed, few situations coming amiss to him from hill to plain, whether in association with man, or in entire independence of him. One fell enemy, however, keeps a strict check upon the multiplication of this highly prolific bird—the frost; and as even this often fails to drive him from his quarters, it is beyond doubt that vast numbers yearly fall victims to starvation; for, with all his adaptability in other respects, the wren is unable to lay aside his insectivorous habit and accept a winter diet of berries and seeds, and it is through this one flaw in his armour that the spear of the frost strikes.

By the 18th April the black tails of the sitting hens protruded from the edges of almost all the nests in the rookery, and on the 23rd the cries of the newly born might be heard, whilst the admiring parents could be seen standing by, cawing approvingly.

There is a good deal of homely comedy in the

## Birds by Land and Sea

rookery at this period. More than ever the female bird is confined to the precincts of the nest, and there now devolves upon the father the additional duty of purveying food for his offspring as well as for their mother. The particular point where the comedy emerges is when the male returns from the fields with some invisible tit-bit locked in his closed bill ; and its appreciation by the observer no doubt depends upon the fact that the actions of the birds—as is not usually the case—seem quite intelligible by human parallels. Sometimes the cock bird follows the straight path of duty, wings his way directly to the nest and, standing over the sitting hen, gives up the choice morsel which he has brought with watering tongue, and is rewarded by the flapping wings and frantically gurgled thanks of the hen, incapable of any other expression whilst engaged in swallowing it. At other times the suspicious hen, kept waiting longer than usual, seems to scent treachery from afar, and whilst the cock is still winging his way to the rookery, hops from the nest, and awaits his arrival on a neighbouring bough. The cock, who has probably been snatching a surreptitious meal in the fields below, takes in the situation, and alights at a significant distance from the nest, wearing the dejected air of one who has been trying all day to earn bread for his wife and children, but only succeeded in obtaining the price of a pint of beer for himself.

“ *Caw !* ” exclaims the irate wife, incisively, not

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caring a scrap for the neighbours. "Where have you been all this time? What have you got? you . . . !" etc., as plainly as words can speak, springing along the branch from which the cock escapes to a higher one with a deprecating air.

He will not answer such charges, he seems to say; and he has a very valid reason.

But the lady is not to be put off. "*Caw! caw! caw!*" she cries excitedly, until she is beak to beak with him.

If a rook has a physiognomy, it probably requires a rook to decipher it; but it would appear that she has learned the signs when she suddenly charges the delinquent's bill, and extracts the loveliest bundle of wireworms that ever gnawed a farmer's crop.

She bears them with chuckling satisfaction to the nest, and the cock, apparently feeling that he has purged his offence by such a sacrifice, hops up with alacrity to witness the distribution among the young.

Then comes another phase of the comedy. Having fed the young, the hen hops on to a bough, and stretches her legs and wings, stiff from long sitting. The action appears to be a protest, if not an invitation to the male to "take a turn." This is to be inferred from the manner in which he shuffles aside from the nest, gazing abstractedly toward the field where the lovely wireworms are.

He must be off! he seems to say. Although

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exacting, the duties of paternity are sacred. They must be fulfilled, however much he might desire to stay at home and rock the cradle.

And so the old hypocrite slips quietly from the bough, and gets under weigh again, leaving the nest-ridden hen to clamber into her place and, possibly, dream of the time when she will take the children down into the fields herself, and they will all eat wireworms together.

Another curious incident in connection with our rooks came under my notice about this time, and it owes its interest, perhaps, to the feeling that, if the actions of a bird and of a man under a certain set of circumstances are similar, the impulses prompting such actions will also be similar ; and to the belief that a man may to this extent penetrate the otherwise closed mind and feelings of a bird.

I had just passed a low hedge one morning at the middle of April, when I heard a sudden commotion of wings, and, looking back, saw a rook sweeping at a great rate just beyond the hedge. Having taken no further notice at the time, I was returning by the same way half an hour later, and observed a pair of wings flapping in the wind upon the grass at the spot where the commotion had been heard. I found them to be those of a rook which lay, with its head completely doubled under its breast, just dead. As there was no further evidence of violence in the otherwise undisturbed plumage of the bird, I concluded that one rook had been chasing

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another close to the ground, and that the front one, being all but driven to earth, had caught its bill in the ground just at the moment when the rear bird dropped upon it, causing the head and neck of the bird beneath to be doubled in sharply under the breast.

Whilst approaching, later in the day, the spot where the dead rook lay, I observed a live one going through some unusual antics, and stopped, glass in hand, to watch it. As I suspected, it was occupied with the dead bird. Marching round and round, the living one stopped from time to time to stretch its neck down and caw to its silent comrade. It appeared to have an idea that the latter might be foxing, or might suddenly spring up; for, in its circuiting, it frequently started aside, as if about to fly off. However, in the end it gathered more confidence, and making a sudden dash, laid hold of the slack wing, and giving it a vigorous tug, backed off again as rapidly. When it had tried several times thus to arouse the dead rook, but without the desired, or rather, dreaded result, it resorted to stronger measures. Hopping up and on to the prostrate form, it alighted with sufficient weight to insure a speedy spring-off on the farther side, where it turned immediately to observe the effect of the shock. Certain conclusions seemed to emerge clearly enough from the bird's conduct. It recognized the unnatural posture of the dead rook, and showed, by continuing to skirt it, that it feared a

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rook dead more than it feared a rook alive. It knew that rook ought to stand on its feet. "Stand up!" was the practical meaning of its cry when it stopped to caw to it in circling about it. But it would not stand up. There was the rub. After recognizing this, the living bird started aside suspiciously, prompted to fly off. The tugging at the wing was only a more emphatic, "Why don't you stand up?" but it was manifest, from the touch-and-go quality of the bird's courage, that the vigour of its actions was largely prompted by trepidation. One might have imagined that the final jumping upon the body of the dead would be the last demonstration of its harmlessness; but the alacrity with which the bird sprang off and turned about seemed to prove that it still had a fear that—what? It did not know. That was just the trouble; and has been the trouble of many who hold themselves wiser than rooks.

Although starlings have been laying claim to their old nesting sites in the house-eaves by frequently visiting them for a couple of months past, it was only on the 13th of April that I first observed a starling carrying material for building its nest. Small flocks have been continually present in our meadows, and latterly bands comprising several hundreds have been seen during the day performing their concerted movements on the wing. But I had good evidence on the 16th April that the dissociating principle was at last thoroughly at

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work. On that day at sundown, I was just outside a thick fir plantation, and observed that there were about three hundred starlings in an adjoining grass field, and that small bands and straggling streams were continually arriving, so that in the end the number reached between fifteen hundred and two thousand birds. They were engaged to some extent in feeding, but never so as to fail to add interjectional notes to the ceaseless wiry wheeze that rose as from an evening host of locusts. Even this was not the most serious business on hand; for it was evident that the one inspiring impulse for each was to obtain from that jostling multitude a partner for the season. The only philosophy a starling knows, whether in love or feeding, is—"First come, first served;" and each male plied his suit with the females, and disputed with his fellow males, as if he feared that of all that concourse no eligible lady might be left to share his lot. The starling is a business-like bird, and, as if conscious that he lacks the softer graces of the feathered lover, follows a sterner tack, and turns his courtship into a veritable hunt. Pick out your bird, and watch him as he shoves his way among the thronging birds. He charges a hen by way of salutation: then charges a neighbouring cock for being a cock at all. He seems to have no particular ideal of a mistress, and I call to mind one which all at once found himself between two responsive hens. It was plainly a dilemma. He looked from one to the other; ran

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first toward this one, and then toward that, apparently contemplating polygamy, but was diverted by suddenly finding something to eat midway between the two. Mrs. Starling, or rather, Miss, does not mind being hunted. She has a heavy coquetry which becomes the daughter of a hard-headed race. When she takes wing, she knows perfectly well that half a dozen enterprising cocks will spring up after her ; and so she announces her flight by a short chattering cry, which, heard at a distance, sounds like a few bleats of a snipe carried across the wind. Away she goes, with the cocks in full chase. They have not gone far when a sudden prod from behind shoots one of them out of the running, and the prodder, "naturally selected," takes his place. From similar causes, the following decreases, until the surviving "fittest" closes up in hot pursuit, the dusky fugitive uttering her chattering cry every time he manages to touch her tail. She leads him round, and dashes down low among the wheezing, jostling mob from which she started on her flight, and as the cock chases her in and out among the crowd with endless turns and doublings, one would imagine that he must inevitably lose touch with her. But, no ; out from the farther side they emerge, and mount again into the open. The silent, furious pursuit of the cock, and the startled cries of the hen, convey the impression of an unrelenting hunt ; and yet, in the end, the hen lays out her wings, and floats quietly on, the cock



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imitating her. After this, they may resume their wild flight, perch calmly together on a tree, or descend to feed as calmly on the ground. From this it would appear that the performance is in the nature of a "pairing flight." Hundreds of pairs are on the wing together, crossing each other at all angles, some flying at a great height, some lower.

In the mean while the sun is sinking. New flocks continue to come in, and the wild wheezing chorus becomes more and more strident. A few horses which grazed in the field before the starlings arrived have drawn off into a far corner to avoid the hubbub; hares that browsed quietly, dotted about the field, limped away with an injured air, as if bored by the noisy revels.

From time to time the old principle of association reasserts itself, and a great body of birds rises at once in flight, wheeling and whirling in compact order over the field, until as suddenly the column dissolves, and the birds are shed broadcast like leaves scattered without rule or method. These ordered flights are repeated at intervals, until the whole body of the birds has been transferred from the ground to the firs of the adjoining plantation. Heard from within the thick, dark wood after sundown, the din is indescribable. The clarion voices of innumerable throstles, the rattling even-song of chaffinches, and the resounding "*Pink!*" of blackbirds that seem to be exorcising spirits of ill

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from their roosting places, are the only sounds which break up through the wild sea of the starlings' cries, except when a pheasant, resenting the licence of this intruding host, changes his perch with an angry "*Ork! ork!*" With the growing darkness these sounds cease, and the general chorus of the starlings, although unhushed, is tempered by the stillness that has fallen upon all around. One might have looked for it to cease altogether, but when it had become no more than a gentle "zee"-ing, with an occasional livelier click or hard bubbling note, a sudden disturbance arose in one part of the flock, and could be followed as it spread along the dark tree-tops, until the birds nearest were heard to rise with wings that scuffled through the branches, and short, sharp cries that betokened action. Hearing the sounds recede, as I thought, I hurried through an open "ride" to the edge of the wood, and as I came out I heard the sudden roar of the birds' wings as the whole host swept past. I drew up with a feeling that something strange was toward; for, there was no *other* sound. In a few seconds the hollow roaring returned, and passed again. Thus thrice it was heard, each time duller, and, as I recognized, from an increasing altitude. Otherwise, the marshalling horde gave no sign of its presence. In the end, I remained straining my ear to catch what I thought to be single cries from belated members of the departed horde. For thus, in the early night of the 16th April, something

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under two thousand starlings set out on their migratory voyage to the north ; and on the following day no more than a few local birds might be found feeding in the field where the great host had mustered.

## MAY

A COLD April delivered us over to an un-springlike May, which opened with twelve days of all but incessant rain and winds from the north and east. The grass seemed to run up visibly, rank and lush, in the wet fields, and tree and hedgerow to burst at once into full leaf.

Unpleasant as this might be for man and bird, it was no disservice for at least two of the latter, which arrived in the early days of the month.

I had been out in our meadows on the evening of the 7th May—a moonlit night, with a flying cloud-rack above—to prepare a robin's nest in order to photograph the sitting bird early the following morning, and was returning after nine o'clock by a street—alas! once a bird and bat-haunted lane—which thrust itself out into the fields, like an outer tentacle from the body of the village, fast swelling to a town, when a sudden clucking overhead announced the passage of birds, which had evidently come over the fields, and, rising at the long line of houses, passed with startled cries over the lighted street into the dark fields again beyond. I immediately went

## May

back, and a few minutes later heard the first cry of the corncrake, to which a second bird responded from a more distant field.

Every year these birds return to the same group of fields. Last year the grass was so backward that for weeks they ran about with their heads visible above it. This year they found better cover ; but, even so, a corncrake may usually be detected in the early grass. Later on it is a more difficult matter, for this bird, although a migrant, and a strong flier when once under way, never leaves the ground unless unexpectedly flushed by man or dog. With head lowered, it cuts through the grass with surprising speed, the only indication, if any, of its course being given by the ripple of the green in its wake.

If one enters the grass, pursuit is all but sure to be fruitless, and the bird's "crake" is like a will-o'-the-wisp of sound, followed only to be renewed in some unexpected quarter with tantalizing ubiquity. Indeed, there can scarcely be a more skulking bird than the corncrake. If it be seen at all, it is generally as it skirts a field, hugging, as it goes, the hedgebank or the outer rim of the standing crops. If it passes a furrowed field, it will not traverse the furrows directly, but glides along one furrow, sneaks over the ridge, glides along the next furrow, and so on, following a broken diagonal across the field.

The only occasion on which I had a prolonged near view of the corncrake was at noon on a hot

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July day. I was skirting a grass field, in which the second crop was making poor headway, owing to the dryness of the month, and suddenly noticed a corn-crake twenty yards in front of me, drinking from a rain puddle at the side of the path. I stood absolutely still, and for the space of a minute or so the corn-crake, with head raised, watched me without a movement. As I had the glass, the bird was, so to say, in my hand for all purposes of observation. The result of the corn-crake's inspection of the motionless column on the path seemed to be that, if it was not a man, it was a remarkably good imitation of one; so, lowering its head, it slid into a tuft of grass at the edge of the field. I could easily cover the whole tract with my eye, and seeing no bird emerge, concluded that it was still skulking in the tuft. I examined the latter without finding it, and to this day continue to marvel at the adroitness of that corn-crake in getting away unobserved.

With the introduction of the modern mowing-machine, however, the bird's habit of running hither and thither without leaving cover no longer serves as in the days of the scythe. A Cheshire farmer told me of an amusing experience he had, when last getting in the hay. He knew that there were corn-crakes in the field, and when he set to work in the early morning to drive round and round—at each turn stripping the outer edge from the great central square—the birds followed their usual tactics in the ample cover still left at their disposal. But as the

## May

day went on, and the standing grass formed an ever-diminishing island in the middle of the bare, mown field, the birds found that the farmer had no sooner scared them from one side as he drove down field, than he was already upon them again as he drove up on the other side. They continued to work silently about the plot, as if in search of some fourth dimension into which to make their escape from the rattling whirligig, which, every time it went round, cut a fresh strip from their hiding-place and added it to the bare expanse surrounding them. At last, when they were all but exposed, and the farmer feared they might be cut up at every turn, they got up with tremendous outcry, and ran, or rather flew, the gauntlet of a dozen men working between them and an adjoining wheat field, scared out of their wits by the clapping and holloaing of the onlookers.

Among the numerous pipits and wagtails which at this time frequented the Mersey banks and the adjacent water meadows, there appeared on the 1st May a bird wholly distinct, but in one way strangely resembling them. It was on this day that I caught the piping "*Wheet! wheet! wheet!*" of the common sandpiper, or summer snipe, and looking along the river, saw the bird running to and fro on the mud at the water's edge, with the same erratic movements and the same exaggerated rocking of the tail which characterized the pipits and wagtails among which for the time being he found himself. He is a small snipe, olive-brown above,

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and white below, with a wash of light-brown on the upper breast, deepening until cut off in a sharp line below. He runs nimbly at the water's edge, using his long bill to probe the soft mud. He wades in the shallower water, but, although reputed to be an expert swimmer and diver, prefers to pass some narrow neck of deeper water by skirting it on the bank to entering it and swimming across. As he takes wing and flits along stream, crying "*Wheet! wheet! wheet!*" the white of the outer tail-feathers and the white bars on the wings are conspicuous. The flight is a quick fluttering, the pointed wings half drooping; but when alarmed he plies them vigorously, and, flying low to the water, skims on level wings ere landing, at which time the wings are held aloft, exposing the white under sides.

A little party of six birds remained with us in the marshy tract adjoining the Mersey until the 11th May, and then left us, as I thought at the time. During that time their musical piping might be heard at any hour of the day and far into the gloaming; for the broad sheet of water they frequented, by reflecting the waning light, served to prolong the day for these lively little waders. Very entertaining were their pipings in the quiet hour. Now and again some belated wanderer came in from the river, piping out for company, at which his fellows, gathered in a little group by the reeds at the water's edge, raised a clamorous welcome. At last, when all the stray birds had been whistled



## May

up, the little group remained together in the dusk, ever and anon piping out in unison a merry peal, as of elfin laughter, high-pitched and continuous; or, as if one of their number had perpetrated the most sandpiperly joke, and all together suddenly saw the point of it.

Although this flock never broke up, it was evident that pairing was in progress, the males from time to time fluttering round their prospective partners with a sustained shrill piping which ran up into a trill.

Having been absent from Stretford until the 25th June, I was not a little surprised upon returning to the marshy spot frequented by the sandpipers to be greeted at once by their well-known note. A male bird flew about us with the anxious cry and drooping flight common with his kind when disturbed in their breeding haunts, and the inference was obvious that sandpipers had found this low-lying, marshy spot sufficiently attractive to deter them from faring higher up and farther northwards when their companions left us in May.

Following the cock to a slight earthy elevation he used as a point of look-out, I came at once upon the female bird with four young ones feeding on the mud by the water. The old bird uttered repeatedly an anxious "*Pee . . . eep!*" as I approached, but the young ones continued to run about the mud and feed. These young birds were two or three days old, and the relatively large size of a

## Birds by Land and Sea

sandpiper's egg no doubt accounted for the sturdy way in which they ran hither and thither, feeding as independently as their elders. They come into life wagging their tails, or, at any rate, the place where their tails will some day grow; and this they do with such vigour that the under part of their bodies is heaved into view at each wag. One would expect such extravagant and perpetual motion to affect the structure of the bird itself, and, since it is more pronounced in the young birds than in the old ones, the habit, no doubt, has a history, and an ancient one. These young birds are clad with down, light-brown above, and white below; and a clear dark line passes from the base of the bill through the eye, and beyond—a feature absent from, or less conspicuous in, grown birds.

As I continued to advance, the female bird receded, calling to her young; but the latter paid little heed until the cock, who had hitherto remained silently on his look-out, descended suddenly with vociferous outcry. Then the young ones scampered after the female bird, and, diving under her wings, remained with their four white rumps protruding in the most ludicrous manner. Upon my nearer approach, however, she abandoned them, and I might have caught them, had I wished, or had I not suddenly sunk to my knees in an oozy ditch thatched with specious grasses. There was no attempt on the part of either the old bird or the young ones to escape by swimming or diving,

## May

although, being in a little archipelago of mud patches in open water, such a course offered the readiest mode of escape, in view of the reputed diving and swimming powers of this bird. Able, they may have been; willing, they certainly were not.

With the sandpipers a single dunlin came in on the 1st May. Not unlike a sandpiper in general appearance, it associated with them during its stay, but might be easily distinguished from them by the presence of a heavy black patch on its lower breast. Evidently it felt little desire to remain; for, on the following day toward noon, a sudden inspiration seemed to seize it, and it got up, and dashing round in wild flight over the water, repeating an excited "*Pr-r-r-r-r-ee!*" shot up into the air at an enormous pace, and was quickly lost in skyey flight.

On the morning of the 8th May I found the whitethroat back in the hedgerows, prospecting among the nettles and hedge-parsnips, which were well up for his reception.

There is small chance of overlooking the white-throat, even for a day.

"*Gr-r-r-r!*" he says, by way of greeting, and gets out at the back of the hedge as you pass, flashes white as he comes over the top of it to the front a little farther on, and settles there for a moment to pour out a torrent of the wildest gibberish to which bird ever gave utterance. Any one unacquainted

## Birds by Land and Sea

with him would imagine, from his excited antics and the medley of song-notes with others which sound more like highly argumentative speech, that he had come home in a towering passion—no wife, no house, no anything—“*Gr-r-r-r!*” But those who have met the whitethroat before, know that it is only his way. He has come back, in fact, bubbling over with life, vivacious and loquacious to the last degree. Now he threads the close thicket, grumbling quietly to himself, like one who plays the scold; then he comes to the top and, with odd gestures, as of one turning repeatedly from one side of an audience to the other, pours out a flood of gabbling notes, without order or musical quality. Anon, he springs upward and outward, prattling as he goes; then breaks back on the same line, descending, with wings thrown back like a snipe, to the spot from which he rose, and where he resettles, prattling still. He has no sooner settled than he is up and off again, singing as he flies, to the lower branches of a tree, where he clambers about the twig-ends in search of the small life lurking on the under sides of the leaves. If a female appears, he gives chase at once, and the two double in and out of the hedge in a marriage-by-capture style, their white throats flashing as they go.

It may have been due to their late arrival in this country that the whitethroats this year made such short work of courtship and espousals; for although it was only on the 8th May that I saw my first whitethroat, on the 15th I photographed the nest



NEST OF COMMON WHITETHROAT



## May

and five eggs shown in the picture. The slight but deep and well-rounded structure was slung in a bed of nettles and hedge parsley, some of the grass stems forming the outer rim of the nest being passed round the stalks of these weeds, and re-introduced beyond. Whilst the female sat thus embowered at the foot of the hedge, the cock kept up a continuous prattle in a tree which overshadowed the whole. When I approached the nest, he gave no signal beyond ceasing to sing; and the hen bird—a very close sitter—seldom crept from the nest into a bramble hard by until I was quite near.

Although advised from the south of England as far back as the end of March, it was not until the 2nd May that a few swallows and house-martins were observed at Ashley, just over the Cheshire border. These flew low on the lee side of a wood, perching more frequently and longer than is customary with them. It required nine days more—the 11th May—for these two species to put in an appearance in the more open ground about Stretford. As time went on I noted a very distinct deficiency in the number of these birds as compared with former years, a fact rendered stranger when the swift arrived on the 16th May, and continued to increase during the month until its numbers were just as notably in excess of those to which we had been accustomed in our parts. This seemed the more remarkable, since the swift is known to return year after year to its old haunt; but so many swifts certainly never nested

## Birds by Land and Sea

in our neighbourhood in recent years. How attached the swift is to its old quarters may perhaps be judged from the following occurrence.

There is in a neighbouring village a long street formed by continuous rows of brick houses, under the eaves of one of which—otherwise undistinguishable from the rest—several pairs of swifts yearly make their homes. The occupant of this house, finding small attraction in the joyous scream of the birds as they broke out and dashed up and down in the early hours of the spring mornings, caught one of them, killed and hung it by a string under the opening to one of the nests. But the dead bird swung in sun and rain unheeded by his living comrades, who came and went undeterred by this public witness to the brutal ignorance of the man. It would argue too great confidence in the imagination of this small spirit to hope that some of the horrors of the "Ancient Mariner" might come to plague it; but, at any rate, there are four nests there, and as each pair will probably account for a brood of two, I sincerely trust that ere long sixteen birds may scream sleep from the roof where the dead bird hangs.

The cuckoo, reported from Essex on the 20th April, was heard for the first time at Ashley on the 2nd May, an unusually late date for this bird to arrive, even in our parts.

From the moment of its arrival the cuckoo's troubles begin. A little observation suffices to show



## May

the birds, which poets have loved to sing as the blithe harbingers of spring, to be but the Hagers and Ishmaels of bird-dom. (The appearance of this bird in any spot is the signal for small birds at once to pack and chase it on to some other place, whence it will be similarly driven out in ceaseless wandering. Small birds are said by some to chase the cuckoo because of its resemblance to a hawk ; but, as small birds are as well acquainted with the cuckoo as with hawks, it would be as reasonable to maintain that they chase the latter because of their resemblance to the cuckoo. Small birds, although unable to fathom the mystery of their connection with the cuckoo, know it for a meddler, and must often enough surprise it in its surreptitious visits to their nests at a time when such visits are least to be tolerated. Although apparently incapable of connecting this meddling with the tragic consequences to their own eggs frequently attending it, or of recognizing that an alien has been billeted upon them, they seem to grasp the fact that the cuckoo is an intruder, and a coward to boot, and as such to be chased with impunity. No one who has seen, as I have, a couple of cuckoos pursued unremittingly by a rabble of birds ludicrously small, considering the size of their quarry, but must have recognized that conscience makes cowards of cuckoos as well as of men. To see a thirteen-and-a-half-inch bird, with a *queue* of six-inch stalwarts behind it, fleeing from point to point in its efforts to escape from them, suggests the

## Birds by Land and Sea

thought that birds also have their moralities, and that a craven spirit has been engendered in the cuckoo by the consciousness of its crooked dealings with its neighbours.

Darwin ("Voyage of the Beagle," page 53) quotes Prevost to the effect that the female has to pair afresh after laying each egg or two eggs, and argues that if the bird waited to sit until all were laid, those first laid would probably addle; and that if it hatched each egg or two immediately after laying, the time of its stay would be too short. But Darwin himself has shown ("Origin of Species," page 212) that the normally non-parasitic American cuckoo has eggs and young successively hatched in its nest, all at the same time; and it is well known that with regularly nesting birds even the maternal instinct gives way under the migratory impulse: witness the deserted broods of the swallow tribe.

— An instructive parallel is afforded by the parasitic American cow-birds referred to in the same work (page 215). Of the three species of cow-birds, one sometimes pairs, sometimes lives promiscuously in flocks. It either builds a nest of its own, or appropriates one belonging to another bird, ejecting the young, sometimes even building a nest of its own upon the nest so appropriated. It usually rears its own young, but from the fact that the young of this species has been seen to follow old birds of a distinct kind, it has been inferred that it is sometimes

## May

parasitic. A second species always lays its eggs in the nests of strangers, with an occasional exception, when several together build a rough nest in some ill-adapted situation. They often lay so many eggs—fifteen to twenty—in the foster nest, that few or none can possibly be hatched. They also lay many eggs upon the ground. A third species lays its eggs singly in the foster nests, the young birds being securely reared.

[That there is nothing unique in the parasitism of our cuckoo will appear from the fact that there are several other species of cuckoos well known to be parasitic ; and, similarly, any deviations from the parasitic instinct on the part of our bird, such as the reported laying of its egg on the ground, sitting upon it, and feeding its young, would appear to be only a partial reversion to a former state of things in which it performed its natural duties, just as they are performed to this day by the normally non-parasitic American cuckoo.

It would, therefore, appear that our bird has passed through stages of less perfect parasitism similar to those described above, the question remaining to be solved being—How came it to attain to that perfection of degeneracy which it now exhibits, having abandoned duties which rest upon the deepest instincts governing the life of birds ?

There are certain sets of correspondences between the structure of the cuckoo and its young and the

## Birds by Land and Sea

ends they serve which will call for explanation by any one attempting to elucidate the problem.

Thus, the formation of the bill of the cuckoo is cited as correlated with the abnormally small size of the egg it lays, the bird being thereby enabled to deposit it with its bill in situations in which it would be impossible for it to lay the egg directly. Further, correspondence is found between the smallness of the egg and the fact that it is almost always in the nests of small birds that it is deposited ; between the circumstance that the cuckoo distributes its eggs singly, and the result that it thus obviates the encounter in the same nest of two of its young bent upon mutual destruction ; between its habit of depositing its egg at a time when the earlier eggs of the brood of the foster parent have been laid, sometimes throwing out all, at others a portion, of the native eggs, and the accruing advantage to its young of being early in possession of the nest, and adequately equipped to eject its fellow nestlings and appropriate the food which, if divided among all, would prove insufficient to meet the needs of so large and greedy a bird ; and, finally, between the singular depression in the back of the young bird, which assists it in ejecting its fellow nestlings from the nest, and the ejecting impulse itself.

If the bird is to convey its egg at all, it would not seem strange that it should employ its bill for this purpose, seeing that the bill is always used by birds in arranging their eggs, and as a means of

## May

conveyance generally. It is not primarily due to any depth of gape, exceptional as this may be, that the cuckoo is able to convey its egg in its bill ; but to the fact that the egg itself is abnormally undersized. A cuckoo's egg in my possession measures 0.94 by 0.69 inch ; whilst four eggs of a pied-wagtail, with which it was found, gave an average of 0.84 by 0.63 inch. The relative smallness of the cuckoo's egg will be apparent from the fact that the cuckoo measures thirteen and a half inches from beak to tail, and the pied-wagtail seven and a half inches.

[This fact is the more significant because the normally non-parasitic American cuckoo lays a full-sized egg.

(It would appear that the cuckoo is under some physiological or anatomical disability preventing it from laying a full-sized egg ; and, just as the smallness of the egg suggests such peculiarities in the bird laying it, so does it augur physiological or anatomical peculiarities in the young hatched under such straitened circumstances. It is probably due to the fact that the embryo is packed away in about a fourth of the space to which a chick with the makings of a cuckoo in him is entitled, and to the limited amount of nutriment contained in so small a compass, that the young cuckoo hatches out early from his uncomfortable quarters with a certain leeway to make up in the matter of diet and elbow-room. Is the anomalous structural peculiarity in the back of the young cuckoo due to the obstruction to free

## Birds by Land and Sea

development by the narrow walls of an unnaturally small egg?

That the egg, being small, should be deposited almost always in the nests of small birds is probably due to the cuckoo's fear of meddling with the nests of larger birds, rather than to a perception of fitness; for the egg has occasionally been found in the nests of larger birds, the eggs of which exceed that of the cuckoo in size as markedly as the latter exceeds those of some of the smaller birds in the nests of which it is at times deposited. Is it, again, to the cramped feeling of the large young bird in a small nest, coupled with a sudden access of expansive vigour, which may well accompany its release from its unnaturally close confinement in an under-sized egg, that we must ascribe the origination of the ejecting impulse? Would it have arisen if the cuckoo had habitually placed its egg in the roomier nests of larger birds?

— I am not disposed to regard the depositing of one egg only in a foster nest as an act of foresight on the part of the parent cuckoo. The bird has no nest, and has ceased to feel the attraction which makes of the nest the central point of interest for birds of a more domestic habit. It is a wanderer, and upon occasion seeks the first suitable place where it may deposit its egg in obedience to the last prompting of an almost extinct maternal instinct.

I am as little disposed to regard as an act of foresight the destruction by the parent cuckoo of

## May

all or a portion of the eggs found in the foster nest. The destruction of all would, in many cases, lead to the desertion of the nest altogether; the supposed motive in destroying a portion only involves too fine a discrimination in a bird capable of placing its pale-coloured egg in an open nest by the side of the bright-blue eggs of the hedge-sparrow. I regard the action as one of simple offence committed upon eggs not its own in the presence of an egg which is its own, and as comparable in the impulse prompting it with those acts of defence to which nesting birds are impelled when their eggs are threatened. Both sets of actions regard the present, not the future.

I would explain in a similar manner the fact—if it be a fact—that the cuckoo deposits its egg in an empty nest, or in one containing only the earlier eggs of a brood. Such a course involves the recognition of a present fact, that there is more room for the introduction of an extra egg in a nest containing one or two eggs than in one containing four or five, and has not, I am convinced, any reference to the advantages accruing to the young cuckoo through being early hatched or having fewer competitors in the nest.

The presence of the singular depression in the back of the young cuckoo might be accepted as being correlated with the impulse to eject if it were shown conclusively that this impulse lasted as long as the depression; but it would appear that the hollow

## Birds by Land and Sea

in the back disappears ten to twelve days after birth, whilst the impulse to eject seems to die out earlier.

The line of argument which suggests that the actions of the parent cuckoo are determined by consideration for the future welfare of its young would appear to be wholly unsound, if for no other reason than that any direct interest shown by the cuckoo in its offspring is so rare as to be regarded as phenomenal. Its habits have true causes in anterior conditions, and are not to be explained by substituting for the latter fanciful motives having reference to the future welfare of its own offspring, or of the species generally. For, if this be not so, we must admit that the hundred and nineteen species of European birds upon which the cuckoo has been known to father its young, also have their motives for sacrificing their broods in the interest of the intruder; or that, while they are her unconscious dupes, she only sees all along the line, and adapts her actions to the end she has in view.

A more rational conclusion is that arrived at by Geddes and Thomson in their work, "The Evolution of Sex," p. 278: "The general character of the birds—the unsocial life, the selfish cruelty of the nestlings, and the lazy parasitic habit—have a common basis in the constitution. The insatiable appetite, the small size of the reproductive organs, the smallness of the eggs, the sluggish parturition, the rapid growth of the young, the great preponderance





ROBIN'S NEST IN HEDGE-BANK



## May

of males, the absence of true pairing, the degeneration of maternal affection, are all correlated, and largely explicable in terms of the fundamental contrast between nutrition and reproduction, between hunger and love. Similar unnatural or immoral instincts in birds, in mammals, and even in the lower animals, are explicable in similar terms. The cuckoo's habit is a natural outcrop of the general character or constitution, only one expression of a dominant diathesis."

The above characteristics are, as it will be seen, with one exception, derivative; only one—the insatiable appetite—being primary. If the gluttony of the cuckoo could be explained, the rest would follow as a corollary. The bird's principal food, whilst with us, is the hairy caterpillar of the tiger moth—the so-called "woolly bear."

My first robin's nest of the season is shown in the illustration, and was found in the opening days of May. Although this bird affects human habitations during the winter months, early in the spring large numbers draw off to the woods and hedge-banks, and there the male, at no time a mean songster, surpasses himself in the first ardour of spring love stimulated to the point of conflict by the rival songs of his fellows. For the red breast of the robin is symbolic; he is a born fighter. When, walking in the country lanes, I have turned to behold a robin on low hedge-top or gate-post within a couple of yards from me, it has been with a start

## Birds by Land and Sea

that I recognized that that round black eye had been fixed intently upon me as I approached, unaware of the bird's presence. There he stands, drawn up taut and trim to the height of his small martial figure, action in every line of him. He cedes the position to you at the last moment as if under protest, but probably falls to with a song at once to show you that he thinks no more of you. His popularity with man is generally set down to his trustfulness, but it would perhaps be more in keeping with the bird's well-known character in other respects to attribute it to his boldness. There is defiance in his eye and attitude, and the bird is boldly curious. If I set up my camera and retire to photograph a bird on the nest, not infrequently a robin springs on to the legs and takes stock of the apparatus ; or if I hide myself in the loneliest wood in expectation of a "snap," a robin is sure to find me out and hold forth on the questionable character of my occupation. In short, he is a notable patron of human inventions, and one cannot leave a spade in the ground but he will perch on the handle. Approach his nest, however, and the bird springs on to some perch before you, bobbing wrathfully, whilst his full black eye blazes with defiance. I have seen a robin perfectly bewilder a cat which had unintentionally strayed near its nest ; darting and chattering about its ears, so that with the motion and the din the cat ran this way and that, apparently under the impression that



NEST OF COMMON WREN



ROBIN NESTING IN PLANT-POT



## May

the bird's object was to prevent its departure rather than to hasten it.

Watch him as he sings from the low and, preferably, bare branch of a tree, for the robin is no hole-and-corner bird, and likes to sing in full view. His prelude as he takes his perch is generally an incisive "*Tet-tera-tet-tet!*" and at once follows the spontaneous burst of song, infinitely varied in its forms, exquisitely pure and penetrating in its quality, the strong glad song of a bird which takes all seasons alike, and strikes its colours to none.

From a neighbouring tree comes the answering song of another of his kind. Immediately the first songster is all attention. He hears his rival out, then springs up to a higher branch and alights with a movement which seems to say "Now!" If the second singer do not invade the territory which the first claims by right of prior occupation as his "beat," the vocal duet continues turn and turn about; for one robin never interrupts another except to fight. Should the second comer, however, invade the other's territory, the latter immediately gives chase. Whether conscience makes a coward of him, or he is surprised by the sudden attack, the invader generally turns tail, hotly followed by the rightful lord of the domain. After the first flight or two, however, the second comer may turn upon his pursuer, who in his turn becomes the fugitive. At the end of each flight, during which the birds are seldom more than a few inches

## Birds by Land and Sea

apart, they settle within a yard or two from each other, alert, with one foot advanced, ready for offence or defence. If a stand be made between two old birds, they will sometimes fight to a finish, one of them being left dead.

Robins are notoriously eccentric in the choice of their nesting sites. The one shown in the picture built its nest this spring in a flower-pot that lay on the ground in my garden.

Reed-buntings are not common in our district ; still, they are generally to be found in small numbers in suitable places. Since the end of March I had noticed these birds examining various sites, singly or in pairs, but not until the 17th May did I flush a sitting bird from a tuft of reeds on some marshy ground by the Mersey. It did not rise until I opened the tuft and peered in, but then flew out and continued to fly to and fro with excited cries, perching frequently upon neighbouring tufts. As the nest, containing four beautifully streaked eggs, had been slung in the heart of the tuft, it would have been impossible to photograph without dislodging it. This loss, however, was made good to me by the immediate discovery of another nest containing two eggs, slung a foot from the ground in a dense bed of hedge-parsley within a stone's throw from the first one. Both birds rose, the male at the first sign of approach, the female when I was almost upon her. Their behaviour was similar to that of the first bird I had found, both flying backwards and forwards in



## May

a distracted manner, perching now upon one hand, now upon the other. As I was desirous of showing a full clutch of eggs in the picture, I went back to my friend in the tuft and borrowed two of her eggs for a few minutes, taking care to return the same two afterwards, as they were in a more advanced state of incubation. My solicitude on this account was, unfortunately, of little service to her, for, owing to some carting operations near her nest, the first bird forsook it a few days later.

The reed-bunting is not a notable architect, and its nest of dry grass, lined with fine fibres and a little horse-hair, shows no greater skill than those of its relatives the corn-bunting and yellow-hammer. Nevertheless, the two nests I had found so near together, but in different surroundings, exhibited distinct signs of adaptation to the varying conditions under which they had been built. The first one, slung in a close bunch of wiry reeds, was deeper and more closely compacted; the other, attached to the pliant and less densely growing stalks of the hedge-parsley, was comparatively shallow and open in texture, and where a gap presented itself at one point between the nearest stalk and the rim of the nest, the bird had extended the rim by weaving grass stems in zig-zag fashion so as to form a small horizontal platform. I have found a yellow-hammer's nest with a similar extension in the hollow centre of a hedge.

The reed-bunting has little to say for itself in

## Birds by Land and Sea

the way of song, which consists of two or three repetitions of a note resembling the "*trit*" note of the yellow-hammer, delivered monotonously as the bird clings to a reed. The reed-bunting does not, however, lack distinction in its looks, the black head being boldly set off by a conspicuous white collar, although the back, streaked with browns after the manner of a sparrow, has in some parts of the country earned for the bird the homely name of the reed-sparrow.

On the same day I put up a skylark, which had embedded its nest in a tuft of grass upon a small knoll in a meadow. This bird, perhaps because of its habit of nesting in open places, is a more nervous sitter than birds which build under cover, and but for its getting up, while I was still some ten yards from the nest, and flying low along the meadow, I should probably have failed to discover it. The skylark, when nesting, is also a very exclusive bird, and as far back as the second week in April I had watched the male bird clearing out undesirable visitors from the neighbourhood of his nest. Upon a yellow-hammer alighting upon a field path where the cock lark was standing, the latter burst into song, then charged the yellow-hammer at a run, causing it to retreat. It then turned its attention to a large company of pipits in the grass, hovering about the field, and, by dipping at any bird it came across, put them up one by one.

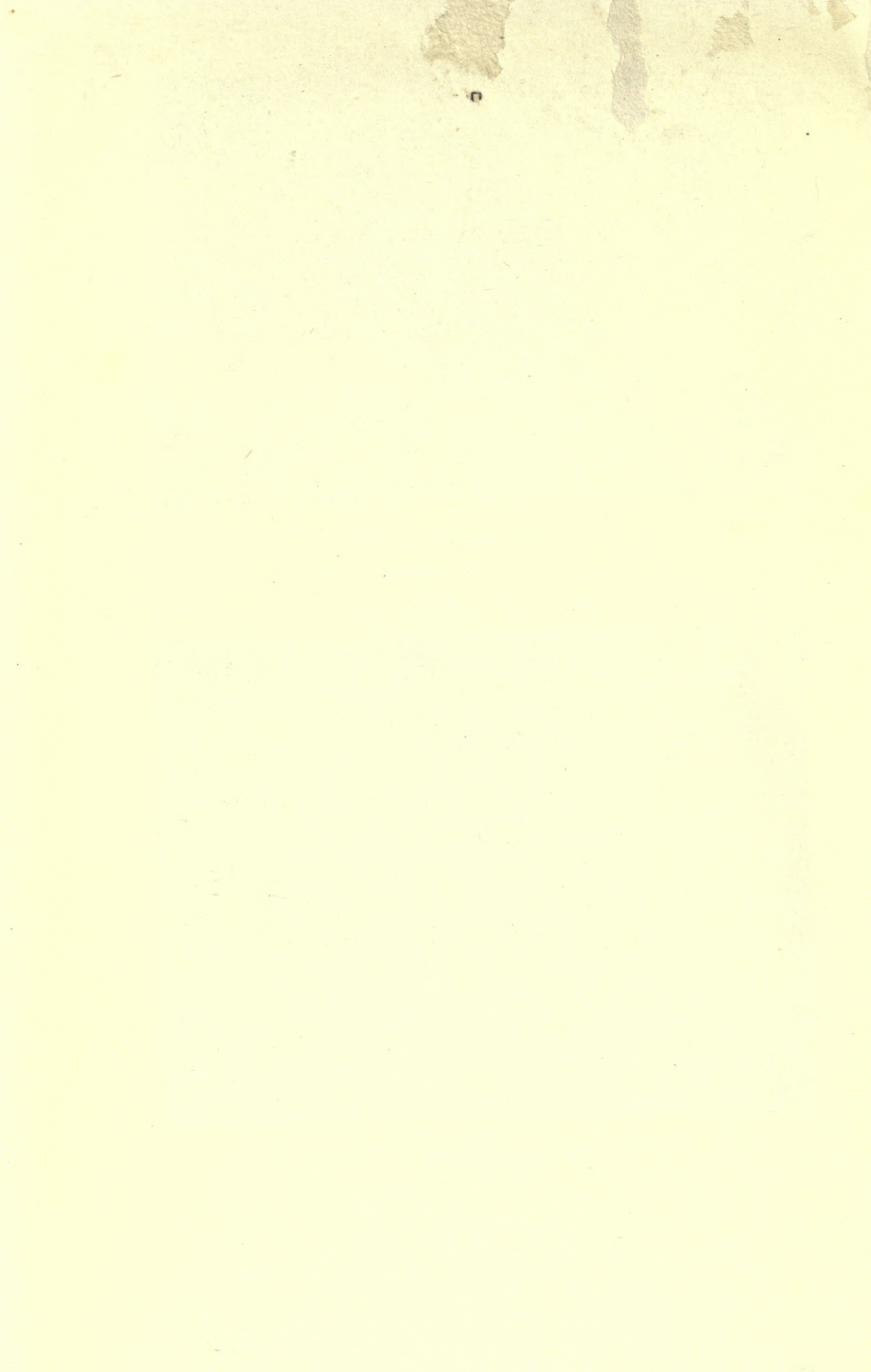
Whilst returning at evening from the lark's nest,



REDBREAST



NEST OF SKYLARK



## May

I followed a path running along the top of a steep embankment, some ten feet or so in height. Upon the left of the embankment, but separated by a small ditch at the foot of it, was a wide stretch of marshy ground, where lapwings nest and cry day and night. Upon the right hand the embankment declined steeply to a small brook, which is similarly embanked on the farther side. I was surprised to see a lapwing hovering excitedly above a thick bed of dock and nettles, which clothed the stream side of the embankment along which I was proceeding, and even more so to hear a tiny squeak respond regularly to her cries. This led me to discover a chick lapwing, sitting among the dock-plants, halfway down to the stream. This chick was so young as to be unable to use its legs, which, in the case of the lapwing, are so soon put to use that the chick is generally stated to run from the shell. How, then, did the chick come there? If hatched on the marsh, it had passed the enclosing ditch, mounted a ten-foot embankment, and descended five feet on the stream side. It could not have been hatched beyond the embankment on the farther side of the stream, because in that case it would have had to cross the stream itself. It was just as impossible that it could have been hatched where it was, for no lapwing would ever place its eggs in such a position. Had the old bird carried it there?—for they are much disturbed by men and dogs on the marsh. I took the chick and placed it a few feet on the marsh, remaining half a dozen

## Birds by Land and Sea

yards off to see the result. After much running and wailing, the old bird came up and covered it. I then advanced slowly, so as to give her the chance of picking it up and bearing it off, if she were so minded ; but she only waited until I was nearer to get up so hurriedly as to overturn the chick, which she left struggling on its back as she made off. I repeated the experiment several times, but in the end had to put the chick back on to the embankment where I had found it, as I could not get the old bird to remove it. Upon visiting the spot at seven o'clock the following morning, I found that the chick was gone ; and I am still as far as ever from solving the problem of how it came to be in such a place, and how it got away.

I have never found the bullfinch nesting in my immediate neighbourhood, but on the 21st May lighted upon a nest in an ivy-clad thorn, overhanging a pond in a small copse at Ashley. It contained three eggs and a newly hatched chick, through the transparent skin of whose stomach the yolk of the egg from which it had been hatched was plainly visible. Although at such a critical period, nest and contents had evidently just been forsaken, the eggs being cold and the chick dead. Such an act is characteristic of the bullfinch, for although so docile in captivity, and although the female in the wild state sits so closely that one may approach her almost within touching distance, the bird is a lover of quiet places, and resents intrusion. The spot chosen was



NEST OF BULLFINCH





## May

suitable enough, but being subject to periodical inroads by "trippers," was most probably abandoned on this account. It is the male who exercises authority in such matters, and one can well believe that it must have cost the hen a pang to defer to him and forsake her first-born at the moment of birth. Bird life is full of such tragedies, and one can only console oneself with the thought that birds have short memories, and that when once sufficiently scared to cause them definitely to abandon a spot, out of sight is out of mind, and they soon select a site for a new home.

On the same day I came upon the moorhen's nest shown in the illustration. It was built in a tuft of reeds upon a marshy piece of ground in a small clearing in a wood traversed by a stream. Thousands of dead oak leaves had been gathered from beneath a tree hard by, and placed in circular layers one upon another to form a column a foot high. The reeds forming the tuft, in the centre of which the nest had been built, afforded a little cover at the sides, but it was evident that the bird had trusted for privacy to the general inaccessibility of the spot rather than made any effort at concealment.

Owing to absence, I was unable to follow the fortunes of this brood, but revisited the spot on the 27th of June, when, by working quietly through the wood and making a sudden rush at the last, I just arrived to see one of the little black chicks

## Birds by Land and Sea

scamper into a bed of nettles beyond. Upon looking round, I found that, although the reed tuft indicated by its decayed centre the site where the nest had been, the whole of the materials to the last leaf had been transferred to form a second nest under some overhanging dead branches four yards from the original one. At a similar distance in another direction a third nest had been roughly constructed of similar materials, with the addition of a few flags and reeds. At my next visit on the 11th of July the second nest under the overhanging branches had been partly demolished, and nest number three had been built up so as now to form what appeared to be the principal one; whilst, some five or six yards farther on, another rough nest had been built similar to the previous ones, this being the fourth of the series.

When building over water, the moorhen as a rule places its nest upon strong branches, so as to be just above or touching the surface, but sometimes she aspires to higher things, and I have a picture which shows a moorhen's nest built in a large tree at a height of about six feet above the surface of a lake. When I first discovered it, the hen was sitting with head lowered, and her bright red bill averted, as if conscious of its conspicuous colouring. Owing to this, I had to pass twice before I could be sure that she was there at all; then she became nervous, and flew down with great outcry, dashing and splashing along the lake below.



LARGE CLUTCH OF MOORHEN'S EGGS



## May

By climbing out along the branches supporting the nest, and tying my camera-legs to them, I was able to photograph her nest and seven eggs. While I was so engaged, the moorhen fell to feeding at the edge of the lake, honouring me from time to time by an expression of mild displeasure, but in other respects behaving like the highly sensible bird she is.

A clutch of moorhen's eggs consists usually or from seven to nine, but I recently came upon a nest containing eleven eggs, as shown by the picture. There was but one hen to this nest, as I proved by watching it for a whole day.

Recently I came upon a number of domestic hens feeding on a public way, and passed them, casting a careless glance at a small black hen feeding with them. After I had passed, some inner prompting caused me to look back, and I then noticed that this small black hen was proceeding with stately carriage and nodding motion toward some bushes enclosing a secluded pond, and there was no mistaking the red bill and the white under coverts of the slowly jerked tail as she disappeared. It was a moorhen.

Upon visiting a week later the second of the nests referred to above, I found it empty. The water of the lake, which quickly rises and as quickly subsides, had drawn off from under the nest, leaving a six-foot drop from the latter into soft slime. How had the bird got her young ones down?—for I found them on the other side of the lake, little

## Birds by Land and Sea

balls of black fluff with red bills and quick legs, running and swimming in the best moorhen fashion.

It is worthy of note that the young of the moorhen have the conspicuous red bill from birth, because birds with highly ornamental features of this kind usually acquire them only at a later stage : witness the oyster-catcher, which, as a chick, has the bill and legs of a dull slaty colour, and only when grown acquires the orange red bill and pinkish legs of its parents.

By wading across the weed-grown lake, I got into close touch with that brood, the old bird making little fuss beyond an occasional high piping note, repeated several times in succession, to give warning to her chicks. The chicks were scattered about, feeding in the most grown-up fashion, and as smart in taking cover as their dam. One of them I intercepted as he was about to follow the latter to a small island in the middle of the lake, and he clapped down in some reeds on a comparatively firm piece of marsh. For some minutes it was a game of 'touch' between us. After a good deal of dodging, I got him out by poking the reeds, and he stood back in the open, watching me perkily with one eye, as if forecasting the next move. As I approached in a quick zig-zag, he turned tail and slid into a small stream in a muddy channel at his back. This was too wide for me to stride, but narrow enough to jump, and when my young friend found that I could not take to the water as he did,

## May

he led me a fine chase. As I jumped to one side, he swam to the other; and when I jumped to the other, he was back again on the first. Every time he tacked he got nearer to the point where the stream entered an open course between walls of high reeds; and it was worth the capering in the mud to witness his triumphal entry upon this inner stream, paddling at top speed, with now a backward glance from one eye, now from the other, and such an air of having gotten the victory withal. As a matter of fact, I could have turned him over with my stick at any moment during the chase, but he looked so horribly proud that I did not like to hurt his feelings.

As I was already too dirty to fear anything short of being submerged, I went back for my bag, and wading across again, took a front view of the nest with steadily sinking camera.

In crossing, I found that the birds had a sleeping nest in the reeds, which was natural enough, since, whatever means may have been used to get the young ones down to the water, once down, there was no means of getting them up again.

The yellow-hammer is such a stay-at-home with us—or, at any rate, if he shifts in the autumn, his place is so regularly taken by his relatives from farther north—that we are able to follow this bird pretty closely throughout the year. One might have expected that the buntings—birds which winter with us—would more quickly feel the stimulus of returning spring and the more generous diet it provides

## Birds by Land and Sea

than the warbler class, most of which forsake us during the hard season for sunnier climes, and only return when the rigours of our own have begun to abate. Such, however, is not the case. There would appear to be a natural lethargy in the buntings, which manifests itself not only in the sedentary habits of these birds, but exerts its influence upon their nesting habits also. Coupled with this, however, is a certain persistency which may readjust the balance. If the yellow-hammers and their fellow buntings are somewhat sluggish in beginning their nesting operations, they often have eggs out as late as September ; and if a large portion of their time is spent perching inactively upon bush, tree, or telegraph wire, they make some amends for the absence of motion by an indefatigable persistency in song. On the principle that where there is breeding there will be song, the buntings sing on through the otherwise songless period when other birds have retired for the moult, and only retire to renew their own coats after the latter have resumed their singing in the autumn. Upon their return, the buntings follow on singing during the late autumn, and, as mentioned elsewhere, I have known a corn-bunting sing throughout the winter.

The yellow-hammer generally builds in a hedge-bank. Not infrequently, however, the nest may be found in a hedgerow, several feet from the ground, as shown in the picture. This nest was somewhat unusual in structure, for, having been built in a





YELLOWHAMMER'S NEST



## May

hollow part of the hedge, where the dead twigs had fallen away, leaving a gap at one side of the nest, this gap had been stopped by a rough platform of woven grass stems independent of the nest, and a portion of this platform appears to the right of the nest in the picture.

Perhaps there is little more excuse for putting in an illustration of a pheasant's nest than there would be for illustrating nests of farmyard fowls which, through some passing aberration, had "laid away." Unlike the cuckoo of the Board School boy—"what don't lay her own eggs"—the pheasant does lay her own eggs, but this is about the only thing that she does for herself. The keeper gathers them up, and the domestic hen hatches them, or if, by misadventure, the pheasant hatches out a couple of chicks on her own account, as soon as they get their legs, she is off with them, and leaves the remaining eggs to their fate. Considering that this bird has for centuries been the object of man's protection, it is, perhaps, no matter for surprise that it has become a shiftless imbecile, not to mention that, although a monogamist in a state of nature, in its domesticated state it has degenerated into a polygamist. And to think of the fine species of these islands which are persecuted to the point of extinction to preserve this consecrated popinjay!

## ANGLESEY

**A**T the end of May, my early morning, evening and week-end rambles in my own district ceased for a time, and I had to leave many a new-comer and many a resident species at the most interesting moment of the year. This loss, however, was more than lightened for me by the prospect of a stay of some weeks in the island of Anglesey, where I promised myself to make the acquaintance of many a strange bird by land and sea. So, with a last look round on the evening of the 27th May, I packed up my camera, and on the following day arrived at Beaumaris.

The prospect I had painted for myself was one of innumerable opportunities and adequate achievement. I was going down to a land flowing with the milk and honey of ornithology, and why might not boundless enthusiasm and steadily grinding industry look to secure a goodly share? I am disposed to look back upon that period of effervescence with some leniency. It helped to carry twenty-five pounds of camera and tackle along some hundreds of miles of road during those three weeks; it worked the clock



MOORHEN'S NEST



PHEASANT'S NEST



## Anglesey

round many a day on three or four sandwiches and nothing to drink ; it nearly dropped me over the cliffs, but made loyal amends by pushing me steadily up the hills ; it blackened every limb in my body, smashed my camera, and tripped me into salt water times numberless, but always brought me out atop ; and, please heaven, come next season I intend to lay in a store of the same commodity, in spite of the wisdom which is supposed to come from experience. The man who first goes out to photograph birds possibly appreciates the difficulties before him a shade nearer their true value than the people who stay at home and vote him a crank ; but only the man who comes back, leaving his path strewn with plates under-exposed, over-exposed, twice exposed, or not exposed at all, knows the price he has paid for his few successes.

The ground was not new to me in a general way—the fine wall of mountains dominating the mainland shore of the beautiful Menai Straits ; the luxuriant woods and lanes of the Anglesey side, upland moors and inland bogs, the high cliffs on the open sea, and that old bird-haunt Puffin Island—the very name full of promise—suggested the lines upon which my work might run. How this ample scheme worked out will appear in the sequel ; suffice that for the time being it served as an inspiration.

The great variety of bird life to be met with in the neighbourhood of Beaumaris is due to the equally various nature of the country immediately

## Birds by Land and Sea

surrounding it. Within a radius of five miles almost every modification of which land and water admit may be encountered—deep sea, and shallows exposing extensive flats at ebb tide ; shingly beaches, and coves enclosed by the gravel walls of what also were beaches in their day ; open sweeps of sand, and precipitous limestone cliffs ; while, on the land, luxuriant hedgerows and deeply wooded slopes, meadow, marsh, and moor, with here and there a secluded sedge-grown mere, diversify the gently rolling land, from which the rocky outcrop protrudes—a frequent reminder of the more turbulent youth of the old island of Anglesey.

Early the following morning we were on the road.

A glance over the sea-wall before starting revealed our old inland friends the jackdaws playing the sea-bird in considerable numbers. They were feeding at the water's edge with a number of immature herring-gulls, by whom they were constantly reminded, and appeared as readily to recognize, that they were interlopers, with only the tenacious impudence of their kind to support them in their *rôle* of uninvited guests. These birds were nesting in the ivy-clad towers of the ruined castle of Beaumaris in the company of somewhat elevated robins and thrushes. I was surprised to find the pied wagtail also nesting twenty feet from the ground in the castle walls, but have since come upon the same species nesting at a still greater height in the roof of the ruined Priory at Penmon.



## Anglesey

When one of the jackdaws perched upon a tower where a thrush was waiting to deliver some food to its young, the thrush made a demonstration of attack. There is a power which "makes for righteousness" among birds as well as among men, for, let a bird be as big as he will, if he be a crooked dealer, a thief or a murderer, conscience makes a coward of him, and I have seldom known such a bird to stand his ground against the righteous indignation of even incomparably smaller birds. The smallest birds will mob the cuckoo; I have seen blackbirds keep an old owl on the run until it only escaped from them by bolting down a hollow tree; meadow-pipits will have their say to the kestrel; the little ringed plover will dart up at the marauding black-backed gulls, and these in their turn will attack that master among thieves, the carrion crow. A rook will go a long way round to avoid nesting lapwings, and if it is made the object of attack, its companions profit by the diverted attention of the attackers to cut round at top speed by another way. But this jackdaw stood his ground stolidly before the excited thrush. Evidently he had a clear conscience, or no conscience at all.

The Menai Strait, about eighteen miles long, lies on a north-east and south-west line. About five miles broad at its northern entrance, it gradually contracts throughout the first six miles until, at a point about a couple of miles above Beaumaris, it measures only a mile and a half across. Here,

## Birds by Land and Sea

however, the channel suddenly narrows down to half a mile in breadth, and so continues to the southern opening of the strait. South of Beaumaris, the shore on the Anglesey side is overlooked by a ridge some few hundred feet in height, sloping steeply, and well wooded to the water's edge. Below Beaumaris, the high ground takes a more northerly trend, and descends with a broader sweep to form a succession of bays and low lines of gravel cliffs, fringed by shingly beaches. At Penmon, four miles below Beaumaris, steep limestone cliffs first merit their name, and, after passing the north-east corner of the island at Point Trwyn Du, or Black Nose Point, bold limestone bluffs with perpendicular cliffs five hundred feet in height, foot up close to deep water on the open sea. The Dinmor and Caregonen rocks are notable points on this part of the coast.

These wooded slopes, shingly bays, and limestone cliffs, and the meadow and moor lying inside, formed our principal hunting-grounds.

Working north from Beaumaris along shore, the first nesting bird we come across is the meadow-pipit, which has found a suitable spot on the grassy shelves where the low sand cliffs have partly fallen away, providing lodgement for a green growth.

As we cross Mount Green, upon emerging from the town, the cries of a populous rookery come from a clump of tall trees just in shore. Many a time these birds, performing their evening evolutions against a sunset sky, will be as a cheering beacon to us,

## Anglesey

plodding this last strip of our journey home after a hard day's work.

Even so near the town as this grassy rise, useful hints may be gathered from the frequently passing sea-birds as to their haunts.

Well out to sea the cormorant flies low to the water with rapidly beating wings. He does not loiter to pick and taste, but has always an object, and generally a distant one, in his journeyings. The bird is often alone, but if there are more than one they proceed in Indian file, with the regularity of flying ducks, a resemblance further heightened by their long outstretched necks and quickly beating wings. Should one fly nearer in, a field-glass will reveal the white spot on the bird's thigh, its nuptial ornament at this season. We shall find, upon following the Strait south of Beaumaris, that these birds regularly frequent a spit of land called The Point. Here they may be seen fishing, submerged all but the surface of their backs, their necks and heads, the body appearing only when the bird springs to go down head foremost for its prey. It generally stays beneath the water for from fifteen to twenty seconds, during which time it travels considerable distances, rising to the surface for five or ten seconds before diving again. At times the cormorant will spiral up laboriously into the air to soar at a great height with the gulls, but it can only maintain itself by frequent and rapid vibration of its wings after short spells of soaring.

## Birds by Land and Sea

It seldom alights, but when it does so, may often be seen standing erect on some solitary snag of rock, its black wings outstretched to the full and motionless. We shall find that these journeys southward on the Strait are made only in the earlier part of the day, but that at evening the birds make their way northward, so that we may look with some confidence for their breeding haunts in that direction.

Gulls are not numerous on the Strait at this period, and those which are present are for the most part immature birds without nesting responsibilities. These are lesser black-backed and herring-gulls, and they, too, are observed to make their way northward on the Strait at the close of day, evidently homing to some cliff on the open sea. Of the common gull we see nothing, this bird having its nesting quarters north of the Border. The black-headed gulls, likewise, are missing, until a few gradually appear during the second week of June, and we notice that these draw off southward on the Strait when day falls. During a previous stay at Beaumaris, lasting from the 4th until the 21st July, 1902, the black-headed gull was the commonest on the Strait. At the time of our second visit this bird—an inland breeder—was evidently busy nesting in some of the marshy tracts south of Beaumaris.

I call to mind that, during my former visit, the common tern also was a constant passenger over Mount Green, coming up from the sea with shining fish in its red bill, crossing the fields and rising to

## Anglesey

the wooded ridge, and so away over Baron Hill by a short cut to some point south on the Strait, bearing food for its young. During my present stay, however, I found flocks of hundreds of these birds haunting the fishing weirs to the north of Beaumaris, so that every black stock in the palisade had its white bird atop waiting for the fish to be left by the falling tide, and in the mean while screaming as they usurped one another's place, evidently still fancy-free and on the less responsible side of matrimony. I found, however, before I left, that this bird was nesting on an island near Menai, some eight miles down the Strait.

On the farther side of Mount Green is the first of the series of shingly bays, where, at ebb, extensive mud flats are exposed below the shingle. It is well to sweep these flats with a glass before going forward, as even at this period the heron and curlew are to be met feeding here. You are not likely to outwit the wary old heron in your approach, but by gently advancing a good view of the bird may be obtained with a glass. The tall figure, with its long straight neck inclined forward, may be easily picked up at the water's edge. There he stands, grey, gaunt, motionless; and so he may stand for half an hour together, and at the end of that time you may possibly notice that the long bill has shifted through a small angle, otherwise there has been no sign of life in the strangely immobile figure. Or, if he moves, it is with stealth and deliberation. One foot

## Birds by Land and Sea

is raised, the toes drawn together, passed slowly over the water, and set down carefully, ere the other foot leaves its place. There is no bird so patient as the heron—so indolent, a casual observer might say. But, if he have to wait long for it, his chance generally comes in the end. Then you have the other side of this apparently inert bird. An imperceptible increase in the inclination of the rigid-looking neck, and in a flash the long bill has struck the water, and is up again, with some twirling captive between the powerful mandibles! The heron makes few false strokes. If you come too near—and the bird takes account of human proximity by a long measure—he quietly folds back his long neck with a snake-like motion, spreads his broad vans, and, drawing up the stilt-like legs, flaps slowly along the water-line to some more remote spot. Keen eyes this old heron must have, for I have watched him fishing at the Point with his bill down to the water after the bats had retired, when he looked more like some night-walking ghost of a bird than a living creature with blood in its veins.

The curlew, although he has neither the stature nor the bulk of the heron, is nevertheless a sufficiently conspicuous object by reason of his long legs and long curved bill. This bill, by-the-by, is straight in the young bird, and as such structural peculiarities in an organ in the young are held to represent earlier stages of its development in the evolution of the species itself, it is a nice question

## Anglesey

how the bill of the curlew, which, upon this showing, must once have been straight in the adult also, in the course of time acquired its present curved form. Dressed in sober greys and browns, relieved only by the white of the belly, rump, and tail coverts, the curlew is less pleasing in its garb than singular in its form. Nor is there much to commend it in its carriage as it moves with staid gait about the shore, searching the weeds and rock-strewn sands newly washed by the tide. If possible, the curlew is even more wary than the heron, and it is rarely that a near view may be had of him. His note, too, is not for over-sensitive ears. Wherein, then, lies the singular charm of this bird for bird-lovers—bird-lovers, I had almost written, of the less perfunctory kind? Is it not that they, too, know something of that spirit of aloofness which possesses the curlew—a bird more than ordinarily shy of the presence of man? When he rises from the moor, calling to his fellows to be gone, one seems to hear the sound of the distant sea to which they go; when he moves quietly about the tidal flats, one has a sense of the ample solitude of unfrequented moors to which he will soon return. And when that V-shaped column of birds passes high in air upon its distant quest, now rigidly regular, now dissolving to re-form as at a word of command, the old Adam of wandering stirs in the blood; for the nomad is not yet dead in man, if, indeed, it have not been quickened into desperate vitality in this age of

## Birds by Land and Sea

extravagant motion—a late revolt from the crowding, sedentary life of the town.

I was once bending down to examine the foot-prints of birds in the mud beside a small reed-grown streamlet, and, after having been hidden for some time, was in the act of rising, when a large bird all but alighted beside me, but gathering itself up again in sudden fright, rent the air with such ear-splitting outcry as to raise every feathered creature around. It was a curlew. It did not make off at once, but continued to wheel about at a safer distance for a short time, repeating its harsh and, as it seemed, objurgatory cry, so that I felt as if I were being denounced before the whole body of Nature as that traitor and renegade, man, and this wild thing of the air were my accuser. Some of the smaller birds appear to have retained a simple trust in man, which one cherishes as one would the confidence of a child; but of the larger birds of strongly marked character there is not one but fears the sight of man, a fear which in the bolder sorts finds expression in cries of unmistakable hatred.

After crossing the first bay, a line of low sand cliff, partly overgrown by thorns and brambles, is reached. Where the small swing-gate admits to the cliff-path above, a whitethroat had courted disturbance by nesting in a bed of hedge parsley hard by. This was mutually satisfactory; for he was as fond of grumbling as I was of hearing him do so.

As the fields, mostly under grass, come right up





YOUNG JACKDAW



SAND-MARTINS' NESTING HOLES



## Anglesey

to the edge of the cliff, larks and meadow-pipits were flitting about on one hand, whilst, on the other, a rock-pipit had slung its nest in the loops of roots projecting from the face of the gravelly cliff. Thus, within sight and sound of each, one might observe at once the pipit of the land and the pipit of the shore.

Below, on the shingle, their sprightlier kinsman, the pied wagtail, betrayed his kinship with these dun-coloured, but much more widely distributed, pipits, by a similar dipping flight, the same walking gait, the same flirting motion of the tail. With its slimmer build, more brilliant markings, and elongated tail, the wagtail combines characteristics which are but exaggerations of those of its homelier cousins. Both walk, but the wagtail struts; both wag their tails, but the wagtail has more to wag, and wags it oftener. He and his immediate and elegant relatives, the yellow and the grey wagtails, are the patricians of the household of the pipits. They have risen in the world, donned fine clothes, and assumed a lordly air. But they have forgotten how to sing. Such song as they have is a low, prattling warble, inaudible a few yards from the bird emitting it. It was not an extravagant compliment to the sweet songs of the pipits when earlier ornithologists bracketed them as the immediate kinsmen of the skylark; and if later classification has placed them with the wagtails, they have the satisfaction of more nearly appreciating that, if fine feathers make fine birds, as a rule they make poor songsters.

## Birds by Land and Sea

At the spot indicated, I had the opportunity of witnessing the courting difficulties of a quartet of pied wagtails on the saltings immediately below me. This quartet, however, lacked all the elements of harmony, the performers being three females and one male, and the piece to be performed the old tune for two voices, male and female, with mutually agreeable variations. The variations in the present instance appeared to be universally disagreeable. There is no stage-craft to equal nature. Here the actors do what they desire to do, and not what they have been taught to think is the proper thing to be done. This gay Lothario of a cock perched on one piece of rock after another, and allowed himself to be adored by the contending females, displaying now and again a weak preference by pecking first at one and then at another of them. There is no bar to female initiative in the courtship of birds, and the three hens followed him about, and paid slavish homage, each perching as near to him as the two others would allow without open violence. And those tails ! how they wagged ! now with an ecstatic quiver as the hen-haunted cock bestowed some little attention upon their owners, now with quickening vibration and widening sweep ere one swooped at her rival, and heads and tails were lost for a time in the general scuffle. In the end, I felt sorrier for that cock, coxcomb though he seemed to be, than for the hens ; and he remains in my memory a pathetic figure disappearing down shore pursued by



COMMON WREN AT NEST



## Anglesey

three determined viragos who would run him to earth again before he got very far.

Several inland birds build in the bushes growing upon this stretch of sand cliff. Thrush and black-bird are there, and skulk in the hollows in the rocks just as they skulk among the evergreens in an inland garden. Greenfinches and tree-sparrows also are there, and the latter had built beneath an old greenfinch's nest, thereby dispensing with the usual dome to its own. Starlings, with a shrewd eye to the limitations of human stature, had built in holes drilled an arm's length deep in the face of the cliff, turning seamen for the nonce. Sand-martins, too, had returned to their old holes in a damp, soft patch of sandy cliff, and spent their time flying backwards and forwards before them during the daytime upon the same line and in much the same manner as the bats which replaced them in the evening.

Near to the martins' haunt, a pair of common wrens had reared their brood in a nest packed in among the hanging roots left by the fallen sand at the head of the low sand cliff. The male bird shown in the picture is standing at the side opening to his globular nest, having just brought food for the young, and is probably reflecting that the photographic camera at which he is looking is a strangely inert creature to have three such long legs.

Wherever there is a stretch of open shingle, especially if backed on the land side by any green cover where the young may hide, one is sure to be

## Birds by Land and Sea

greeted in approaching by the double-noted alarm call of the male ringed plover. "*Tuli! tuli!*" he calls, while you are still a long way off, and at this signal the female bird, who has been sitting upon her four eggs, slips from the nest and runs with lowered head down to the water's edge. If you have been quick enough to sweep with a glass the shingle lying immediately above the high-water line as marked by the drift, you may determine by some object lying near it the spot from which she rose. If not, as a general search would be hopeless, the best plan is to hide, and keep the glass on the female until she returns to the nest. This she will do very cautiously, and with frequent runnings to and fro, pausing to turn this way and that with repeated bows and bobs, as if performing some ceremony. The nest, a slight depression in the shingle, lined with small stones and bits of shell, lies, as a rule, a few feet above high-water mark, the stone-coloured eggs, spotted with blackish-brown over pale grey undermarkings, being almost indistinguishable from the shingle. The nest may at times be found among very coarse shingle, in which case it is lined with fine seaweed or something similar. It would not be correct to say, as is sometimes said, that the ringed plover makes no nest. To one accustomed to pick out such nests among the shingle, there is a very characteristic formation about a ringed plover's nest, by which he can at once distinguish it from a casual depression in the shingle. It is fairly accurately





RINGED PLOVER AND NEST



## Anglesey

circular ; it is lined with small pebbles, chips of shell, fine seaweed, etc., in a way which shows purpose. There is often a larger stone at some point in the circumference of the nest. In one nest we found remarkable variation in the markings of the eggs. One was normal, with the usual stone ground spotted with blackish brown over grey ; two had the grey markings only, and those in varying degrees of faintness ; whilst the fourth, pale blue in the ground, was free from all markings either brown or grey. In another nest there was one egg only, and from this the black-nosed chick greeted us with what was probably its first chirp through the just-punctured shell. The female bird from this nest rolled itself about the shingle in the crippled fashion common with birds of this kind when their young are approached, a device generally ascribed to a desire on the part of the bird to allure the intruder from the nest by feigning to be wounded and incapable of escape.

Another handsome little plover frequently seen on this stretch of shore at this time was the turnstone. Where a small stream debouched on the shingle, a few of these birds might often be seen running beside the shallow water in company with ringed plovers, oyster-catchers, and the inevitable, solitary dunlin, which seems to play Paul Pry in every assembly. The general colouring of the turnstone is black, mottled with chestnut above, and white below. The black of the breast, continuous

## Birds by Land and Sea

with a black neck-band, the white spot beneath the eye, and the bright orange legs and feet, readily catch the eye. The large proportion of white on the wings, lower back, rump, and tail-feathers, separated by equally pronounced tracts of dark plumage, make of the turnstone, when seen on the wing, a bird almost as strongly marked as the oyster-catcher, and not a little like it in general appearance. There is one habit, however, which reduces doubt to a minimum in identifying this bird—it is a turnstone indeed, and may be watched turning over the pebbles with its bill to search for any small life lurking beneath them. Whilst observing them and their associates, it is impossible to overcome a feeling of surprise at the small influence a bird of one species exerts upon those of other species, although habitually associating with them. Here were ringed plovers, oyster-catchers, and a dunlin, birds which for a large portion of every year mix with turnstones in the everlasting hunt for food upon the sea-shore. They see that the turnstone lives by turning over pebbles; they must see what he finds beneath them; and what he finds is exactly that which they themselves are seeking. Yet, it seems never to strike ringed plover, oyster-catcher, or dunlin, that the turning of stones might be profitable for themselves, or might, at least, be worthy of a trial.

The turnstone is a migrant with us, passing northwards in May, and returning in autumn. It

## Anglesey

does not breed south of Denmark. It is a mighty traveller, and of practically world-wide distribution. The bird was last seen by me on its northward passage on the Menai Straits on the 28th May.

About halfway to Penmon, we went to inspect the spot where, in July, 1902, we started a nightjar from a patch of furze and bracken which lies above a line of low sand cliffs. The bird is held to return year by year to the same spot to breed, but, although we searched well in the surrounding cover, we failed to discover our bird again.

Upon the occasion mentioned, the nightjar kept cover until we were close beside her, then rose with a low startled cry, and fluttered in an erratic way with drooping wings and tail above the furze, afterward dropping suddenly to earth in the open a few yards before us. There she crouched close to the ground, facing us and a blazing sun behind us, a handsome bird sharply mottled all over with light and dark browns upon grey, but with something uncanny in her owl-like face—a creature of the night suddenly driven into the sunlight, with a dreamy, uncertain look in its great brown eyes, as if unable to see properly through excess of light. When we approached it, it rose with an owl's noiseless flight, and, fluttering in the same uncertain manner, uttered a succession of low clucks as it passed over the spot in the furze from which it had at first risen, then dropped to earth again, dragging itself silently, but in the most distressing manner, along the ground.

## Birds by Land and Sea

Upon examining the spot, we found two young birds dozing on the ground—little brown and grey creatures scarcely to be distinguished from the ruddy fragments of dead bracken which had been pressed flat to earth, and, shaded by furze, bracken, and thistle, served all the purposes, although scarcely meriting the name, of nest. Most unfortunately, I had forgotten the screw of my tripod, and after lying on the ground until I was well-nigh sick with the heat of the sun beating down on my back whilst rigging up my camera upon a base of stones, I had the chagrin, just at the moment I had got it in position and focus, of seeing one of the chicks rise, and, spreading his wings, run into the cover fanning them like a small ostrich. I could, therefore, only photograph the remaining chick.

No one would imagine, to judge from the small snub, grey beak of this bird, what an enormous gape it has. We handled one of the chicks, which opened his beak to the full, and in his 'prentice fashion showed us how his elders produced the strange whirring sound which has caused them to be named churn-owl, night-churn, etc. Gilbert White has mentioned that, when the bird was uttering its jarring note, he had "for many a half hour watched it as it sat with its under mandible quivering." I noticed this peculiarity in the two chicks when preparing to photograph them. Their lower mandibles were quivering with such rapidity as not to be distinctly visible. I set it down at

## Anglesey

the time to their exposure to the great heat of the sun.

The nightjar is described by a local authority as "common" in North Wales, but, however frequently it may be met with, this bird is in every other respect a most uncommon one. It is one of a numerous and widely distributed class of birds, but it is the only member of that class which visits our islands. One has but to mention the mysterious serrated claw, of which no satisfactory explanation has yet been offered; the bird's habit of perching along, instead of across its perch; the fact that it is a night-bird, but nests on the open ground; its strange whirring note, for which there exists but a remote parallel in the reel of the tiny grasshopper warbler;—one has, in short, but to look at, and listen to, the bird, to recognize that here is a creature unique, eccentric, unlike any other. No wonder that popular imagination has attributed to it all sorts of malign acts and influences, not the least ridiculous of which is that from which it derives its name of "goat-sucker." The nightjar has some queer ways, but it is safe to affirm that he never carried his eccentricity to the point of milking goats!

As dusk sets in, the nightjar is transformed. Sleeping during the daylight, no sooner has the twilight fallen than the bird takes to the wing, skimming the irregular surface of the furze plots, and coasting the woods with the swiftness, sureness,

## Birds by Land and Sea

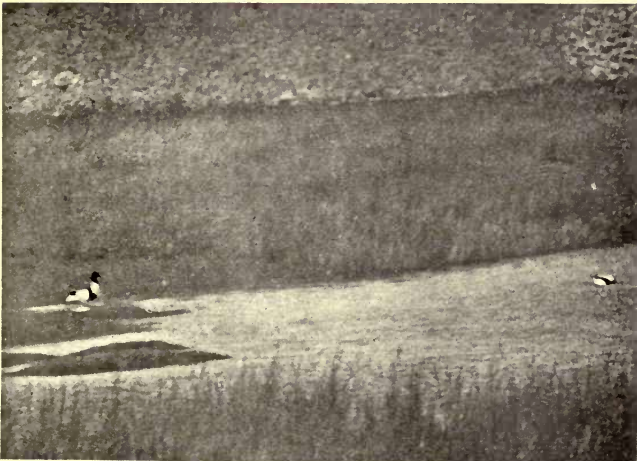
and sudden doublings and turnings of swallow or bat. It is then that the great dark eyes detect the fluttering insect in the gloom, and the wide-gaping bill increases the precision with which the bird darts at and captures it. It is then also that its weird reeling note is heard, rendering more ghostly still the noiseless passage of its wings. This strange, rolling note is continued by the bird for an indefinite time, often for a quarter of or half an hour without break, and is audible at a great distance. It so vividly recalled to my mind the drumming of toads and frogs as I had heard it in the great evening chorus in the Pará marshes, that when I first heard it I at once set it down to these creatures. A homelier comparison would be with the continuous rattle of a mowing-machine, as to its form; but the quality of the note is mellower, and more in the nature of a rolling, bubbling sound. It may be imitated very nearly by opening the mouth, and forcing the breath past the uvula, causing it to vibrate.

As we get nearer the headland at Penmon the shore takes on a rockier, and the land a more moor-like character. At once the lapwings appear, every pose and movement reminiscent of their small kinsman, the ringed plover, so long as they remain upon the ground. But let the lapwing rise, and, for the acute, rapidly vibrating wing of the ringed plover as it circles out in plain flight to sea and back again, you have the powerful beat of the rounded wings of the lapwing, and a flight as erratic at times





YOUNG NIGHTJAR



SHELD-DUCKS AT FEEDING POOL



## Anglesey

of excitement as those of swallow and tumbler pigeon combined. There is an element of song in the sweet piping of the little ringed plover, but the strenuous "pee-whit!" of the lapwing is more like vehement speech. Hearing both birds together, and seeing them only on the wing, a stranger to them would find it hard to believe that two creatures so dissimilar under one aspect could have points of such close resemblance under another.

The field where the lapwings first appeared—a field covered by coarse grass, with patches of reeds and furze here and there—had a small pond in the centre. In this pond we used to see a pair of sheld-ducks feeding in the early hours every morning. This large, goose-like bird, with its bright red bill, dark green head, broad white collar, and ruddy brown band at the base of the neck, and with equally heavy markings in black, white, and green upon the wings and body, is certainly the most conspicuous object in these parts, whether on the ground or on the wing. It is also by no means uncommon. We put up a pair from some low sandhills in this part of the strait; we have seen a pair regularly feeding at the water's edge at the end of a particular spit of sand (they appear to be birds of strong habit); we have found them nesting in the rabbit-burrowed headland forming the north-eastern corner of the island, and have seen a string of twelve leave Puffin Island for the Anglesey shore just as our boat was approaching. We shall come

## Birds by Land and Sea

into closer touch with the sheld-duck farther round the headland.

Outside the field where these sheld-ducks feed, martins and swallows might always be seen perching upon the telegraph-wires that run above the road. I picked up one of the former from the ground immediately beneath the wire, uninjured externally, but quite, although only just, dead.

Upon the same wires a corn-bunting used to sit every day, and all day, uttering its monotonous note. It is hard to imagine a corn-bunting without its beloved telegraph-wire. A bird of his temperament must be as good as an insulator.

After turning a rocky point here, one enters the bay where the Penmon quarries are. Here we saw at different times a pair of lesser terns, and watched long, but fruitlessly, in the hope of discovering their nest on the shingle-clad beach. We were the readier to believe that the nest might be near because we observed the male bird bringing fish to his partner. If the sea has anything daintier than this little eight-inch sea-swallow, with his white body, pearl-grey mantle, and black cap, and orange bill and legs, I have yet to find it. White and lissom, with fine-drawn bill and tapering wings, it would seem almost as if the purity of his plumage had come of his frequent divings in the sea, and the low smooth curves of head and body from the attrition of the water as he shot through it to seize his prey. The bird came into sight with a thin shrill scream, the



GREEN WOODPECKER'S NESTING TREE



## Anglesey

finely pointed wings flickering as if too frail for the battle of wind and wave; but in a moment they were folded back, and like a compact dart the small form shot, head lowermost, into the sea. A few moments later it emerged with a little silvery fish in its bill. This did not prevent the bird's scream of invitation to its mate, and the latter rose from the shingle and went out to meet him. But thus to give up the fish would be too plain a fashion for this delicate wooer. He avoids her, and there is a mingling of wings as of two white butterflies which toy in the sun. The lady screams so to be put off, and her lord screams too, but leads her gradually round to the shingle. When they alight, she makes a sudden snatch at the tardy love-tribute, but the male flutters aside, and pursues his tantalizing performance. With wings drooping at his sides, and tail cocked up, he goes through his love-dance with all the coxcombrity of the male in love. In the mean while, the female stands by, apparently eaten up with impatience and mortification. Now she is silent and sullen; then she opens her wings, and shuts them, as it were, with a vicious snap. But in the end her moment of triumph comes, and with a scream she darts at the male, tears the fish from his bill, and, as like as not, turns her back upon him while she swallows it. We found several ringed plovers' nests in the shingle of this bay, but would gladly have missed them for a sight of the lesser tern's. After all, this bird is social, and breeds in

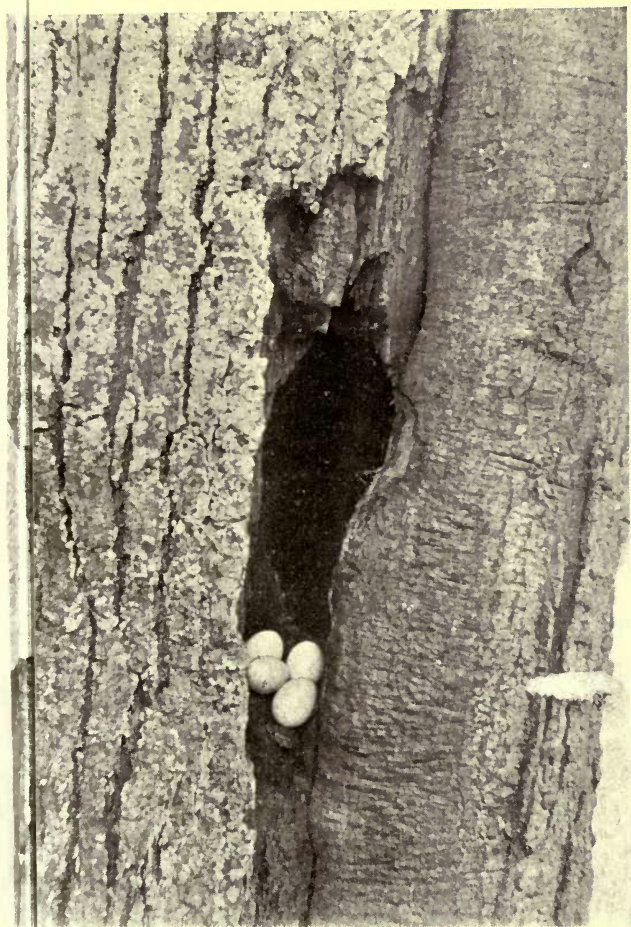
## Birds by Land and Sea

communities, so that there was, perhaps, little of its nesting here alone. It is never safe, to assume that you know what a bird will do.

Following the path which skirts the entrance, it enters a lane which, from its overarching tree-grown walls and hedgerows, might reasonably be styled an avenue. Such, in fact, it is, and the way to Penmon Priory and the "Park." It seemed natural that we should find sparrow-catchers nesting in the thick forks of the trees. We were less prepared to discover birds of a retiring sort in such a situation.

In this lane is the entrance-gate to the marble quarries, and immediately adjoining the picture shows, is an old oak. I was peering at the latter with my eyes on the ground when my attention was arrested by thousands of chips of wood lying at its foot. I looked up to see the effect of the tree of this act of vandalism, as I imagine, but saw no outward evidence of it. From the ground, however, there was a large opening into the tree, which was hollow. Above this higher was a similar opening, the two openings connected by the hollow trunk. As I was about to pass my arm down the trunk, my son discovered an egg, which had lain with the wood upon a bedding of chips a foot and a half from the lower opening. The mystery of the chips was explained. Strange as it may seem, a great woodpecker had made its nest four feet from the





GREEN WOODPECKER'S NEST-HOLE



## Anglesey

1 a tree standing at the side of a narrow public way, and at the very gates of the quarry. I photographed the tree and the multitude of chips lying at its foot, and afterwards placed the eggs at the entrance to the nest, and made a second picture.

Shy as these birds were, I managed to see a good deal of them in my almost daily passage through this lane. Often enough they would keep quite still in the leafy branches above, and when one caught sight of either of them, the bird would be seen clinging to trunk or branch, from behind which it peeped round at the intruders below. At other times, while we were yet some distance down the lane, the bird's huge guffaw would be heard, and he would shoot ahead, a sudden glow of green and red as he flew between the trees, then darted aside and disappeared over the ivy-clad wall. I never see green woodpecker or kingfisher without being carried back to my old days in the forests of Brazil; for they have the true tropical colours, and the wild cry of the green woodpecker has the right forest ring with it—sudden, detached, breaking out of, and as abruptly sealed up in, immediate silence.

About a week after the discovery, I noticed that the right-hand side of the nesting-hole had been enlarged, so that I was able to pass my elbow through it. One of the eggs had been taken. The thief had evidently had some conscience; it was a pity that his judgement seemed to be equally rudimentary. A green woodpecker is not likely to

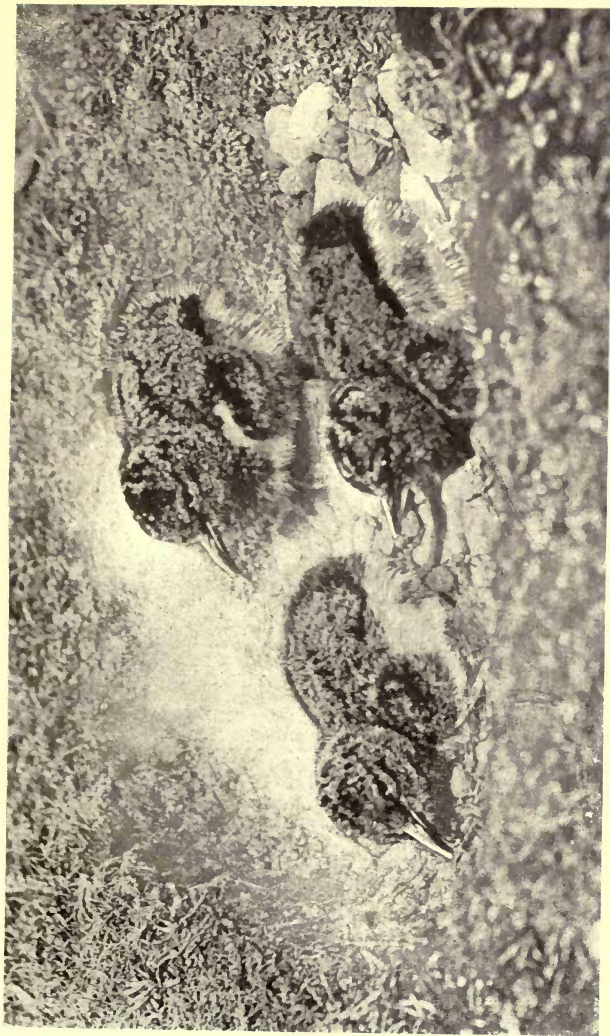
## Birds by Land and Sea

allow one to chisel her nesting-hole, even if it be to abstract only one of four eggs. From that time the nest was deserted.

Passing the old ivy-clad ruins of Penmon Priory, one enters Penmon Park, a fine open sweep of bracken-covered moor breaking down to the sea in the rocky cliffs forming the headland. Here lapwings and rabbits abound, and missel-thrushes—I heard the natives call them “jays”—are met in quite unusual numbers. I stalked the lapwings from the pathway with the double-lens camera, and obtained a few pictures of rather indifferent quality. Although a sufficiently reposeful bird when alone, the lapwing is a tetchy, peevish, restless creature when approached.

Upon reaching the “Black Rocks” at the extreme corner of the island, we found the lighthouse and Puffin Island lying in front of us on the open sea. We noticed that the cormorants, after coming down the Strait, turned this corner, and continued their flight along the north side of the island. There are no cormorants on Puffin Island.

Our path for the present also lies along the limestone cliffs forming this northern coast of Anglesey, and we shall not have gone far along the rocks ere an oyster-catcher remonstrates. Seen on the sea-washed points or snags of rocks, where he spends most of his time, he is a round-shouldered, squat-looking bird, black above and white below, with a long brilliant orange-red bill, and pinkish legs and



BROOD OF OYSTER-CATCHERS



## Anglesey

feet. But when he gets up on the wing, as he will do upon the slightest provocation, the bird is transformed. With free, powerful flight he circles out to sea and back again, the sharply pointed wings, striped longitudinally with broad alternating bars of black and white, more than justifying the bird's other name of "sea-magpie." As he flies he utters incessantly a loud, metallic, piping note.

As we approached the rocks, a cock bird, who had stood guard on a low stone wall running along the edge of the cliff, piped out while we were still about a hundred yards off. When a cock pipes at a distance and keeps to the ground, it is a signal to the sitting hen to quit the nest, and a safe sign to the observer that the birds have eggs, and not young. If the young are out, both birds get up and maintain a perfectly distracting piping.

We inferred from the position of the male that the female was somewhere on the rocks below, but searched in vain there for the nest. The oyster-catcher makes its nest as a rule on shingle a few feet above high-water mark, or on the rocks. A sure sign of the bird's having frequented a particular spot is afforded by the empty limpet shells strewn about. Although I saw a large number of these lying on the turf quite a long way from the rocks, the thought never entered my head that an oyster-catcher would nest anywhere but near to the shore. Some days later, however, I was returning from working on the cliffs, and, crossing the green to save time, noticed

## Birds by Land and Sea

an oyster-catcher running with head lowered as fast as she could along a low stony ridge formed by rocky outcrop from the soil. Although a couple of hundred yards from the shore, I knew from the bird's manner that I had taken her unawares, the ridge having hidden me from the cock's place of look-out on the wall. Apart from its distance from the rocks, the stony ridge seemed a sufficiently likely place for the nest. Up and down that ridge I went, searching every hollow without success. At last I turned my back upon it in despair, and gazed blankly at the grass below the ridge. I had hit upon the spot as if by magic, and was all the while looking at three large eggs lying in a hole scratched by a rabbit in the turf. Beside the eggs the hollow contained a few rabbit droppings, small stones, and fern stalks. This oyster-catcher, at any rate, might be said to have made no nest.

I last saw the eggs when returning from the cliffs in the evening of the 6th June. Re-visiting the nest on the morning of the 8th June, I found the three chicks shown in the picture. At our approach both of the old birds got up and circled round and round, piping frantically. The young, at first, crouched and were silent; but soon they began to pipe back, and take to their legs whenever they got the chance. The markings of the young were just those of a tabby kitten, the black, white, and grey giving no promise of the startling combination of black and white which distinguishes the





OYSTER-CATCHER'S NEST ON TURF



OYSTER-CATCHER'S NEST ON ROCKS



## Anglesey

grown bird ; whilst the bill, and the legs and feet, were of a slaty hue, and were just as far from the orange-red bill and pinkish legs and feet of the adult state. The hatching of these chicks was the most startling transformation I have ever witnessed. Within a couple of days the birds were in the shells and running about fledged as shown in the picture. The unusually large size of the egg, no doubt, has its result in the early equipment of the young, which at birth are furnished with bill and legs of extraordinary size and strength. By photographing them on the morning of the 8th June, I was only just in time, for when I passed the nest in the evening of the same day they had left it, and from the behaviour of the old birds it was evident that they already had their young ones abroad in the bracken.

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How differently the oyster-catcher makes its nest under varying conditions may be judged by a comparison of this nest with the picture of one which we found on the rocks. In the latter case, a most remarkable structure had resulted from the use of chippings of rock found on the nesting site, the nest being encircled by a regular rampart made from them.

While I was attempting to obtain pictures of some old birds on the wing, I soon observed that their actions betrayed anxiety for something other than their own safety. I was evidently near a third nest. I examined the surface of the rocky point

## Birds by Land and Sea

where I was standing, but failed to find the nest. I returned to the camera, and whilst following the birds with my head under the focussing cloth, I kept hearing, as I thought, a small squeak respond to the powerful piping of the old birds. To cut a long matter short, I at last found three chipped eggs in a fissure at the edge of the rock where I was standing, walled up by projecting slabs of rock, so as to be invisible save to one standing immediately over the nest. Here again nature had furnished the oyster-catcher with a ready-made nest, and the bird had added nothing to it. Upon examining the eggs, I found the tips of the large bills of two of the enclosed chicks protruding through slits in the lining membranes of the eggs. These two chicks were piping lustily their ante-natal song, responding to the cries of the mother whom as yet they had never seen. The third egg was only just chipped, and there was but a minute slit in the inner lining. Nevertheless, the enclosed chick also called from time to time in a small far-away voice. As the eggs when in the nest were too deeply in shadow for me to obtain a photograph, I set them out on the grass in such a position as to show the openings in the shells and the projecting bills.

Between the Black Rocks and Dinmor Rocks is a hollow where the limestone has at some time been quarried, and the loose stone has been flung up in heaps in the hollow, one of the heaps having a flat top. Here, with stones forming a low wall on three



YOUNG OYSTER-CATCHERS IN THE SHELL



NIGHTJAR'S NEST



sides of the nest, a nightjar had selected its breeding-place. A small path wound up one side of the heap, leading to a point from which the nest was visible through the opening in the remaining side. There was no attempt to form a nest of any sort, the eggs being laid upon the bare rock, but in a spot where small chippings gave it a more regular surface. One egg was out on the 3rd June, and the completing egg was found beside it on the following day. There can be few eggs more beautiful than those of the nightjar; white in the ground, they are boldly marbled with brown upon an under marbling of stone grey, both ends of the egg being rounded.

The natives of these parts, as of other parts of the country, have a superstitious dread of the nightjar, and when the present nest was found, they advised that the eggs should be broken and the bird driven away. The day after the second egg was out, I photographed the nest, and after doing so, made preparations to get a picture of the bird itself. In order to get light on the nest I was forced to remove one of the enclosing stones, and setting the camera upon it, covered it with small stones to disguise it. As the bird did not return during the day, I feared that I had exhausted its patience and caused it to desert. However, placing everything as I had found it, I trusted to the bird becoming sufficiently bold, when going her nightly round, to look in on the old spot, and finding all safe, to resume sitting. In this I was not disappointed, for

## Birds by Land and Sea

upon revisiting the nest early the following day, the bird was sitting again. I had marked on my camera the requisite extension for focussing an object at four yards, and likewise marked the rock at this distance from the nest. Creeping round with the camera in my hand, slide open and shutter set, I came to the rock which I had marked. I then turned quietly at right angles so as to face the nest, prepared to press the bulb. As any one who has stalked a bird for its picture—an operation infinitely more delicate than stalking it for its life—knows, the moment was supreme. But neither bird nor nest was visible. Had I turned in the wrong direction?—I asked myself. In some direction at a distance of four paces from me I knew that the nest must surely be. As my eye picked out the old landmarks, I became aware of an indefinite something lying on the rock—a brown and grey patch such as might have been presented by the weather-stained rock lying about. Then the sequence of events was lost. The shutter snapped, and the brown and grey patch became animated at what seemed precisely the same instant, and glancing noiselessly over the edge of the heap, the nightjar was gone, leaving me to wonder if her movement had been the cause of my snapping the shutter, or if the snap of the shutter had caused her to move. Only development could reveal the true sequence of cause and effect.

Looking back on the occurrence, I recall the first image that came into my mind as that of a lizard



## Anglesey

lying flattened out on the rock, basking in the sun, as I have frequently seen them do. The bird's eyes were closed, and its feathers sleeked down. It was either asleep or feigning sleep. I had stood for ten or fifteen seconds facing it. If it was asleep, it should have continued to sleep until aroused by the shutter ; if it was feigning, it probably considered that there was too much intention in my attitude to risk the situation any longer.

Development of the plate subsequently showed that the bird was in position at the time of exposure, but the plate was rendered useless by a slight side-shift of the camera while the shutter-blind was passing.

That was the first and last snap I obtained of this nightjar. Although I visited the nest daily during the following week, I never again caught sight of the bird. Upon going to the nest eight days after the second egg had been laid, I found several pieces of stone and one broken egg-shell in the nest, and the broken shell of the second egg a yard outside the nest. Had the good folk of Penmon had their way with the ill-omened bird ? The fact that none of the contents of the eggs was to be traced on the ground, and both were broken clean in halves, one having been carried a yard over a little six-inch wall of stone forming the rear of the nest, pointed to an alternative. Either gull or carrion crow would readily enough devour them, but in such a case the question was—how to account for the presence of

## Birds by Land and Sea

the loose stones in the nest? No bird could have brought them. So the history closes, like so many of its kind, with frayed ends, and without even a plausible conjecture to knit them up.

Where the turfy ground, with its rocky outcrop, numberless rabbit-burrows, and heaps of quarry *débris*, adjoins the shore rocks, is the particular haunt of the wheatear. They do not allow themselves to be overlooked; for the wheatear is not a bird to meet invasion by evasion. He demonstrates at first sight, but takes care to choose his ground at a safe distance from his nesting-hole. "*Chat! chat! ee!*" he cries, from his perch on stone or clod, or any other object affording the prominence he courts, the chat being like the sound produced by striking together two small pebbles, and the final "*ee*" an acute sob-like sound, resembling a catch in the breathing. If you are inclined for a stroll, the wheatear is at your disposal to lead you on your way in all directions but one. But if you desire to make a nearer acquaintanceship, try the effect of searching here and there. When you are "cold," the bird becomes less insistent; when you are "warm," he closes in and disputes the right of way. I soon discovered that the bird in the picture had a very strong objection to my being near a particular heap of stones, and when I began to cast aside a few of them at the base of the pile, it flew to the top of it and, with bobbing head and flirted tail, rattled out its "*chat*" at a great rate. There was little doubt



WHEATEAR



YOUNG RINGED PLOVERS CROUCHING



## Anglesey

that somewhere in that heap it had its secret nest ; but as I was more concerned to get its picture than to find its nest, I stalked it until, from the foot of the pile, I obtained a fairly satisfactory series of photographs.

Rock-doves were often present along this shore, starting out in precipitate flight with clapping wings as we invaded the recesses of the rocks.

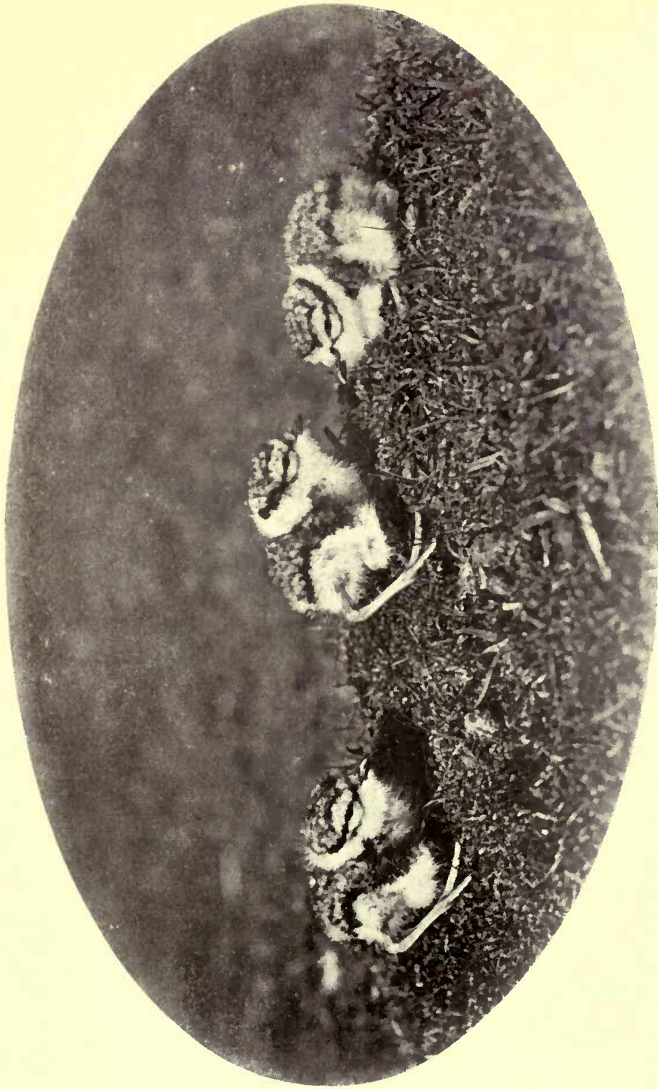
We found a blackbird had nested facing the sea, and we fed the voracious young ones with potted shrimps, as became birds of quasi-marine pretensions. Probably they would have swallowed hobnails, if presented, for they are ravenous eaters, and will make powerful efforts to gulp down one's finger-end.

I have mentioned a pair of sheldrakes as feeding regularly in the early hours of the morning in a small pond up the strait. At about eleven o'clock in the morning a pair used to come down the strait with equal regularity, and turning the corner at the lighthouse, circle in-shore, and disappear over a near ridge forming the seaward edge of the bracken-covered land beyond. My attention was specially aroused by the fact that a few seconds after the pair had passed over the ridge, the male bird, without settling, at once wheeled into sight again, and, following the line by which he had come, returned up the strait. This gallant sheldrake, so punctilious in escorting his lady home, was evidently not of the sort who are stated to mount guard over the nesting

## Birds by Land and Sea

burrow. Having dutifully attended her to the doorstep, so to say, he seemed to wave a lofty adieu, and straightway betake himself to more congenial occupations, only suspended to perform an act of necessary courtesy. Beyond the fact that Madam Sheldrake never came home alone, I soon observed that she never came out by the way by which she went in. Farther along these rocks is a small cove, and where the land proper begins is a sheltered corner with a clump of high bushes. This was the invariable place of exit of the female sheldrake. It was connected with what we may call the front-door entrance by a continuous stretch of bracken. Once we saw the bird alight upon arrival and run through the bracken, but spent fruitless hours in trying to trace her burrow. At another time we hid near and rushed up immediately the birds had passed the ridge, upon which both wheeled round and went out to sea again. However, if we failed to find the nesting-burrow, we at least learned something of the habits—the cast-iron habits—of the sheldrake.

We were told that a nest of young “dotterels” was to be seen farther up the coast, and entering at a little shingly cove, emerged upon a strip of higher grassland inshore, edged on each side by rising ground covered with bracken. Already at the entrance to the cove the cock bird met us, piping, like the true ringed plover (!) he was, that he was the only huntable bird in that part of the world, and that he was going quite the opposite way to that in



YOUNG RINGED PLOVERS





## Anglesey

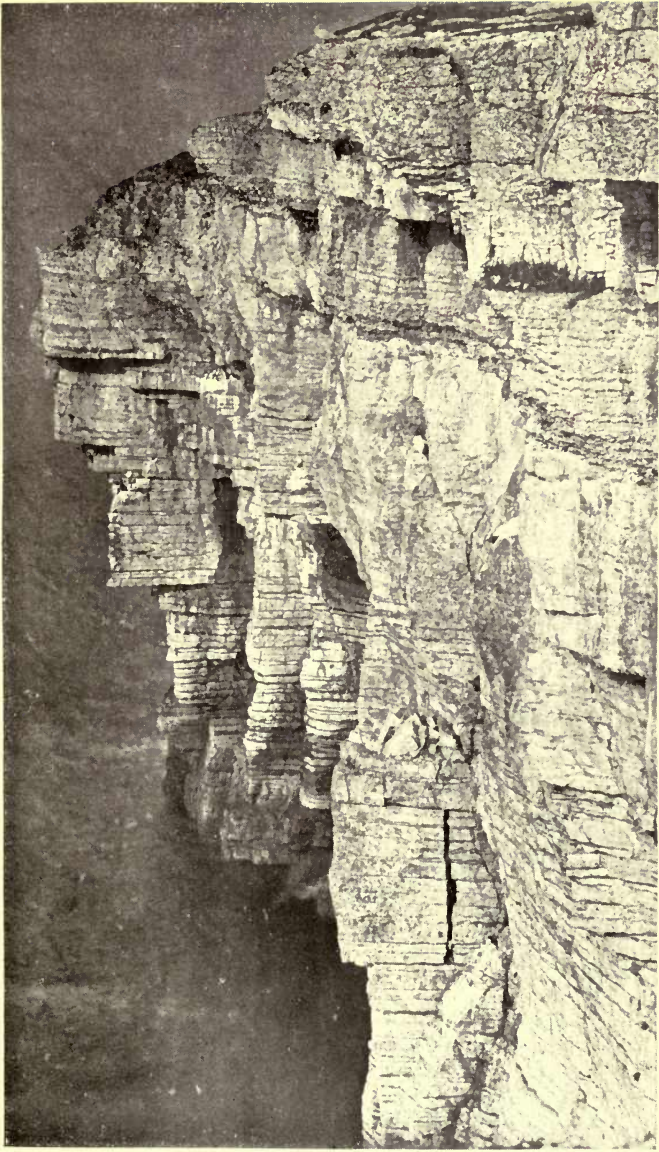
which we were proceeding. However, taking no notice of this young gentleman, beyond the fact that he was a ringed plover, we got up on to the grass, where we were received by the female bird, equally anxious to convince us that we should stand the best chance of catching her if we followed her down again to the shore. After a short search, we found first one and then two more of the chicks, which had clapped down motionless, at sign of danger, in any available rut or hollow in the grass. The fourth chick—supposing the full brood to have been brought off—we failed to find, and so proceeded to put the three others through their facings, with a view to presenting them creditably to the world. They were a most unruly trio, to say the least of them. So long as we stood over them, they seemed to feel the shadow of authority, and crouched to earth; but if we sat down or turned aside for a moment, they got up and scattered every one his own way, scudding over the turf with long legs and expanded callow wings like so many miniature ostriches. No sooner had we gone in chase of one truant than the two others got up and made off at top speed in another direction. Things became so lively from this cause that we had to put them under hatches in a blind rabbit-burrow, covering them up with the lunch-bag whilst we made ready to photograph them.

While we were engaged with the chicks, the old birds ran to and fro on the grass, or flew round in

## Birds by Land and Sea

wide circles, piping continuously, the young ones responding as lustily. They seldom ventured very near, although if the peculiar performance of the hen bird, by which she is generally held to feign to be wounded, is really intended to convey such an impression, one might have expected her to afford us a nearer view, so as the more surely to attract attention. As it was, I was able to get a snap only at a considerable distance. The bird gets its head down, depresses and expands the tail, lifts the wings, and either gives both wings a flickering motion, or lays one to the ground whilst the other is carried high in air; the whole while she continues to run from the observer with a dragging, and sometimes rolling, motion. The action which most disposes one to accept the usual statement that this is done to attract attention from her chicks by drawing it to herself is that, whilst so occupied, she continually casts backward glances as if to see if her device is taking effect. This theory presupposes that the bird knows that if it can convince the observer that it is wounded, he will pursue it. This, however, seems rather advanced logic for a ringed plover, although I must admit that appearances favour the theory. If really pursued, the bird takes wing readily. I noticed that when the female was thus dragging herself along the ground, the cock generally flew across to her.

After photographing the chicks, we set them free to follow their parents. This they did, running



DINMOR



## Anglesey

rapidly with expanded wings, now stopping to bob their heads in true plover fashion (they must have learned that in the shell), now coming a header over some slight inequality in the ground. However far they got from danger, the old birds still continued to call and lead, but did not attempt to return and cover the young, as I have seen lapwings do under similar circumstances.

Crossing the cove and reascending on the farther side, we gained the top of high limestone cliffs which fall perpendicularly to the sea, assuming a character befitting their name—Dinmor, or Deep Sea, Rocks. The picture was taken from the edge of the cliff, at the foot of which the sea breaks at high water with a hollow boom as it flushes the recess known as the Guillemots' Hole.

The bird standing at the edge of the cliff is an old herring-gull, who might be seen in the same spot at almost any time of day, as still as a figure on a cornice. I stalked him with the double-lens camera, making the camera "walk" by advancing the front leg as far as it would safely go, then bringing up the two back legs quickly, refocussing, and setting the front leg forward again. By this means one may always snap on the last focus if the bird becomes restive. So long as I kept my head under the focussing-cloth the bird did not seem to mind much, and I was thus able to get up within half a dozen yards from him. He was one of a solitary pair of herring-gulls nesting on a tufty ledge not far

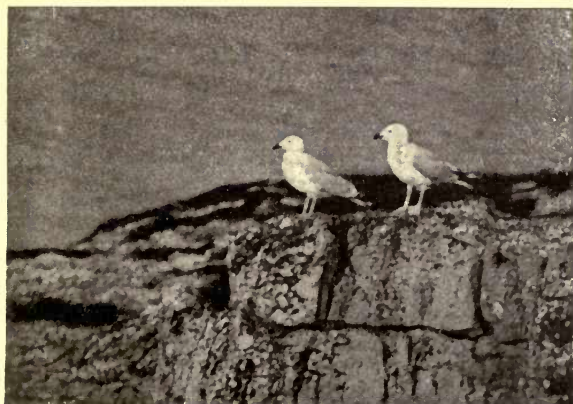
## Birds by Land and Sea

below the cliff head. His mate, however, did not regard the advancing camera with the same indifference. She had been sailing backwards and forwards at the edge of the cliff, crying "*Ha-ha-ha-ha!*"—a cry which, although expressed in the form of laughter, was yet delivered in tones of menace. I was less than a foot from the edge of a four-hundred-foot precipice, with my head enveloped in the focussing-cloth, when this bird swooped at the black-headed, spindle-shanked monster advancing upon her mate, and made my heart stop as she cuffed me with swishing wing in passing.

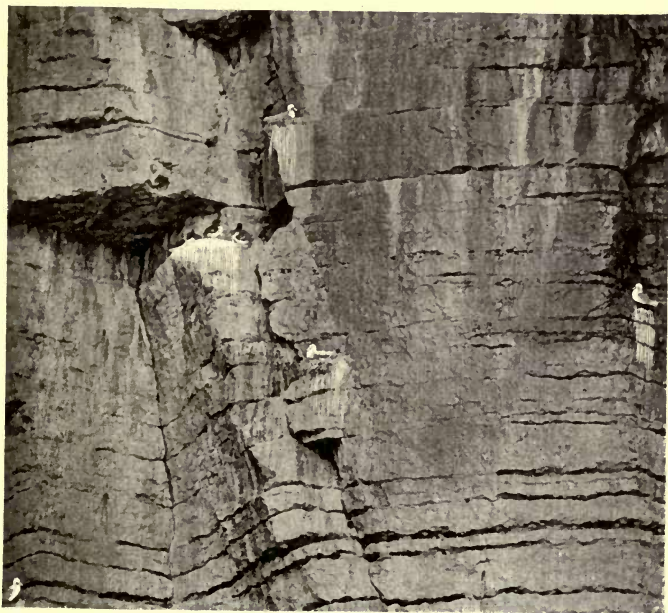
There is not much danger in this sort of work if one keeps a cool head; the danger lies in the "unexpected," which may prompt one to precipitate action. I remember being once in a similar position when a dark slide slipped from my coat-pocket and fell over the edge of the cliff. My first impulse was to snatch at it, but, having already had one or two "shockers," I refrained, and was rewarded by seeing the slide settle in a bunch of scrub, from which I was able to haul it up in a more deliberate manner.

Seeming to have satisfied her wrath in some measure, the female herring-gull took her stand beside her mate, and I exposed a plate and had done with them.

In the cliff below, a number of guillemots and kittiwakes were nesting, and at any time the old herring-gull could bring out the whole colony by



HERRING GULLS



KITTIWAKES





## Anglesey

flapping out over the sea and uttering his deep, mirthless "*Ha-ha-ha-ha!*"

As I saw kittiwakes nesting well down the front of the cliff, and guillemots entering and leaving the rocks, I set myself to find a way down. The only way of approach, I found, was at the west end of the cliff. Here the cliff is suddenly shorn off in a perpendicular wall which has the appearance of a great fault. By going inland, however, descent may be made by a steep incline into a valley, and following this seaward, one passes beneath this western aspect of the cliffs to a long slanting slab of rock running down to the rock-strewn shore. Shore, however, in the proper sense of the word, there is none—only a wilderness of great blocks of slimy, weed-grown, tide-eaten rock, piled up in angular masses presenting surfaces in every plane but the useful horizontal. Work can only be done here on a falling tide, for there is a deep gully running up to the foot of the cliffs, and here the tide remains later, and arrives earlier, than at other points. Having crossed this gully, the work of clambering over the blocks begins. A length of rope, with which to sling the camera case from one block to another, and to draw it up and let it down the ledges, is absolutely necessary. It will require an hour to cross a space which might be passed over in two minutes on level ground, by which time you will probably have sunk to your knees in water-filled basins thatched with specious weed, and shown the soles of your feet to every point of the compass

## Birds by Land and Sea

as they shot from beneath you on that thin, dry-looking green slime. Now you will have to abandon the camera to save yourself; then you will have to sacrifice yourself to save the camera. In the end you will stand, a mass of bruises and general scarification, on a weed-covered slab, with the sea—which seems never to go properly out—"sucking," as with great wet lips, in the hollows between the blocks, and, after periods of apparent subsidence, rising with alarming irregularity to flush parts which it appeared to have abandoned.

In front of you is the Guillemots' Hole. There was more hole than guillemots when I was there, although the birds were evidently in a fair way to increase their numbers. The latter, however, are in no way to be compared with the demoralizing multitudes to be met with at any of the noted breeding-stations; and the question was not seldom asked: Is it worth the trouble? Is anything worth anything, unless measured by its own standard? one might answer. For my part, I prefer the zest of the hunt on new ground, even if attended by a slender find, to stumbling through overcrowded colonies where one is afraid to step for fear of treading on a nest.

But if one goes for something besides numbers, there is to my thinking nothing more alluring than some out-of-the-way haunt of sea-birds such as this. The great white cliffs bar you off behind; the sea hems you in before. You have got over the wall of your own world, but are unable to enter this

## Anglesey

world of heaving water. You are alone in limbo. For the wild things up on the cliffs are not of your world. They belong here ; they are of the water, and know its ways. You thought you knew its ways when you came here, but all the poetry is gone out of it. By all human count, the tide should be now at ebb ; but you do not reason any longer. This same restless sea, which keeps putting its long watery fingers between the blocks and drawing them back again, is like a live thing. It might run up suddenly into that empty gully, and cut you off with a wild sardonic laugh. The shocks of matted seaweed heave and fall on the water around you ; so might the hair of drowned men spread and gather together again in the swell and fall of the waves.

“*Ar-r-r-r-r-r-er !*” A guillemot comes in from the sea, uttering its interminable rolling cry as it sweeps on a broad arc like some small black and white aerial torpedo, always with an inward tilt and bias in its flight. The cry means something down here ; for, the bird with the black back barred with white, straddling its one egg on the narrow ledge, and with legs braced to keep its breast to the wall, turned its head, although unable to move its body, as he swept past and out to sea again. The cry means nothing to you ; you are not of this world.

Or, again, do you hear that low bark as of some sea-dog on the cliffs ; or those moanings as of men in pain ? They are the cries of these same guillemots, but whether for pain or pleasure, in

## Birds by Land and Sea

feud or amity, you cannot tell. You interpret them by human likenesses, and they are always sombre, wild, and weird.

And the kittiwake—that least of gulls, with its pure white head and body and pearl-grey mantle, sitting upon its seaweed nest just poised on some scanty shelf of rock—surely so sweet a bird will have as sweet a voice. But one calls, and then another, and out of the Guillemots' Hole they come trooping all together, wheeling round and round as they cry, "*Kit-a-ey! Kit-a-ey!*" Is not this the very voice of ailing children, fretful, fanciful, but at bottom sorrowful too, as if the fretfulness were their own, but the sorrow rose from some impersonal deep thus to find superficial utterance? When they have done their solemn play, they return to their places, and stand like little white and grey saints in their niches in the rock. Whether they sometimes take the liberty of sitting in each other's nests, or the male occupies it while his mate goes for a turn in the air, I do not know; but the returning bird will at times dump down with a scream on the nest, from which the sitting one slips just in time to avoid the impact.

At times a sudden excitement sets the whole colony crying, and the screaming and wailing of the kittiwakes mingle with the low coughing bark and moanings of the guillemots, so that one might imagine that the very bedlam of the sea had broken bounds.



GUILLEMOTS



## Anglesey

But the point of sanity is the camera. When it has been rigged up, the old herring-gull from the cornice above drops sheer on to it, until, when within a few yards from it, she glides up again and beyond. The birds are high up, and the water so near, that one cannot get far enough back. The camera has to be set up in defiance of every rule of perspective, and perpendicular columns incline toward one another as if in drunken embrace. The climax was reached when the camera's centre of gravity tried to emulate the extravagances of its centre of position, and, aided by a fair breeze, brought the whole structure crash on the rocks. There be land wrecks and water wrecks, but this was both; for whilst splinters of the camera shot about the weed-grown slab, one of the dark slides slipped between the blocks, and, striking clear water, set off merrily to sea. For the information of those who have never made the experiment, I may state that a dark slide, if it be a good one, sails perfectly, as flat as a raft, and that an exposed plate contained therein is not necessarily lost. The picture of the Guillemots' Hole is probably the only one ever produced from a plate whose development started with a sea bath. Misfortunes sometimes bring a certain cold comfort of their own: I should not have known the satisfaction of recovering the dark slide, or of repacking the giblets of the camera, if I had not come nigh losing the one and ruining the other.

A last look up at the cliffs before starting to

## Birds by Land and Sea

clamber back showed the swifts playing backwards and forwards before their nests at the cliff head ; and beneath a ledge several hundred feet up could be seen a line of little red-earth nests where a colony of martins had fixed their abode.

By the time I reached the slanting slab leading to the valley above, the day was drawing to a close ; and as I climbed the slope from the valley, a black string of jackdaws was making a short cut on a high line across the land from the strait where they had been feeding during the day, and as they arrived, cawing all along the line, one after another slipped into all but invisible cracks high up on the west face of the cliff, and disappeared like those upon whom a door shuts suddenly. When the last of these was housed for the night, the simpler cormorants were still urging their flight up the strait and along the north coast, performing two sides of the triangle by sea instead of one by land.

By the time I had reached the top of the cliff, the gully below was already full, and the slab where I had stood was covered by the sea. A couple of hours and all would be black down there, the risen waters pounding away in the hole where kittiwake and guillemot slept. Truly, they have a world of their own—birds that rest upon the restless sea, and are at peace in the wind-swept, tide-smitten rocks.

Although when at home I see the kestrel almost daily during the autumn and earlier spring months, I had to come to the coast to find them nesting.



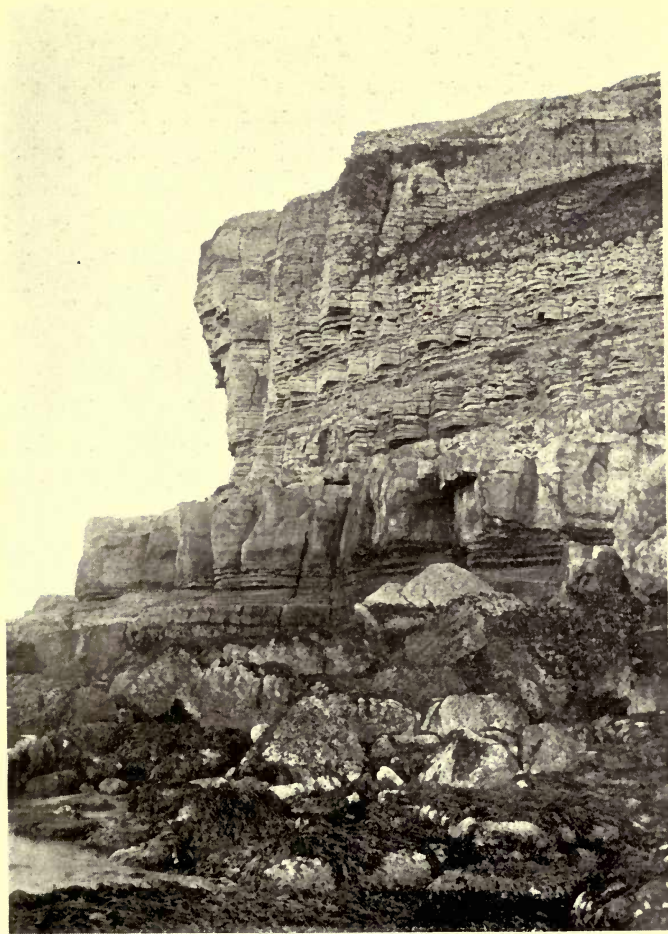
## Anglesey

They appeared to be fairly common along the Anglesey cliffs, for I saw three pairs with young between the Dinmor and the Caregonen rocks.

Here also we came in touch with the peregrine one evening when returning from the latter point. We were descending from a rocky upland tract to pass along the shore of a small bay, at the farther side of which a high block of cliff presented a west face similar to that of Dinmor, when a bird got up from the rocks near us, and, flying out over the water of the bay, kept up a continuous rasping cry, resembling the syllable "*Crek!*" The same cry was taken up immediately at the farther side of the bay, and we saw another bird sail out from the cliff head, circle about, and then return to a ledge high up the cliff, where it settled without ceasing from crying. Taking note of the spot by the aid of the glass, we descended to the shore, and reascended to the top of the cliff on the farther side. During the whole time of our approach both birds maintained the monotonous rasping cry, but when we emerged on the cliff top and went toward the place below which we had seen the female perch, the latter beat round in wilder flight, and raised her cry to such a pitch of frenzy as to cause it at times to "break" in her throat. The bird's bill was held open continuously whilst the cry was emitted, and the latter had a nasal twang. The precipice was a clean drop of several hundred feet, beetling slightly at the top, the position being

## Birds by Land and Sea

rendered still more difficult by a fringe of dwarf bushes at the edge. By lying on my stomach and grasping the gnarled roots of the bushes, I was able to look down and inward. The old bird now came down so close that I knew that I was "warm" in my search, but the fierce anxiety in the tone of her cry made me fear lest she should drive at me in her fury. Six feet below me, and slightly to the right, was a bare ledge of rock, and a solitary green tuft which grew from a crack in the rock had been flattened by continuous sitting. At the side of the tuft was the plucked and flayed body of a young lapwing, from which the head and feet had been removed, although it was still surrounded by the feathers. I had watched unobserved for a few seconds, when a young peregrine, fully fledged, came sideways along the ledge. I continued perfectly still, and shall not forget the sudden start of recognition when the bird's eye met mine. Since the bird was born that fringe of stunted bushes had been like a black eyebrow on the brow of the cliff, but there had never before appeared above it this strange thing with eyes in it looking down upon the nesting ledge which the birds had probably regarded hitherto as inaccessible. It was a pleasure to note the fine spirit of this young peregrine. There was no terror-stricken squawk and sudden flight. It spread its claws out and dug them down, lowered its head, which it continued to jerk from time to time as if adjusting it for better vision, and with sidelong glance looked up with an eye full at



PEREGRINE FALCON'S NESTING CLIFF



## Anglesey

once of suspicion and defiance. One may descant as much as one pleases concerning the cowardliness of birds of prey ; they are born nobles among birds. No bird looks like that for nothing. In any case, it ill-becomes man who plays the hen to imbecile, if marketable, pheasants, and pours shot into birds of this build and aspect, to discourse of cowardice. Up to this point the young bird had been silent, but now that it saw that the game was up, it took up the cry of its mother, and, spreading its wings, flew to a spot farther along the rocks. Then a second young one came along the ledge to investigate matters on its own account. With actions like those of the first one, it too made off with the rasping cry of its parents.

Then I drew back and lay in the grass covering the top of the cliff, watching the old bird, which never desisted from its wild flight and wilder cry. How strange it seemed—this fierce maternity ; this coupling of the tenderest instinct of all living things with the bloody violence of the falcon ! It kills the young of another that its own may live. Selfish under one aspect, it is yet not self-seeking under another. So is it ever with this double-faced Nature—with birds as with men.

For any one keeping to the rocks as we did, there is some stiff work between Dinmor and Caregonen. The slope at the top of the cliff is at times cut by deep fissures filled with brambles and briars, which, when one's leg sinks in them to the

## Birds by Land and Sea

hip, may be thanked for a useful if prickly support, seeing that they save one from sinking into less definable depths. Moreover, there are sharper fangs than those of bramble and briar in this thick dark growth. I came across a whitethroat's nest in a bramble growing in such a rocky fissure, and leaping from one lip of the opening to the other so as to inspect it from the sunny side, alighted with parted feet upon a white slab of limestone. The view presented as I alighted consisted of a pair of low canvas shoes over thin socks framing an adder upon a square foot of rock. The sudden horror which the sight aroused held me fixed to the spot, watching the foreparts of the creature straighten out, and the rings uncoil with what seemed horrible deliberateness, as it slid through my heels and down the fissure behind. What might have happened if I had alighted right upon it, Heaven only knows. It is to be hoped that the adder was as much scared as I was, in which case it will not want to see a pair of human feet for some time to come.

The next line of cliffs, and the highest of any east of Red Wharf Bay, is the Caregonen Rocks. They rise about five hundred feet sheer from the sea, which at no time is far from their rock-strewn base.

There are several gulleries containing herring-gulls and kittiwakes on the way, but the Caregonen Rocks are the first cormorant station of any importance in this corner of Anglesey. It is from these

## Anglesey

rocks that the cormorants come which are to be met feeding miles up the Menai Strait. There are herring-gulls, also, a few lesser black-backed gulls, kittiwakes, and some guillemots, nesting there. But the cormorants form the principal feature of the Rocks.

With their social proclivities, these birds crowd together chiefly on one ledge, one end of which is separated by a deep but narrow chasm from a projecting crag, to which descent may be made without much discomfort. The cormorant is not easily scared if one behaves with due decorum. I spent two days with them, I on my crag and they on their ledges, and might have gone on photographing from then until now for all they cared either for me or my camera. There was, indeed, only one part of the camera to which they appeared to take marked exception, and that was the focussing-cloth. When I first put it on the camera, it set the whole black colony in motion; not locomotion, not even commotion, but just a gentle, general twisting and turning of long sinuous necks. They wondered what it was, the movement seemed to say; they were even somewhat surprised that such a thing should have been attempted in their presence; they hoped it would never be allowed to occur again.

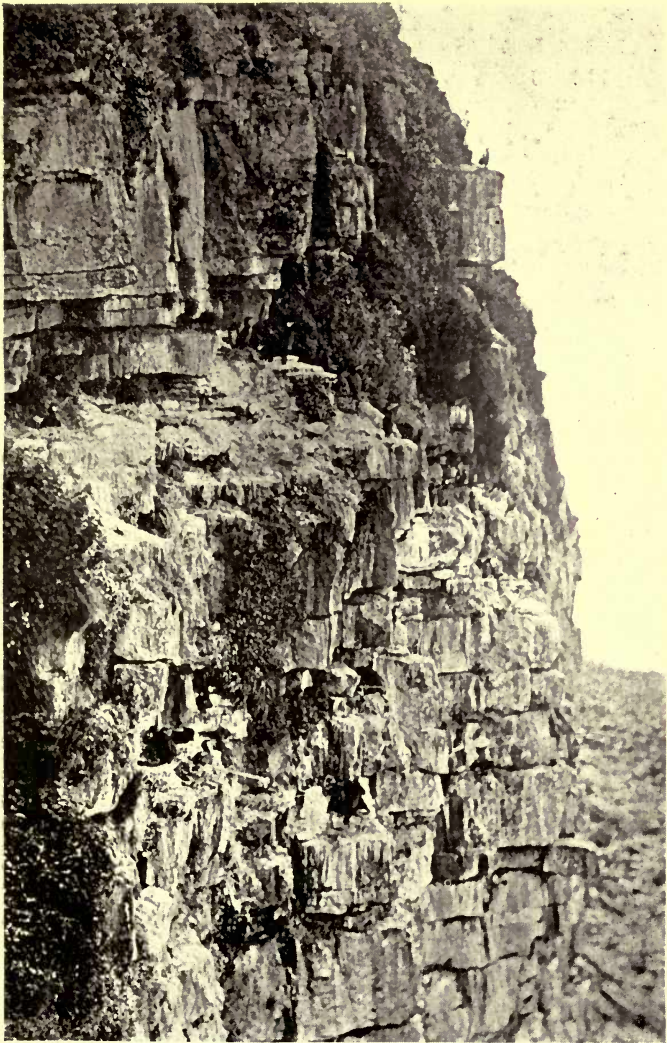
Cormorants are the most delightful old humbugs that ever stood up in black frocks and white chokers. They are almost too respectable for sea-birds; and it is no wonder that the tearing, swearing gulls try to

## Birds by Land and Sea

upset their gravity—gravity as in every sense of the word it is—when the cormorants are arriving home, charged to the bill with fish. The gulls probably have a shrewd suspicion that the fish which the cormorant brings home is not necessarily done with even after having been once swallowed. The young cormorants have a more intimate knowledge of such matters. To them the respectable old lady perching at the side of their big seaweed nest is a sort of animated feeding-bag ; and so two or three of the little brown-bodied creatures prod her throat with their bills, keeping up a gentle sing-song in their own the while, which is very pleasant and soothing to listen to. One marvels at the naughty persistency of these little creatures only less than at the long-suffering patience of their parent. At last, however, even this monumental virtue appears to give way. Her long neck writhes about, she seizes the most importunate of the young ones by the head, shakes him vigorously, and to all appearances swallows his head for the time being. When all the wriggling and thrusting is over, the young one withdraws his head from her gullet, satisfied, no doubt, for the time being, with the portion he has been able to recover of his mother's last meal. The gulls are right ; the fish a cormorant brings home is not necessarily done with until it has been twice swallowed.

While I was sitting one quiet sunny afternoon watching the cormorants, a sudden commotion at the





CORMORANTS



## Anglesey

top of the cliff drew my attention to where a block of rock had become detached, and was pitching down the slope. Finally, it shot over the edge and fell clean to the rocks below, where it alighted with a jarring crash. The birds appeared to apprehend at once the nature of the occurrence whilst still impending, for they sprang out with unusual alacrity when a thin shower of earth fell preceding the lumbering block. For how many thousand years had that block been a debtor to nature for the amount of force expended in heaving it up? In any case, the debt was cancelled in a moment, and she received her own again without usury; all very obvious, no doubt, as set down here, but driven in with a sharper moral as one sat there seeing a block of the cliff head shot down for beach lumber.

An old carrion crow was the evil genius of these rocks. He used to sail out from above to reconnoitre, but if there were any black-backed gulls about, as was generally the case, they would cut up the face of the cliff, and, dashing at him, drive him off. Still, he must have found his visits profitable, for he regularly returned, and I came upon spiked cormorants' eggs lying at the top of the cliff, which he must have obtained by force or guile. Carrion crows are not uncommon on this coast, but nest, I believe, mostly to the west of Red Wharf Bay.

But the Caregonen Rocks, which are at the east arm of Red Wharf Bay, formed the limit of our work on this part of the coast. Upon our turning

## Birds by Land and Sea

inland at this point, Table Mountain, or the Round Table, as it is variously called, lay before us. It can only be called a mountain by courtesy, but its remarkable flat top merits to the full its name of "Table." It is open, gorse-covered moorland, pure and simple—a delightful, lonely place, to which I hope to devote closer attention at some future time. Beside the meadow-pipits and linnets, the usual inhabitants of such upland tracts, we found the yellow-hammer, whose absence from the lower ground about Beaumaris we remarked, in considerable numbers on this higher land. The yellow-hammer is plentiful with us on the Cheshire border, in the rich pasture and arable lands, and we were surprised to observe its preference here for the wilder uplands.

We found the willow-wren also where there was scarcely a tree, or leafy bush, in sight. Its young were perching on the stone walls and gorse bushes, and were being fed with the tenderest portion of the gorse bloom instead of the little green caterpillars which form their usual diet in the lowlands.

But the bird most abundant in this land of coarse grass and gorse was the stonechat. "*Chat! chat!*" sounded from all sides wherever we went, and the sprightly little bird might be seen on all hands perching on the tops of the gorse bushes. Approach, and he flits to the top of another bush—always on the look-out, always demonstrating and remonstrating. His note and gestures at once recall those of the wheatear which we left, not on gorse

## Anglesey

land, but on the stony, rabbit-burrowed ground nearer the coast. There is another bird still a degree nearer civilization than the stonechat, namely, the whinchat, which, by his note and gestures, will just as strongly remind us of both wheatear and stonechat, when we meet him in the cultivated lands further down.

Here are three birds with a pronounced family likeness showing itself so strongly that we cannot look at or listen to one of them without being reminded of the others, all subsisting on the same kind of food, but distinguished by the fact that the wheatear makes his abode in stony, desert places, the stonechat on gorse-covered commons, and the whinchat generally in the fields. One is naturally prompted to ask how these three birds came to show such a close physical and mental likeness, unless they were derived from a common form. In such a case what kind of land did that common form inhabit? Was the originally still greater similarity of these three birds the cause of their being forced to seek different *habitats* when competition for the same food became too keen in the narrower area of a common *habitat*? Did life under different conditions cause the line of development to diverge so as now to present us with three different birds, each with its distinctive *habitat*?

Although there is a general resemblance in the markings of these three birds, the stonechat is decidedly the most striking in his aspect. His

## Birds by Land and Sea

bright red breast, wholly black head, and the bold white patches on the neck, wing, and rump, render him a much more conspicuous object than the wheat-ear. The whinchat, which also has a red breast, may at once be distinguished from the stonechat by the broad white stripe over the eye of the former.

The whitethroat also was met with on the high lands, wherever there was a tangle of weeds or brambles meeting his requirements.

In a middle zone, consisting of pasture land with hedgerows, the corn-bunting was occasionally seen or heard, and blackbirds and thrushes, especially missel-thrushes, were exceptionally plentiful.

Lower still lies the wooded ridge which overlooks the Anglesey shore of the Menai Strait. Just above this, however, and near to the remarkable China Rock, is the reservoir. Here moorhen, coot, and mallard might be seen feeding in the low reeds, and herring-gulls came up continually during the day for no other purpose than to bathe in and drink the fresh water.

The coot, very like a large moorhen in its general appearance, may yet easily be distinguished from that bird; for, whilst the moorhen has conspicuous patches of white on the flanks and tail, the plumage of the coot is wholly black. Even more striking, however, than the red and yellow bill of the moorhen, is the white shield upon the coot's forehead, a sort of upward prolongation of its white bill. Both birds feed on the water, dive, and swim

## Anglesey

with the same nodding motion ; but, whilst the moorhen feeds principally on shore, the coot seldom lands, except to stand clumsily at the water's edge, and preen its sooty feathers. All day long he sails about the reed-beds, diving frequently to tear up the tenderer shoots from below ; now calling aloud "*Howk! howk!*" now rising heavily to chase a fellow coot, the hollow wings beating violently as he flies low to the water, and the dangling feet striking its surface, until he flings himself into it again with an awkward splash. The nest, like that of the moorhen, is a large accumulation of reeds and flags built up in the open among the reeds, or laid, a little above the surface of the water, upon the strong, outstretching branches of some tree growing beside it.

The natives living in the neighbourhood of China Rock called the coots by the name of "hobby." When one bears in mind the fact that the hobby is a falcon capable of striking down a swallow in flight, and remembers the sorry figure cut by a coot when it attempts to fly a few yards across the water, it seems incredible that the name of the one should ever have been applied to the other.

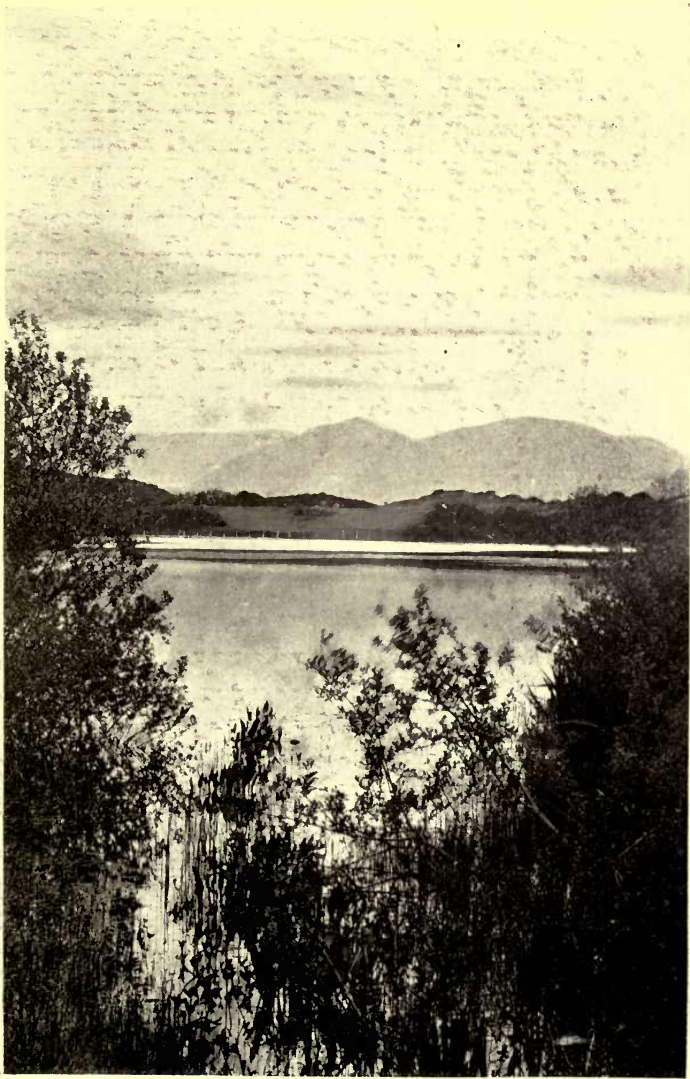
At Pen Park Pool, on the 30th May, we found that the pochard—a duck rarer than formerly, and better known as a winter immigrant—had installed itself for the season. When we put it up from the reeds, it rose with harsh cries, continuing

## Birds by Land and Sea

afterwards to perform increasingly vast circles on the wing at a moderate height, reminding one of a horse galloping round a set course. We watched it for nearly half an hour beating round silently and at full pace in immense circles, having for centre the spot from which it had risen. Upon our giving it a chance to descend, it came down to the water again, forging along at a great speed, and re-entering the reed-bed.

But I recall this quiet sheet of water under its twilight aspect rather than as seen during the day. For it was our custom, after the day's work, to climb the hill and, sitting beside the water, to enjoy the perfect peace of the spot. This was rendered only more intense by the frequent humming of snipe, who became particularly energetic at the twilight hour, and continued their exercises until it was no longer possible to pick them out from the darkening sky. It was more than ever evident, under such circumstances, how hard it is to locate a snipe by its note. Bats played backward and forward, coasting the bushes and trees which overhung the water, and stopping when they met to toy with one another ere they dashed off again each his own way on rapid, noiseless wings. From time to time a partridge, advancing to the edge of some ridge or ascending a knoll in the open grass land close by, cried aloud over the silent land—a cry which, as it seemed, challenged a distant reply, but meeting with none, left the stillness stiller than if it had not been uttered.





CHINA ROCK POOL : BEAUMARIS



## Anglesey

In the end, when snipe had hummed and partridge cried their last, and the bats had concluded a brief activity, we too retired, meeting no living thing by the way save toads and frogs—habitual prowlers on the open ways by night—and glow-worms, whose bright green spark glowed steadily in the dark grass by the roadside.

In the neighbourhood of China Rock we came upon a greenfinch's nest in a furze bush forming part of a hedgerow. I had often before noticed the dirty condition of greenfinches' nests generally, but I had never seen one in such a terrible state of filthiness as that shown by this nest. The young—and there was a nest full of them fully fledged—were simply walled in by a rampart of their own castings, which had been allowed to accumulate to a height of about an inch all round the edge of the nest. When one remembers the fastidious propriety of most birds in this respect, and notes that the young greenfinches themselves obey the instinct of young birds generally to void their excrement at or over the edge of the nest, to be removed if necessary by their elders, one can only conclude that they get lazier and dirtier as they grow older, until they reach at times the state of degeneration exemplified in the present instance. In spite of its condition, the nest evidently proved an attraction to some one, for we found later that both it and its contents had been bodily removed.

It is in approaching the wooded ridge before

## Birds by Land and Sea

mentioned that one observes the great number of perching birds for which Beaumaris is noted. The outskirts of these woods, the roads descending through them beneath trees which arch over and enclose them, and above all the fine Menai Road which runs parallel with the Strait at the base of the ridge, were the haunt of immense numbers of small birds.

This wooded ridge, with its closely planted trees and populous undergrowth, is the haunt of the sparrow-hawk. Lurking in the foliage on the edge of the wood, the bird watches field and wood at once, and the shifting companies of birds that come and go in the shadow and shine which make the outskirts of a wood so attractive to them. At one time I saw it dart upon a young lapwing which had sought the neighbourhood of the woodside, probably for better cover. The young lapwing proving a refractory captive as the hawk mounted with it hanging in its claws, the latter struck it twice with its bill as it flew, and then, grappling it closer, made off across the open fields, where every lapwing for a mile round was already up, having taken the alarm from those nearer the scene of the capture.

At another time, I was returning over Baron Hill, when I was attracted by the cries of a pair of blackbirds ; and, as I approached them, I noticed that their attention was too fully occupied to be diverted by my presence. Robins and tits, chaffinches and greenfinches, hopped excitedly about

## Anglesey

the branches overhanging a low stone wall which separated the wood from the road, all peering anxiously down into the dark growth inside. Creeping up, I looked over the wall, and found a sparrow-hawk furiously plucking a young blackbird, heedless of the cries of the birds surrounding it. At sight of me it rose, and dashed off, the young bird dangling from its claws. On the ground was the well-known circle of feathers one so frequently comes across, their distribution in this form resulting from the flapping of the victim's wings in its unavailing struggles.

The Menai road, where not walled in by the rock through which it has been cut, is lined by stone walls throughout, and on the sea side of the road the woods continue down to the shore. Birds dearly love an open way through woodland such as this, and although the road was built for the use of man, it is safe to say that it is infinitely more used by birds.

The dominant note in those early June days was that of the chaffinches. How they rattled at that time!—pure joy of living, without a hint of those undernotes which in the songs of some birds seem to cross the purpose of singing, and leave the mind perplexed and wondering if nature has conflicting modes of expression for similar moods, or if some melancholy elf sits in the listener's ear, turning the sweet sounds to perverse uses.

But the song of the chaffinch is at once

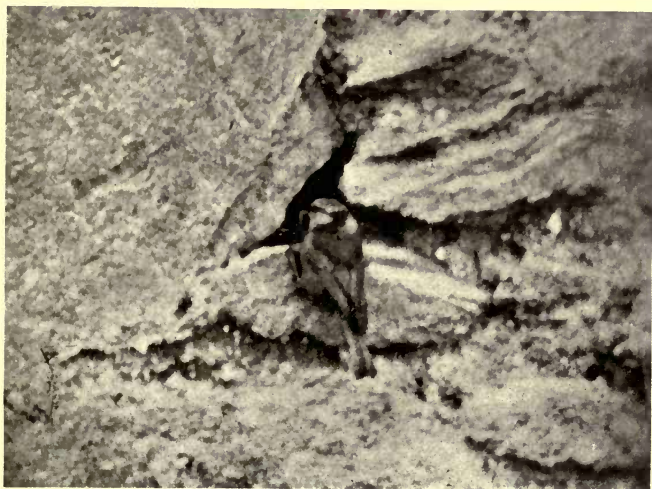
## Birds by Land and Sea

intelligible ; it is the joyous expression of joy, single and unsophisticated.

Bullfinches, too, were always to be seen feeding in pairs—red breast and grey—snipping the young buds from the trees. The pied wagtail also was never absent from the road, and the young—fat, full-feathered, short-tailed birds—were already flying, and quite able to look after themselves. Great-tits were frequently heard in the trees. The numerous holes and chinks in the stone walls furnished both blue-tits and coal-tits with nesting apartments. We found many nests of the former in such situations, besides noticing them high up in crannies of the rock and in holes in the trees. The young of these birds were fledged in all cases, and many families were already out feeding in the trees. One needs only to keep an attentive ear in order to discover these nests in the wall, for the young ones maintain a continuous chirping, and when one looks into the hole, groups of expectant little blue-tits may be seen peering out of the dark interior. Their parents, too, contribute to the discovery of their nests by their assiduity in attending their young. In and out they dart with their beaks full of little green caterpillars, both of the old birds sometimes arriving together at the nest, so that one has to stand by while the other one gets rid of its burden. They will “ping” at a loiterer by the nest with the most transparent impatience, and as soon as he moves a few yards aside, enter without more ado.



COOT'S NEST



BLUE TIT AT NEST-HOLE





## Anglesey

The problem of photographing such mercurial creatures seemed sufficiently difficult at first; for, small as the nesting holes were, the birds disappeared through them with lightning rapidity. After watching their methods for a short while, however, I set my camera upon the opposite wall and focussed on the nest hole, laying on to the pneumatic release a length of extra tubing, which I carried along the top of the wall. I then gathered a small bundle of moss, and when the old birds were absent, lightly plugged the nesting hole. Returning to the bulb at the far end of the tubing, I waited. Very soon one of the old birds came down from the trees with a merry chirp, but received a sharp shock when it beheld the strange addition to its nesting quarters. As it hung before the hole, caterpillar in beak, and with an accusing eye upon the camera at its back, I released the shutter, and had its counterfeit presentment beyond cavil.

Seeing that the bird still entered in spite of the obstruction, when he came out I went to examine, and found that the bundle of moss had served his purpose as well as mine, for, like a sensible bird, he had taken it inside with him, probably for domestic uses.

The coal-tit is a much rarer bird than the blue-tit at Beaumaris, but I found a nest with young in a similar situation in the wall near Menai. Unfortunately, I deferred photographing it until the following day, when I found that it had been "drawn" by a

## Birds by Land and Sea

thorn, probably by some of the nest-hunting boys who infest the road during the week-ends.

In a loop of ivy growing in a most exposed position at the side of this road, a spotted flycatcher was nesting. She would allow me to pass at a distance of six feet without moving, so long as I really passed with eyes set right ahead. Turn your eyes on the bird, however, at even a greater distance, and she is up and off at once. It is worth remembering that a grown bird's eyes always seek those of the observer. A young bird may act with the inexperience of youth, and I have stood over a fully fledged young missel-thrush whilst it spat fire in its petulance at my trousers-legs, but made no attempt to rise until I turned it over with my stick.

The spotted flycatcher has seemed to some a spiritless bird—insipid, if one may use the term. But liking goes by favour, and I have always kept a soft spot for this unobtrusive little bird. One feels it a matter of conscience to state that it has a song consisting of three low warbled notes, which few observers, however, can claim to have heard; for otherwise it might be thought to be voiceless, so rarely does it utter a sound at all. In leaving the nest, this bird followed a course so uniform as to become interesting for its very monotony—from the nest to the top of a gate close by, thence to a dead bough beyond, from that by a little circuit at the back of the wall to a branch on the other side of the nest, and finally to the nest again. Put her up as

## Anglesey

often as I would, there was no change in her way or place of perching. Only after I had kept her waiting an unconscionable time whilst photographing the nest, did she return with her mate, both being so excited that I thought they must needs speak out; but no—rearranging the eggs to her liking, she slipped silently on to the nest, and her mate went silently back to his perch.

The spotted flycatcher is like a child-bird—so lightly troubled, so soon reassured. Long-suffering, uncomplaining, it appeals to one by its very silence. When it is perching, with head and bill slightly depressed, it has a pensive air, and only when it suddenly darts out, hovers, and breaks back to its perch with the deftly-caught fly, does one feel satisfied that this modest little spirit also has its joy of life in small activities and quiet ways.

I must offer a late apology for getting over the wall dividing the Menai Road from the long woodland slope which runs between it and the stony shore of the Menai Strait below. We yielded to the fiery temptation of a redstart's tail. We had heard them "tet-tet"-ing inside—a protest like a robin's, but delivered with more than a robin's force. We were not long in discovering a female whose beak, filled with the little green caterpillars which seem to form the diet of most young birds hereabouts, declared that she was on her way to her own young ones. She was very uneasy at first, and flitted from branch to branch in the neighbourhood of her nest. Then

## Birds by Land and Sea

she made a decided approach, but still lingered at the mouth of the hole in which it was placed, to survey us critically ere trusting her head to disappear within it. Having distributed the food she had brought, she took another good look at us, and then set off to canvass the trees for more. We took advantage of her absence to count her six chicks, noting the robin-like character of her nest and its situation, placed, as it was, in a hole in the ivy-covered stump of a felled oak. The wood, saving the undergrowth, was almost entirely of oaks, and the ground, deep in dead leaves through which nettle and bracken were breaking, overrun with ivy.

We set the camera up as if it were an outgrowth from a neighbouring tree, and were allowed to work at a distance of six feet without the need of laying on tubing. Deceived by the visual illumination of the nest, we failed to allow sufficiently for the degradation in actinic energy of light in a thick wood, and spent a long day in getting what promised to be a superb series of pictures, to find, when developing them afterwards, that they were ghostly in their thinness.

There is a great difference in the appearance of the male and the female redstart. The former, with his white forehead, black throat, and bright red breast and tail, makes the female seem a dull bird by contrast; still, the grey of the upper parts of the female, the breast, flanks, and under tail-coverts, are

## Anglesey

suffused with a delicate red, which lends a soft richness to her plumage.

While working on the redstart, we continually heard the note of the wood-wren, and saw these birds collecting the small green caterpillars from the branch ends. Of all bird-calls I think there is none more intimately expressive than that of the wood-wren. Its "*Tui-tui*" is easily reproducible by the hearer as a subdued whistle; but as uttered by the bird, it leaves the impression of a spoken word of endearment rather than a musical note, the lingering *tu* having a coaxing intonation, and the final *i*, higher in tone and shorter in duration, suggesting a cheerful origin and a cheering intention. Hearing the two birds call and answer by turns, we soon traced them by the sounds. Having found them, we stood still to watch; for the wood-wren—that wandering voice in the high trees in the later months—nests on the ground, and an unwitting step might crush all their hopes. As soon as the female bird saw us near the nest, her note became an inexpressibly sad little cry. "*Dôr! dôr!*"—"Dolour," indeed, as the all but spoken word means in a tongue to which one of us had become accustomed in wanderings in vaster woods than this. "*Dôr! dôr!*" she continued to cry, in spite of the cheering "*tui*" of her answering mate, and perched restlessly now on one branch, now on another, to regard us wistfully from that little white-browed eye, but all the time gravitating toward one spot, notwithstanding

## Birds by Land and Sea

her innocent wiles to mask her intention. In the end she dropped to the ground, and stood at the entrance of her nest, still watching us, who remained some ten or twelve feet away, with a deprecating air, as if she would say, "You are not looking now, are you? You will not touch me if I put my head inside?" And so, with a chirp which brought up seven little yellow gaping bills, she ducked inside, but in a moment had withdrawn her head to see if we were attempting to take a mean advantage. As our attitude appeared to be quite correct, she ducked again, this time distributing her caterpillars, and after picking up any odd castings, flitted to a near branch to watch us, and consider if it would be safe to go in search of more. In the end she went off, but was back again in less than a minute with a fresh bundle of caterpillars. She does not like them to wriggle, so she beats them into submission against a branch. Then begins again the whole comedy of transparent subterfuge. I spent a large part of two days at that nest, in the course of which she must have returned to it fully a hundred times or more, and although I gave her small occasion for offence, she never learned that I was harmless, but every time she returned, tacked hither and thither with the same innocent arts, the same sad little cry, and yet in the end dropped to the nest with the same simple confidence that I had not seen, or could not see. I advanced my camera until it was no more than a foot from the nest without further alarming her; for I promised

## Anglesey

myself that I would present my little friend to the world as she had never before been presented. Alas! the wood-wren went the way of the redstart and flycatcher. In spite of all my labour, and a desire to retain some tangible memorial of this two days' friendship of man and bird, I obtained a series of plates which would develop no farther than was sufficient to show me what I had lost. The nest was packed among the dead leaves on the ivy-covered ground, and is a domed structure with the entrance at the side. There is often a piece of twig at the side, which serves as a perching-place for the old bird when feeding the young.

The wood-wren's nest was on the side of the wood toward the sea, and farther down, the slope ended at the verge of a rock cliff falling some twenty feet or so to the stony shore below. At the foot of this cliff grey wagtails might always be seen posing or feeding. This beautiful bird is easily to be distinguished from the yellow wagtail by the fact that, although both have the underparts yellow, the grey species has a blue-grey back, whilst the so-called yellow wagtail has the upper parts of an olive colour. The pied wagtail was found in large numbers and generally distributed by land and shore; the grey wagtail was less plentiful and more local in its occurrence; while the yellow wagtail was not seen at all, and is, I understand from resident observers, a very scarce bird in this district.

One needs, perhaps, scarcely mention the ring-

## Birds by Land and Sea

doves, which were for ever cooing in the wood, or rushing out with clapping wings whenever approached; but one interesting little bird seen there at times deserves to be mentioned. The tree-creeper is an odd little creature, odd in his structure and ways, as well as in the sense that he is the only member of his family found in our islands. He is said to be plentiful in Wales, but a bird so silent and close in all its ways would need to be very plentiful to become obvious. You will probably see him before you hear him. A movement on the outline of the trunk of a tree catches your eye, and suggests the presence of some creature more in the nature of what is generally understood by a creeping thing than this tree-creeping bird. Now he appears on the left, then on the right, outline of the bole, and at each appearance he is higher; for, as a closer view reveals, he is working his way up in a spiral, searching the bark for the small life upon which he subsists. He reminds one of the woodpeckers by his peeping ways, and resembles them also in the fact that constant pressure in climbing has stiffened his tail feathers as in those birds. But there the resemblance ends, for this little five-inch bird is cast and coloured more on the model of the brown-backed, white-breasted warblers, except that its finely pointed and curved bill is even more delicately adapted than theirs for picking out microscopic trifles from their minute places of concealment in the bark. I would give a good deal for a quarter of an hour's plain talk





CHAFFINCH FEEDING YOUNG



## Anglesey

with a tree-creeper. I would tell him to cease cork-screwing his way up brown old trunks with his nose for ever to the bark ; to try some other way of passing from one tree to another than his cast-iron method of dropping in a slanting line from the top of one bole to the base of the next, uttering his dolorous squeak *en route* ; in short, to cease from being a creeper for a while, and to come out and have a good fly in the open, then return and, sitting in the sunlight, shout his three or four notes over and over again until he was famished for a meal. The grubs are too much with us, I would tell him ; but if he would give them the go-by for a few hours, he would gain an appetite almost spiritual to perceive flavours in atoms, as a fresh palate will tell your vintages. But man's hands are full enough of his own species, and an apostolate to tree-creeper scarcely comes within the purview of the present plan of salvation.

## PUFFIN ISLAND

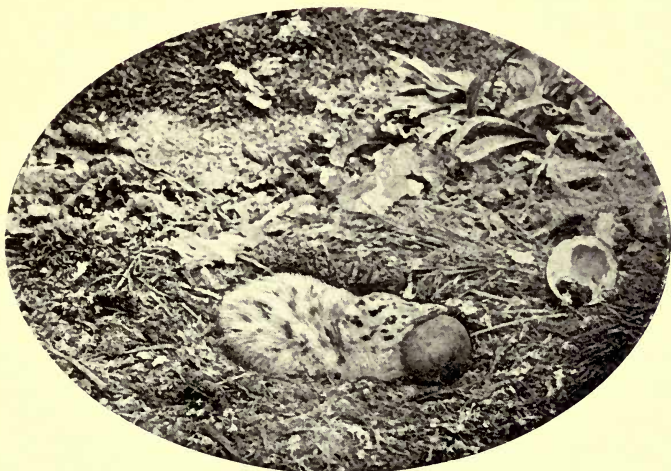
**B**Y permission kindly granted from the Bulkeley Estate Office, we were enabled to visit Puffin Island, which, owing to the depredations of the "tripper," had been closed to the general public.

The island lies at a distance of about a quarter of an hour's row from the north-east corner of Anglesey, provided always that wind and sea are in the mood to let one cross. For the sea runs a regular race between the two islands, and if there is any west in the wind, it is almost impossible to get a passage across. As Puffin Island is uninhabited (there is one house, occasionally occupied), there are no boats regularly present at the Point to take one over. We therefore came down the Strait from Beaumaris, and although the distance from the latter to Puffin Island is only six miles, we spent the whole of the morning tacking in the windless strait, and labouring against the incoming tide. At last, about one o'clock, we anchored off the little shingly cove at the south point of the island, and rowed ashore.

As we approached the land, twelve sheldrakes, which were nesting there, launched themselves from



PUFFIN ISLAND



HERRING GULL'S NEST AND CHICK



## Puffin Island

the rocky head above, and made their way in single file to the Anglesey shore opposite.

As viewed from the Anglesey side, Puffin Island in its form resembles a hollowed hand placed palm downwards upon the water. It is roughly elliptical, about half a mile long by a quarter of a mile broad, the major axis lying on a north-east and south-west line. The side presented in the view faces north-west. A bed of limestone, shorn off all round in steep cliffs except at the landing-place, was covered by a cap of sloping turf, treeless, and only at one point on the eastern side supporting a few patches of weed and stunted thorns, their knotty limbs eloquent of life-long battle with the storm.

Ascending by a path from the landing-place, we followed the cliff on the western side (we will call the sides of the island west and east for convenience), and here fell in with a colony of herring-gulls and a few lesser black-backed gulls. The date of the visit I am describing was the 10th of June, and the colony was evidently in full breeding swing at the time, nests with eggs or chicks occurring at every few steps, so that one had need of care to avoid doing mischief. The nests—large accumulations of fern-roots and weed when on level ground, but more scantily furnished when some natural hollow had been used—were placed on the turf at the top of the cliffs, or on ledges of rock where turf and rock met. As may be readily imagined, the gulls gave us a warm reception as we moved about among their

## Birds by Land and Sea

nests. Rising in a mass, they hovered above and about us with a wild chorus of cries, now one, now another, dashing down and past us, the owners, probably, of the nests to which we were nearest at the moment. One old lesser black-back was particularly violent, swooping down with its menacing "*Ha-ha-ha-ha!*" and when all but touching us, rising again by the impetus acquired, and swooping back from the opposite direction with alarming recklessness and persistency.

We had just made ready for photographing, when we were surprised to see a large party of visitors appear on the slope. This was, I learned, a Field Naturalists' Club on tour, and for the sake of its more respectable members, I will leave it unnamed.

Whatever disturbance our presence might for a time have caused among the nesting birds, we should, at any rate, in the end have left them none the worse off for our visit. But in the conception of many of the members of this society, the function of a Field Naturalists' Club seemed to be to commit wholesale pillage upon natural objects in the field. I had seen boys sneak about hedgerows in the egging season, but they had, as a rule, the decency to assume a powerful preoccupation in the botany of the spot when so observed; but I had never before seen grown men invade a bird haunt like savages, rushing from nest to nest with excited shouts—beside themselves, in fact, with the wealth of plunder lying at their feet. One fellow, more methodical in his





LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL'S NEST AND PUFFIN BURROW



HERRING GULL'S NEST



## Puffin Island

barbarity, went about testing the state of the eggs by working a knife-blade through the shells: if the egg contained a chick in an advanced state of development, the blood which appeared showed that it was useless for "blowing" purposes, and it was returned to the nest. Upon my expostulating at this barbarity, he expressed regret that he "had no stamp paper"! If the egg gave signs of having been freshly laid, it was stored with a growing collection in a wicker basket he carried. This party was captained by three or four ministers of religion, one of whom stood by smiling indulgently upon the juvenile ardour of this budding naturalist of some forty summers!

This horde of vandals swept the island, and we could mark their progress by the empty and disordered nests, but principally by the clamour of the birds—the shrill "*He-hoh!*" and the stern "*Ha-ha-ha-ha!*" as they hovered helplessly, or dashed to and fro wild with rage at this wholesale spoliation.

Did our friends of the Field Naturalists' Club not note the composition of the nests they pillaged?—the hundreds and hundreds of fern-roots which went to the making of a single nest? Every root represented a journey to and from the mainland; for there are no ferns in the island. Backwards and forwards the birds must have gone, full of a new ardour in those spring days, following, as they did, a winter which levied a fearful toll of life upon sea-birds generally in these parts;—backwards and

## Birds by Land and Sea

forwards day by day they went, survivors and continuers of the stock, gathering piece by piece material for their island nests. Did our friends of the Field Naturalists' Club—which should know such things—not know this? Did the sight of a sea-gull's nest—that one point of rest in a restless life—offer no charm to their eyes? Or the beautifully mottled chicks—brown buds to become white flowers of sea and air some day—did they not counsel forbearance? Or, if not these—then for the sake of the fair white-bodied things themselves which cried above them; for the sake of the self-forgetful rage of the dark-winged black-back; for common shame between man and man, could they not let them be? Let them have their Field Club, but, for God's sake, let it not be a club indeed, to beat and bruise and leave its bloody trail wherever they go. The eggs so gathered were brought down to the beach for final test. If they tended to sink, they were held to be fresh and retained; if they floated, they were too far advanced for cabinet purposes, and were stoned down—the only evidence of conscience shown by their purloiners. This was witnessed by my boatman as he lay at anchor.

The turf on the west slope had been burrowed by rabbit and puffin until it sank like a sponge beneath our feet. Here and there a bunch of thrift made a gay show with its pink flowers.

Passing further along the west cliff, we came to the spot where on a former occasion we had encountered



PUFFINS : PUFFIN ISLAND



## Puffin Island

thousands of puffins, but there were now but few, some standing at the edge of the cliff, others sitting on the sea at its foot. We learned, however, that the birds arrived "in thousands" two days after our present visit—that is, on the 12th of June.

We observed that an understanding had, to some extent, been come to between the puffins and the gulls as to their respective spheres of occupation. The puffins occupied a stretch of burrowed turf on the west slope, and on the cliffs below them were their fellow-auks, the guillemots and razorbills, with whom the puffins were wont to assemble when standing on the cliffs. The gulls, however, are tenants in chief on the island, and, besides being found on the cliffs all round the island, lay their nests freely on the turf among the puffin burrows. Their principal quarters are on the ledges of the east cliffs, where, besides herring and lesser black-backed gulls, is a colony of kittiwakes.

We had visited this "puffinry," as my youthful colleague persisted in calling it, late in July of the previous year, when the scene was more animated than on the present occasion. Then some thousands of puffins were present, lines of hundreds of them being marshalled on the cliffs, whilst a continuous stream of them passed between the sea and their burrows, bearing small fish, portions of the shining bodies of which protruded from their bills.

Whether at rest or on the wing, the puffin is a

## Birds by Land and Sea

curious-looking creature. At rest, they stand rank above rank on the topmost rocky ledges facing the sea, their black backs, collars, and crowns, white faces and underparts, combining with their erect attitude and disposition in line to give them something of military uniformity and regularity. But when one noted the great tri-coloured beak, the apparently spectacled eyes, and remarked the mild surprise with which the birds regarded our intrusion, one could not resist the idea that there was something ludicrously artificial in the make-up of the puffin; for surely there never was a bird less bird-like in its appearance than the puffin at rest. They were tame enough to allow us to approach almost within striking distance, had we been disposed to strike anything so mild-mannered as a puffin. When the bird is on the wing, the flight is rapid, but laboured, the short wings beating violently, and as the bird flies, especially if returning to its burrow with fish, it utters a peculiar sound—a deep-throated, mirthless laughter, as it were, which may be imitated by laughing in the throat with the lips closed.

It is a matter of speculation how the puffin, which catches fish by diving, contrives to retain the first fish in its bill while it captures a second or a third. Possibly the tongue is used to hold it to the roof of the mouth, while the under mandible is lowered to make the later captures. The slope where the puffins nest is redolent of fish, and to be there on a summer day with a warm breeze



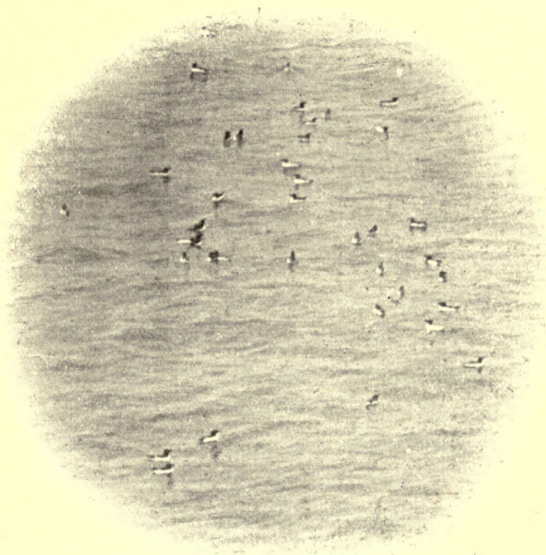
## Puffin Island

playing over the burrows is a sufficient test of one's zeal.

We found a square shaft which had been sunk perpendicularly through the ground and the rock to a rocky platform that opened to the sea. This rocky chamber may well have been a smugglers' store-room, for traditions of smuggling still linger in these parts ; or the shaft may have served as a sink for the disposal of refuse by the body of priests who once inhabited the island, which has a second name—Priestholm. I got into the mouth of this shaft to photograph, and whilst I was there the birds flew incessantly over me, so near that I could distinguish every detail, the bright red feet being particularly noticeable. When I had been there some time, I noticed a burrow in one corner of the shaft, and, looking in, saw the white face of a puffin, which had evidently been watching me as I photographed its kindred. A puffin's face, as seen down a dark hole, has not an agreeable aspect. I sought to convey this impression to the bird in a mild way, upon which she retired with an unearthly growl into her inner chamber. The burrows are in general some eight to ten feet deep, and the solitary young one which each pair rears in a season, seems to take on something of the gloom of his surroundings, being covered with black down, and having dull feet and bill. The parent birds shed the coloured sheath, which encloses a smaller, dark bill, before betaking themselves to the sea after the breeding season.

## Birds by Land and Sea

From the turfey slope where the puffins breed, we got down on to the rocky ledges occupied by the guillemots and razorbills. The breeding arrangements of both of these birds seemed to be in a more forward state than in the case of the puffins. Eggs were out, as could be seen by the attitude of some of the birds. The birds themselves were considerably less numerous than the puffins, and the razorbills, again, were in the minority as compared with the guillemots. The most noticeable point by which the guillemots may be distinguished from the razorbills is the bill. In the latter bird, this is a massive structure shaped at the end like the head of a razor; the bill of the guillemot is sharply pointed. In their disposition to form up in lines, their dark backs to the rocks and their white underparts to the sea, the guillemots and razorbills resemble the puffins. Like them, also, they sit the water in straggling companies, which, by the action of the currents, are often drawn out into long lines, continually changing form as the birds are drifted now one way, now another, by the moving waters. Both dive, fish, and fly like the puffins, but are sharply distinguished in their breeding habits. Each of these three birds lays only one egg; but, whilst the puffin places its egg in an earth-burrow, made by itself or the work of an expropriated rabbit, the guillemot lays its egg on narrow, flat, open ledges on the cliffs, and the razorbills in the same general situation, but always in a hollow or cranny in the



GUILLEMOTS ON THE SEA



## Puffin Island

rock. By their free and friendly association, it is evident that these three birds are conscious of a general bond of affinity, and it is therefore the more interesting to note the points in which they differ in their habits. It would seem to be a proof of the non-rational nature of instinct that it is incommunicable save by physical inheritance. These birds must have bred side by side for untold ages, and yet no influence of example has ever sufficed to induce the guillemot to place its eggs in a hollow like the razorbill, or the razorbill to adopt the still greater security of a burrow like a puffin. Yet, on the assumption that birds so similar in other respects have had a common origin, there must have been a time when the habits of the common stock were identical. If nothing but a non-rational instinct obtained among that common stock, whence the present divergence in habits? That the birds cooperated unconsciously in the formation of their different habits would seem to be borne out by the fact that, after ages of intimate association with the razorbills, the guillemot is still at infinite pains—pains as, in the literal sense of the word, they must often be—to keep its eggs from falling over the ledge upon which it continues to deposit it. Rigid, with its face to the rock, and its legs braced to keep it in position as it covers its egg, the bird seems unable to grasp the simple fact that if it were laid in a hollow it would not roll, and might be hatched in comfort and security. One cannot appeal to

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differences of environment in the case of the guillemot and razorbill, for, wherever there were ledges, there must always have been hollows and crannies also. Just as little can one discern any physical impediment in the guillemot itself to prevent it from covering its egg in what would appear to be a more comfortable and effective manner. We are therefore committed to the position that, whilst so-called instinctive habits arose primarily as variations, it is of the essence of such habits that they do not vary; and that, whilst pleasure and utility are held to be the principles prompting and confirming such habits, the habits themselves, at times—as in the present case—are as much opposed to the one as to the other.

After passing through the puffin area, the north end of the island seemed bare of birds, and it was only when we got round to the east side that they began to increase in number. Here we came to a stretch of cliff which is the site of the principal gullery of the island. The birds at this season were for the most part on the cliff, and not visible from above, except after some slippery work on the rubble at the cliff head. But flying birds soon gave the signal, and the whole colony came out to see what was toward. When we first landed, we thought that we had never heard such a babel of cries as that with which the birds on the west side greeted us, but it was surprising how soon one became accustomed to the sound so as to continue to hear it

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without remarking it, just as is the case with the monotonous sound of the sea. But when the eastern gullery had worked itself up to full chorus, our senses were aroused from their indifference.

To watch from above the flight of a great body of gulls was a delight to the eye. There were the herring-gulls, with their white bodies and grey wings tipped with black, sailing backwards and forwards before the cliffs—forwards against the wind, with that more than nautical skill by which, in conjunction with the natural gravity of their bodies, they cause a head wind to aid in propelling them against itself; backwards when, with a sudden wheel, they let go and swept down the wind in full abandonment. The lesser black-backed gull seems a bird of sombrero mood. Whilst the herring-gulls fly below, the black-back will come up to a level with you or fly above you, so that, with its conspicuously dark wings and nearer flight, it leaves the impression of a larger bird, although black-backed and herring-gull are all but equal in size. A staid and still more deliberate flight marks the movements of the great black-back, and as he passes slowly before you, his eye on a level with your own, the brow seems to beetle in a set frown, and the glass catches the expression of the deeply set eye. It seems an old eye, wise, authoritative. And, in fact, the bird may have been old when you were a child, for it requires four years for a great black-back to acquire all the marks of maturity,

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and its lifetime may well be a century. It will take offence at your presence more readily than the other gulls, and as it passes, utters a low "*Ha-ha-ha-ha!*" and sails on solemnly, leaving you admonished. If his displeasure is aroused, he will return again and again to swoop at you with his menacing cry. "The sea is his," he seems to say; "and the wind and the tides and the smitten rocks. Get back to your brick-and-mortar cages with their glass peep-holes." A century of the sea may well give a sense of prescriptive right. The magisterial dignity of the great black-back is the very antithesis of all that goes to make up a kittiwake. The kittiwake never grows old. It makes its little nest on its little ledge, as if it were playing at housekeeping. It is just the spoiled child of the sea. When they come out from the cliff, circling before their nesting site—a little select company to themselves—they are full of plaintive protest. "*Et-a-ay!*" "Get away!" they seem to say in infantile English, and sail about on their delicate pearl-grey wings with an air of superior sobriety, as if they thought it was not proper for birds in their sphere of life to be seen hurrying like common herring-gulls. When they fall into a temper, as they are apt enough to do, being of a vehement disposition, they set to and scream in the right nursery fashion, then go and sit sweetly on their nests, pictures of the most angelic propriety.

Our presence on the cliff united the whole gullery in a chorus of common protest. The cry



## Puffin Island

was general, continuous; high-pitched "*He-hohs!*" and deeper "*Ha-ha-has!*" mingling to form a shout of defiance rather than a cry of fear; while the "*Kit-a-eyes!*" of the kittiwakes were like the whimpering of children in a crowd stirred to fiercer outcry. There is something awe-inspiring in this wild cry of an excited host of sea-birds. I had heard it before as I stood on the mainland, but to be among it, the object of the many-voiced clamour, produced an indescribable feeling, so that only the ridiculous smallness of one's own voice against that ceaseless roar kept one from shouting also. For a man is not yet so far removed from the common centre of life but a great natural cry like this will arouse in him something of the impulse which inspires it.

When we visited Puffin Island late in July of the previous year, the sea at the foot of this east cliff was dotted over with hundreds of young gulls, whose mottled plumage gave no promise of the distinction to which they would later attain. Now eggs and newly hatched chicks were the order of the day.

In the course of our circuit of the island, a pair of oyster-catchers went out of their way to upbraid us. It was evident that they had young out among the loose stones of the tumbled-down walls in the neighbourhood of the tower which stands on the central ridge of the island, and is stated to be part of a certain St. Seiriol's Church which formerly stood

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here. The tower had more recently been in use as a signalling-station in connection with a telegraphic station on the Great Orme's Head, but whether as church or signal station, its history has gone with the shadowy Brothers who chanted their litanies to the sound of the sea and the sea-bird's cry, and the lonely watchman whose memory was extinguished with his light.

A few meadow-pipits had made their home in the tufted grass in the centre of the island, and one wheatear showed anxiety at our presence. A carrion crow sailed above us for a few moments with his inscrutable "*kaar!*" but whether it was the protest of a proprietor, or of the first poacher to those whom he held to be second-comers, did not appear.

The time had flown as it flies only with those who are pleurably employed, and the sun warned us that it was time to go down to the boat. A company of ten or twelve linnets, with their bonny crimson breasts and crowns, flew to a bush at the head of the path as we began to descend, and with these closes the tale of our acquaintances on Puffin Island.

## JULY

**R**ETURNING to my own neighbourhood at the end of June, I found on the 28th of that month, in an unfrequented wood, a small nest placed a foot and a half from the ground in an open stunted bush. It was made of root-fibres only, coarse without and fine within, and was deep and slight, but well rounded. In spite of the lateness of the season, it was evident that it had only just been finished. Revisiting this nest on the 11th of July, I found that there were two eggs out, and that the owner of it was a garden-warbler. With bitter memories of the results of my woodland photography at Beaumaris, I set my camera in position, and, laying on thirty feet of tube, retired behind a tree-trunk, whence I could watch the nest. As the latter was placed only a little above the ground, surrounded by thick undergrowth and overshadowed by the dense foliage of high trees, it seemed that I must inevitably incur the disastrous results which had attended my work on the red-start, willow-wren, and flycatcher in similar situations. But, warned by those experiences, I was now

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disposed to risk movement on the part of the subject by long exposure rather than face the certainty of a thin negative by a shorter one. Working with the most rapid plates I could obtain, I ran the exposure up to five seconds with the lens at full aperture, and with the camera at a distance of five feet from the nest ; with what result may be judged from the picture of this bird.

This garden-warbler was an excellent sitter. In going to the camera I had to pass her nest, but the bird often remained sitting, although my hand was about six inches from her as I passed. If she rose, I had no sooner put my head under the cloth to reset the focus than she would appear on the screen, re-arranging her eggs. She returned so quickly that it was always a question whether she or I would arrive first, and often, after waiting some time for her return, I would examine the dark little bush to discover that she had been sitting all the time. In the end, I took a series of plates standing beside the camera at a distance of five feet from the nest.

I was naturally much interested in this little bird, who had begun nesting operations so late in the year. Her trustfulness, and the cheerful way in which she hopped back to her place after such frequent disturbance, awakened affectionate feelings such as those which the equally confiding willow-wren never fails to arouse. The spotted flycatcher itself was not more silent than this garden-warbler, for I never heard it utter a sound at all. Only on rare



GARDEN-WARBLER ON NEST



## July

occasions did I hear or see her mate, when he would come to my place of observation, and, with sundry bobs, utter a mildly protesting "tee!"

I revisited the nest again on the 20th of July, and found still only two eggs. I had fears that something was going wrong, for the garden-warbler as a rule lays five. On the 27th there were still only two eggs, and I felt certain that the little sitter's pains were going for nothing, and resolved to break up the nest at my next visit, for the bird had now sat persistently for a month. Upon going to the nest on the 3rd of August, there was only one egg in it, and the bird itself was gone—a fact which was confirmed when I visited the nest for the last time on the 10th of August. What had become of the missing egg, I do not know; but, as I stood with the remaining one in my warm hand, it burst spontaneously with quite a report, thus saving any nearer inquiry into the state of its contents. The history was complete, and all of a piece. A bird lays late, the number of eggs is incomplete, and in the end those laid addle. The end was foreshadowed almost from the beginning. I could have wished better things for my little friend, who had aided me so well under difficult circumstances.

The wood where I found the garden-warbler is watered by a shallow wandering stream, which in certain parts, and especially during rainy weather, spreads into small marshy areas. This stream, flowing at times beneath arching bushes, and always shadowed

## Birds by Land and Sea

by the high trees, was the haunt of the kingfisher. He had two regular perching-places—one on a branch of a dead tree which had fallen across the stream, and the other a piece of a wooden fence which strode the mouth of a small tributary. Both were situated at spots where openings in the trees admitted the sunlight to play upon the water they overhung. Upon one or other of these perches the bird was often to be seen ; but it was extremely difficult to approach without scaring it, and the commonest view I had of the kingfisher was as it flew with a rapid dipper-like flight along stream, flashing like burnished metal as it cut the detached shafts of sunlight which struck through the openings in the foliage above. Where this stream emerges from the wood, it feeds an open lake, in which there is a small wooded island. Often when I have been sitting at the border of this lake watching the moorhens, a sudden flash of brilliant blue has drawn my eye where the kingfisher was coasting the island, but by the time one had said “ There ! ” the bird wheeled with a cant round the willows, and for blue there was a momentary view of the ruddy orange underparts, and it was gone again.

One should never have left these shores to be able to accept the kingfisher as part of the scenes in which we find him. But, for some, he must always appear an exile from lands where a fierce intensity of light and heat seem to combine to express themselves in strange forms and gorgeous





NEST OF GARDEN-WARBLER



HAUNT OF THE KINGFISHER



## July

hues. Remove the kingfisher to the forests of Brazil, and one would say that it owed the lustrous azure green of its plumage to the source from which the great blue morpho derives its colour. There it would seem at home; here it appears incongruous and out of place. If for no other reason than this, however, the protection of such a bird, which breeds throughout our islands, and is the only one of the species we possess, should be a matter of common solicitude. That its eggs should be listed at a few pence apiece, and the bird itself sought as a recognized object for the birdstuffer's art, will afford matter for strange comment when a less barbarous generation comes to reflect upon the idiosyncracies of the present one.

The cuckoo, which is frequently and readily visible in our open meadows, disappeared during July. The last bird I saw evidently had some pressing duty to perform before leaving our neighbourhood. I was out one bright morning early in July, and saw a cuckoo fly to a hedgerow in a field where I was at the time, and settle on the top of it. The many birds of the swallow kind which were in the air came down upon it in a moment, swooping at it one after another in a continuous bombardment. But the cuckoo, undeterred, proceeded awkwardly along the hedgetop, now flying a foot or two, now scrambling from one twig to another, and remained a short time after each move. A pair of greenfinches rose from the hedge, and joined the persecuting

## Birds by Land and Sea

throng of martins and swallows. In spite of continuous molestation, the cuckoo flew and scrambled in the manner described along some thirty yards of hedgerow, and then, as I thought, disappeared into the hedge itself. After waiting a short while, I went along the hedge, and saw the bird leave from the back as I came along the front. It seemed that I had come upon a cuckoo in straits to get rid of a late egg when nesting had all but finished ; but although I searched carefully, I found only one nest, and that contained a fledged brood of greenfinches. From the persistent manner in which the cuckoo canvassed the hedge in spite of so much opposition, I have little doubt that, in spite of the lateness of the season, she was in search of a nest in which to deposit an egg.)

It soon became evident that I had returned to a state of things very different from that I had left at the end of May. Then all was song, and their own domestic content was sufficient for each pair living in happy detachment from their kind. But now song had largely given place to the more prosaic occupation of providing for the young, and the latter were to be found on every tree and hedgerow.

It was a thriving time, but one over which a shadow was creeping, as a great cloud spreads itself out upon the sky, hushing all song beneath it. The time of the moult was at hand ; and as the days passed, one familiar voice after another fell silent,

## July

and one listened in vain for the delicate notes of the true singers. True, robin and wren were not to be wholly silenced, but beyond an occasional outburst from these birds, we must content ourselves with the yeoman service of greenfinch, yellow-hammer and corn-bunting, and a rare reminder from the whitethroat that he was still there, although seldom audible. The stillness in the woods became oppressive; not less so because from time to time some hidden bird shuffled uncomfortably in the dark bushes, where it was nursing its sick body back to health. I have seen few more ludicrously miserable objects than a song-thrush which I encountered perching on a low tree in an orchard at the end of July. Only the short upper feathers of the wings remained, and head and neck were almost bare, the effect of the shortened wings and apparently elongated neck and reduced head being to give the bird the appearance of a battered young corn-crake. From its incessant pecking and preening, it was evident that the bird was in a state of violent irritation.

The sparrow is the principal representative of bird-life in the fields at this time, where, collected in large bands, it spends its time hanging on to the stalks of the standing oats whilst it detaches the grain, rising in grey sheets when the boy comes round with his clapper. This bird is the representative of the proletariat among birds. When it moults, it moults on duty: it cannot

## Birds by Land and Sea

afford, or does not care, to nurse its aches and pains like the more genteel classes of avian society. Sparrows, tailless and with plumage in every stage of rustiness, will be encountered any time between now and the end of September; but it will be in the open, for your sparrow does not care who sees him without his tail. Not only in its sturdiness, but in its prolificacy also, the sparrow ranks as the proletarian among birds. One brood follows another in quick succession, and it would not be safe to fix a date when the last blind-eyed, pot-bellied youngster will have fallen from the gutter to feed expectant cats. One is tempted, with all due reverence, to wonder what image was present in the mind of the evangelist when he wrote that not a sparrow "falleth on the ground," etc.

Where are the starlings in July? From the eaves where they nested they went down into the fields, and one met them there for a short time breaking in their young to feed themselves. These young ones carried matters with a high hand, even to the point of charging the mother who reared them, in their lazy importunity to be fed. But the month is not old ere bands of starlings collect in the early evening, and make off for some place of roosting, reminding one of the great bands which later in the year go through their aerial exercises together in the evening and then depart in a body, to be succeeded by similar bodies, all flying on the same line for some common roost. Winter brings great numbers

## July

of these birds into our fields, but at the present there are scarcely any of them to be seen.

As soon as the first root crops are up, missel-thrushes band together on the broken earth, and but for their grating cry, one could almost believe that the big elegant birds rising in a body to perch on the high trees at the field side were fieldfares come south out of season.

The rooks—there are now something like three hundred birds in our rookery—are reverting to the closer social habits which the breeding season had to some extent relaxed. They still sleep in their nesting trees, and at close of day come pouring in on a common line in eager flight, flinging themselves down upon arriving with excited antics ere they settle. But they are soon up again as at some recognized signal, this time to sweep round above the tall trees of the rookery in a kind of aërial march, solemn, ordered, as in some set rite, so that it has not seemed inappropriate to regard it as the “rooks’ vespers.” There are two great companies. Now they combine and advance together, the edges of their wings thin streaks upon the sky; at the boundary of the rookery they divide, and, as they wheel with uniformly tilted wings, one company to the right and the other to the left, hundreds of black silhouettes flash out for a moment, then fade as the birds pursue their counter-flight, to join up at the other end of the rookery and advance again. I have been disposed at times to wonder what was the

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reason and origin of these strange evolutions in which many birds, in common with rooks, indulge at evening; but, after all, it is manifestly an expression of general joy, and happiness is one of the few things that are justified of themselves.



## AUGUST

**T**HE silence which fell upon the birds in July deepened in August. The early moulters had not yet recovered ; the later ones had already begun.

The song of that valiant little musician, the willow-wren, was only to be heard in the early morning. But the full soul of the singer was no longer in it. Nevertheless, it was one of the delights of those songless days to go round by a certain orchard and hear its morning song. The bird might always be seen threading its way through the little mazes of twigs and leaves at the ends of the fruit-tree branches, searching for a breakfast, and as it went it sang that exquisitely refined strain of which it had given us such liberal measure the summer through. Sometimes, however, it seemed not to have the heart to finish it ; and at others the song, delivered, perhaps, close to you, was so subdued, as to sound as if it came from far off.

It is easy to face December and swear that spring is at hand, although the skaters are abroad on the frozen water-meadows where the lark nests in its

## Birds by Land and Sea

season ; but the hardest time to face is these late summer days, when the leaf is turning, song is damped or silenced, the hill breeders first appear in the lowland fields, and the packing of the birds suggests the closer association of winter, or preparation for the general exodus, the time of which draws near. Beauty is there, beauty of all sorts scattered with both hands ; but it is the beauty of sunset, the prodigality of colour which for a time grows richer and richer with the waning light.

This orchard is an old one — plenty of black knotty wood above, and a sea of rhubarb below. In the spring evenings the birds go wild here—mad, I had almost said—for the torrent of song at that time is indescribable. It had always one ending—the lingering song of the robin perched high in the dark, a song pure and perfect enough to challenge the critical ear of night.

The sparrow-hawk knows this orchard too, but never enters it. He comes over the river at the back of it, settles to the ground, and follows at a break-neck speed a line outside the enclosing hedge, clears the cross-hedge at the other end, and, dropping at once to the ground again, scours the field beyond like a dog on the trail. This beat of the sparrow-hawk was a regular one, for I have met it scores of times at about the same time at the cross-hedge, and watched it vanish on the same line through the fields.

In the spring and summer mornings the willow

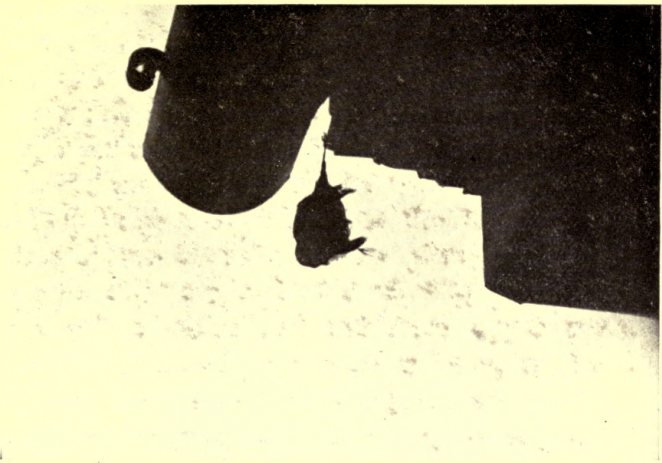
wren holds sway here with its pre-eminently sweet song ; and now that summer is passing, the old trees are full of little yellow birds—sulphur-yellow below, light olive above. They are young willow-wrens. It would be a libel on their elders to say that they present anything but the daintiest and chastest appearance ; but these young birds are lighter on the back, and of surpassing purity both in the yellow under and the olive upper parts. Whether in form, colour, gesture, or song, wood and willow-wren seem to me to express a delicacy of refinement unsurpassed, if equalled, by any other birds. In the late autumn, the tit tribe appear in large numbers in this orchard, and evidently find their account among the mass of old wood in the trees.

A curious little tragedy happened during August to a house-sparrow which had tenanted the gutter-end just above my bedroom window. The house-sparrow has a very catholic taste in the matter of nesting material, and few things, from bits of string to scraps of paper, come amiss to this thrifty and ingenious builder. My bird had found a piece of black thread and woven it into its nest. Doubtless in the wear and tear of nursery life, one end of this thread had been loosened, whilst the other end held firmly in the nest. The loose end became entangled with one of the bird's legs, and she, finding herself fast, had evidently attempted to free herself by flying, with the result that she was hanged by one leg from

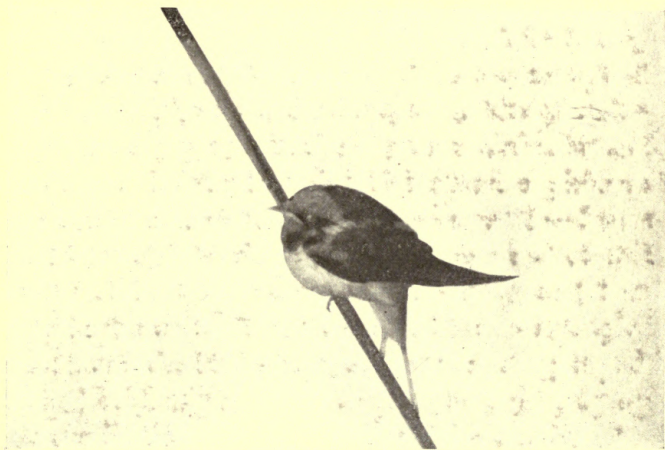
## Birds by Land and Sea

the gutter as shown in the picture, and when I found her, was quite dead.

I have been able to keep an August brood of swallows under continuous observation. The nest was built at the point of intersection of a beam and one of the rafters of a cartshed, and as soon as the young began to perch, the row of small white breasts formed a pretty picture as their owners waited for the return of the parent bird with supplies. There was one place on the front edge of the nest which formed the object of continual competition, the occupant being shoved and shouldered in a very human fashion by those who were only fortunate enough to possess second-best seats to right and left of him. With six young ones to feed, the hen laboured practically without ceasing. Almost every minute she flashed into the shed with a sudden call, hanging on to the edge of the beam as she deposited the insects she brought inside one of the gaping mouths. The persistent expectancy of the young bird occupying the front place seemed to indicate that he held his position to confer privileges equal to the difficulties of retaining it, and this confident attitude was all the more comical for the suddenness with which he snapped his bill and sat with his chin in the air when the tit-bit had been passed to another. For the hen performed her duties with some discrimination, frequently passing through the first line to extend her benefactions to the meeker triplet sitting on the rear edge of the nest. Occasionally



HOUSE-SPARROW HANGED BY A THREAD



SWALLOW



## August

the cock bird flew in with great commotion, imitating the hen by hanging before the nest, but if any of his offspring opened their mouths in the hope that their sire had at last turned honest breadwinner, they had only their pains for reward as he darted out leaving them no better for his visit. The cock was a gentleman above nursery matters. The hen regularly removed the castings of the young birds, carrying the membranous sac with its enclosure in her bill, and dropping it outside the shed. The young are early taught that no good swallow fouls his own nest, and their efforts to comply with the rule evince a certain physical, as well as moral, aptitude.

It was the last day of August when, by the aid of two ladders, I went up to photograph the brood. I found the six birds, now fully fledged, packed closely in the nest in such a manner that each side presented a row of three heads and three tails disposed alternately. Owing to the ill-lighted situation, the exposure unfortunately proved insufficient. Upon ascending the following day to rectify the error, the birds had already taken wing. From this it would appear that young birds, although fully fledged for flight, will not leave the nest of their own accord. On the contrary, when I went up the previous day, any of the young which had been perching on the beam stowed themselves tightly away in the nest as if for protection.

Since that experience, I always carry a number

## Birds by Land and Sea

of small glass tubes charged with powdered magnesium, and plugged at the ends. By blowing the powder through the flame of a couple of burning matches, such dark corners can be satisfactorily illumined.

Not far from this shed was a large sheet of water with a line of overhanging willows growing on the bank. Upon these willows, at first hundreds, but later thousands, of young swallows and martins perched, whilst their mothers darted over the water catching insects for them. When the parent bird approached, mother and young rose twittering into the air, and the food was passed from one to the other as they hung for a moment breast to breast, with their bodies almost perpendicular. Afterwards the young one returned to its perch, and the old one to her hawking.

Broods of swallows and martins, and even eggs, may be found up to the very moment when the birds migrate. What a tragedy in little is here! The parent bird with all the highly strung devotion of maternity constraining her to remain to tend her young, whilst within her the mysterious impulse to be gone awakens and urges her forth, until the multitudinous twitter of the swarming migrants calls her irresistibly, and she breaks away and follows south, the racial impulse dominating the individual. There is something of the Fate of the old Greeks in this.

Of our resident birds the yellow-hammer is one



## August

of the latest layers. Although this bird more commonly builds its nest in banks, I have not unfrequently found it in thorn hedges, and the one shown in the picture was so placed. At the time of photographing it—August 16—there were in the nest two young birds, evidently hatched about a couple of days before; and an egg of a plain white ground, and almost without markings, thus differing considerably from the usual purplish-white ground and numerous streaks of the normal egg. I have noticed that eggs laid late in the year often present some abnormality, and that eggs under such conditions showing abnormal features often addle. The picture referred to—in other respects of indifferent value—is interesting as illustrating the obsolete function of a rudimentary thumb, which in the course of evolution has been transformed into the winglet.

As is well known, the wing in birds corresponds with the fore-limb in mammals, and the feathers at the ends of the wings are arranged upon a sub-structure consisting of two surviving fingers and a thumb of an organ which, in the bird's remote ancestors, must to some extent have served the purposes of a hand. The two other fingers have been wholly lost. The small thumb provides the support for the feathers of the winglet or bastard wing, which lies at the bend in the middle on the outer side of a bird's wing. Before birds are fledged these finger-like structures are readily

recognizable, and are seen to be provided with nails. The hoatzin, a bird of British Guiana, is often referred to as an illustration of the changes which have come about in the form and function of a bird's fore-limb; but inspection of the picture of the "Young Yellow-Hammer clasping Egg" will reveal the unfledged thumb and nail of this common British bird laid across the egg lying at the bottom of the nest. Upon moving the young bird, I was struck by the way in which it made use of its "thumb" to work itself back into its former position, and to clasp the egg as it readjusted itself about it in the nest.

Passing through a neighbouring village on the evening of the 18th of August, I was attracted by a sound resembling to some extent the wiry wheeze of a starling, which came from the belfry of the parish church. Upon my approaching, however, it was evidently too strong for a starling, and seemed more like a continuous light snore, in which the apparently inward and outward breathings were clearly marked. Hearing passers comment on the unearthly noise, one could readily understand how the barn, screech, or church owl had from of old come to be regarded as a bird of ill omen, associated in the popular imagination with ideas of death and calamity. Its ghostly snore, heard in the stillness and darkness of the churchyard, was well calculated to set the imagination to work with gruesome ideas supplied by the immediate surroundings; and when the bird



LAPWING



YOUNG YELLOWHAMMER: TO SHOW RUDIMENTARY 'THUMB'



## August

was seen to flit from the tower on noiseless wings, gliding with the flickering motion of a bat, the incongruity of motion without sound would invest it with a further ghostly attribute. Seen against the sky, the bird was black and square-winged ; but when it returned from its excursions into the meadows, its usual perch was the cross at the top of a pinnacle near the belfry, and seen here in the moonlight, the big white bird could not fail to strike the mind by its singularity, not to mention the uncouth shrieks which it exchanged with the young in the tower. A white bird of nocturnal habits, a noiseless flier even in the stillness of night, a denizen of the lonely church tower and the shunned churchyard, and an utterer of sounds more human than bird-like when neither man nor bird was abroad — it is no wonder that superstition clothed the screech-owl with unearthly attributes.

Superstition is the antithesis of humour. Both, however, depend for their point upon likenesses in things unlike. Superstition, hearing the almost human snore of the screech-owl, labours among images of ghostly torture and uneasy sleepers in the grave ; humour recognizes in it the smothered trumpeting of the late diner, or of those whose nasal organs are ill adapted to the free passage of air. We all know the progression of the human snore ; how it mounts with increasing labour to the culminating point, and, arrived there, stops abruptly, leaving night

## Birds by Land and Sea

expectant, not to say disappointed. The screech-owl imitates this peculiarity to perfection, and must assuredly some day rank as an unconscious humorist. In the mean time, if any hardy theorist is in search of a hitherto unused example of protective mimicry—— But I will commit myself no farther than by the hint.

As the wheatear is wholly a stranger in our parts except as a passenger at times of migration, the appearance of one of these birds in our fields on the 20th of August must be taken as the first indication of their shifting from the hills to the plains preparatory to their departure a month hence.

Lapwings also appeared in large companies in the fields at the beginning of the month. They affect particularly rolling ground, and congregate on the grassy ridges. As the sun sinks, they face it; and, seen from the sun side, present the aspect of an assembly of gulls, their white breasts being turned uniformly in that direction.

He who has not seen the massed lapwings at this time perform their winged march around their sleeping-fields, has yet a pleasure to know. Deploying in a long thin line, and with uniformly beating wings, they circle round, now a band of dark backs and wings as they rise on a low curve against the evening sky, now a flash of white as they dip and skim the black earth, their underparts exposed to view. Round and round they go without a sound over the still land—a silent, solemn delight of

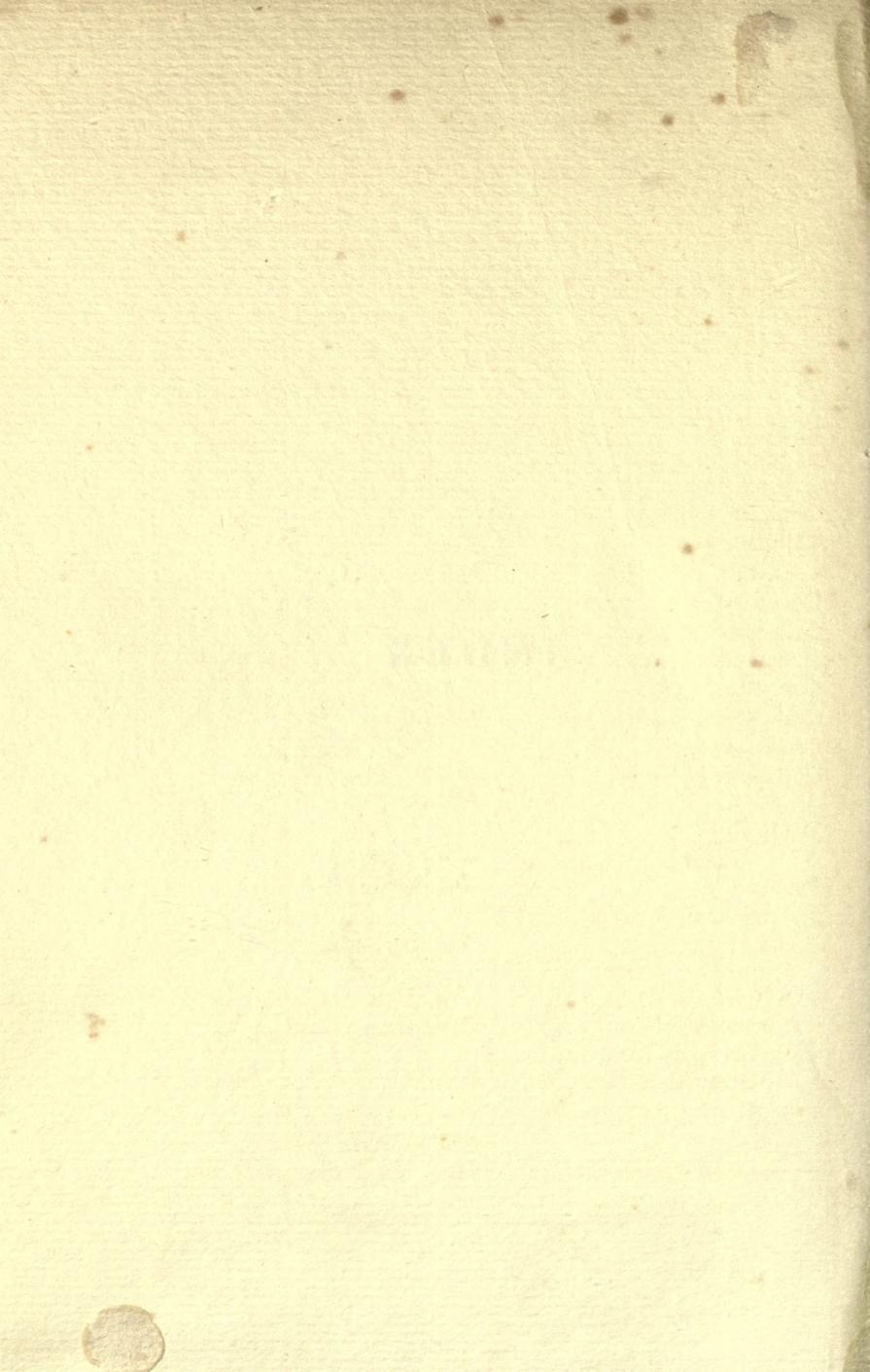
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ordered motion. In the end, they drop with one accord to earth, where they remain, closely grouped, their low "*pee-wits!*" becoming a confused chatter, which ceases as the darkness deepens.





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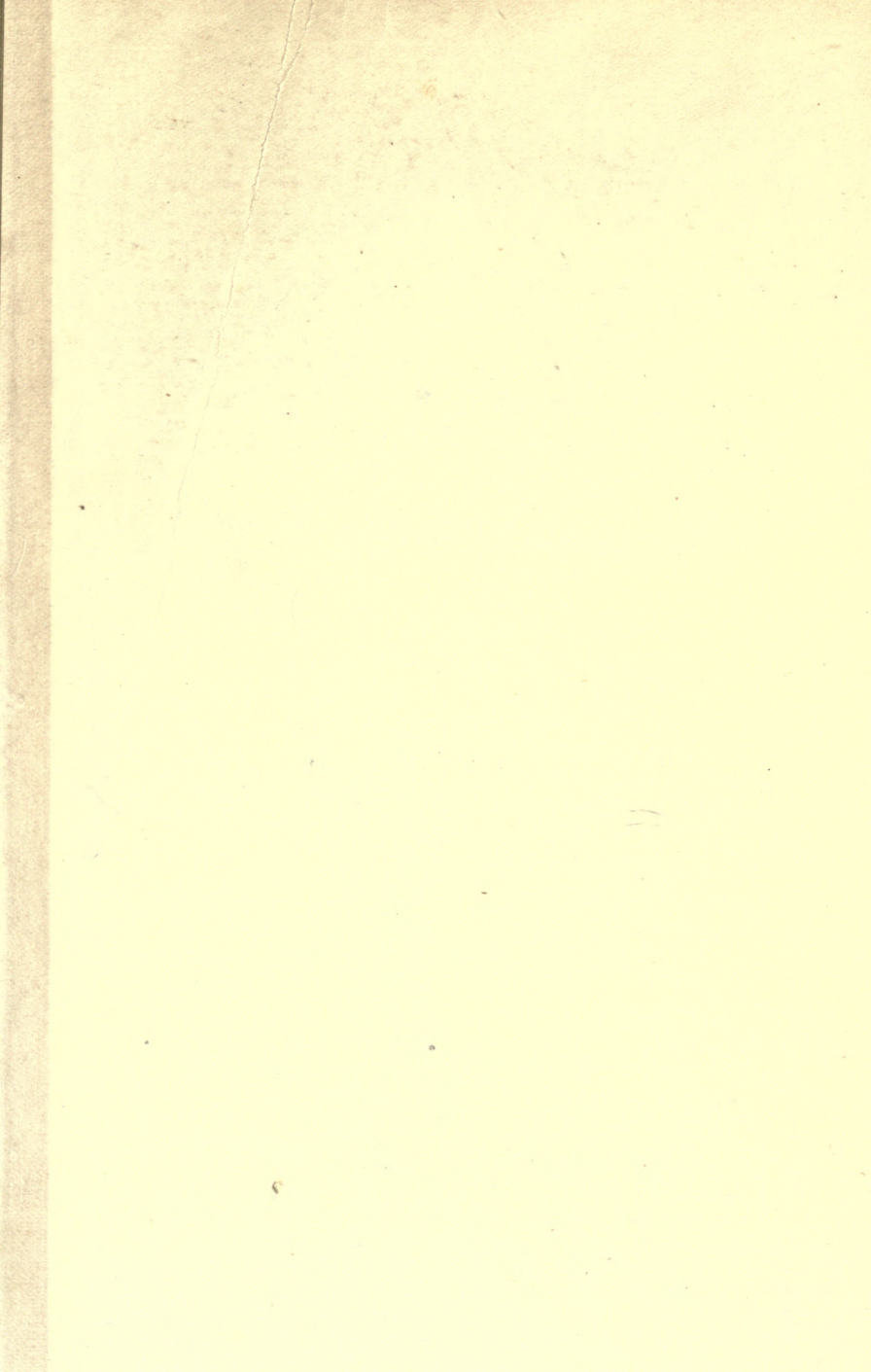


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