

The Ornithology of Derbyshire.

A RETROSPECT.

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BRIEF review of some of the changes that have taken place of late years in the ornithology of the County may not seem out of place at the beginning of a new century. Derbyshire, like most parts of the British Islands, is changing in many of its external features, and the natural result is the disappearance or diminution of many prominent species and the increase of others. To a naturalist, the total disappearance of any species is a thing to be deplored; but, at the same time, it is well to recognize the fact that in many cases it is inevitable, as when the increase of cultivation necessitates the destruction of feeding-grounds. An even more potent factor is the ubiquitous gamekeeper, with gun in hand, ready to shoot, on sight, any bird which shows the slightest resemblance to a hawk or attracts attention by its rarity. Our keepers are not at present, like the German Foresters, trained to discriminate between the useful and noxious birds of prey, and many a harmless Buzzard or Kestrel has paid with its life for the misdeeds of a felonious cousin. Of late years, some attempt has been made, by means of Wild Birds Protection Acts, to restrict the indiscriminate slaughter, but, as a rule, I regret to say that the Act is practically a dead

letter. Here and there one does, it is true, meet with a landowner who insists on game-preservation being carried out intelligently: or a keeper who spares the Kestrels and Owls and reserves his charge for the Sparrow-hawk, but these exceptions are few and far between.

Some idea of the difference between the Derbyshire of a hundred years ago and to-day may be gathered from the study of the shooting diary of the Rev. Francis Gisborne, of Staveley, from 1761 to 1784. This paper was published in the volume of the *Journal* of the D.A. and N.H.S. for 1892, but the notes appended are those of an antiquarian rather than an ornithologist.

The great feature of that day was, of course, the presence of some of the larger Raptorial Birds. The Golden Eagles had gone long before that time; but the Kite, the Common Buzzard, and the Hen Harrier still glided and soared over the heaths and waste lands. Pilkington, writing in 1789, says:—"Perhaps there is a greater variety of falcons found in Derbyshire than in the same extent of country in any other part of England." After mentioning as common the Kite, Common Buzzard, Kestrel, and Sparrow-hawk, he goes on to refer to other and rarer species. Even as late as the sixties, Sir Oswald Mosley says that within his recollection the Buzzard was so numerous that over twenty might be seen on the wing at the same time over Etwall and Egginton Heaths. At the present time the Kite has entirely disappeared, and the Buzzard only appears as an occasional visitor, especially on the grouse moors to the North of the County. The Merlin, one of the daintiest of the smaller hawks, still attempts to breed on the moorlands, and perhaps occasionally brings off a brood in the wilder parts; but generally one or both of the parents are trapped at the nest and the eggs or young destroyed. The Kestrel and Sparrow-hawk manage to hold their own, though in diminished numbers; but the Hen Harrier, which once bred in some numbers, is now a rare visitor.

The Sea-Eagle was never a resident species with us, although many immature birds have visited Derbyshire, but the rapid diminution of its numbers in its breeding haunts in Scotland and Ireland will probably render such occurrences very rare in the future.

It is interesting to note that Messrs. Coward and Oldham, in their recently published work on the "Birds of Cheshire," record an instance of the breeding of the Hobby (always a rare summer visitor) as late as the year 1894, on the north-western border of the county.

The Short-eared Owl has probably ceased to breed with us, although it still occasionally visits us in the autumn; and though the Brown Owl is fairly numerous in our woodlands, the useful Barn Owl appears to be getting scarcer, and the Long-eared Owl is very local.

Turning to the Crow tribe, which, equally with the Hawks, share the enmity of the gamekeeper, we find that the largest of the group, the Raven, has become extinct as a resident, though a stray bird still visits us from time to time. Strangely enough, one of the last nests ever built in the county still exists, although exposed to wind and weather for forty years. It has quite a historic interest, for H. Seebohm visited it, and mentions it in his work on "British Birds." During the spring of 1900, I happened to be at Howden Chest, and was surprised to see that the sticks which formed the foundation of the nest were still plainly visible from the rock opposite. Some part of the overhanging rock had evidently given way recently, and the additional exposure to the weather will, no doubt, hasten the destruction and decay of what still remains of the nest.

The Magpie, Carrion Crow, and Jay, though common enough locally, where game preservation is not strict, are absent from many parts of the county, especially if thinly wooded. The first two species are easily killed from the nest, but the Jay is more difficult to extirpate, and survives even in such game-

producing counties as Norfolk and Suffolk, where a Magpie is as rare as a Peregrine Falcon.

The disappearance of the Goldfinch is probably the result of improved methods of cultivation, though the taking of the nest with young for cage purposes has contributed to the same end.

All the foregoing species may be said to have diminished in numbers or disappeared from the county, but certain other species have increased their range during the latter years of the past century. The most remarkable instances are those of the Hawfinch, Turtle Dove, Red-legged Partridge, and Tufted Duck. It is only within the last century that these birds have established themselves as regular breeding species in the county. Owing to its extreme shyness and caution at the nest, the Hawfinch often rears a brood without attracting attention, until the autumn comes, when its visits to the rows of peas and cherry trees bring down upon it the vengeance of the gardener. In spite of this, its range is evidently increasing, and although not known to breed in England till the days of Hewetson and Doubleday, it is now quite a common bird in many parts of England.

The Turtle Dove has also increased its range to some extent northward. A few have always been found in the south of the county, but they appear to have worked their way up the valley of the Dove, and though exceedingly local, are numerous in one or two places.

The Red-legged Partridge seems to be establishing itself as a resident in S.W. Derbyshire, and more nests were found in the summer of 1900 than in any previous year.

The Tufted Duck is perhaps the most remarkable instance of all. Previous to 1850 there is no record of this bird having bred in our Islands, but about that time a few pairs began to nest in Nottinghamshire, and now the ponds in the "Dukeries" may be said to be the headquarters of the species. In 1876, a nest was identified in Norfolk, where they have since become common, and now Scotland and Ireland have

been colonized. As far as I can ascertain, regular breeding commenced in Derbyshire about 1886 or 1888, and though the birds have been too closely shot down to allow of any great increase in their numbers, there is a tendency to start fresh colonies. A few years' protection of this most useful and ornamental bird would result in its establishing itself all over the county.

A regrettable feature in reviewing the bird life of Derbyshire is the gradual diminution or disappearance of our old-established heronries, and the great increase in the number of Rooks. The latter, when allowed to increase unchecked, are particularly destructive to the eggs of game birds, and the attention of the gamekeeper might well be diverted from the destruction of such birds as the Owls and Kestrel to keeping down the number of Rooks within reasonable limits. On the other hand, the Heron, although a fish-eater, is equally fond of rats, frogs, etc., and at the same time is such an ornament to any scenery that it seems a pity that the few we have left cannot be left undisturbed.

In conclusion, I would express a hope that members of the Society would contribute to a more exact knowledge of our local birds by furnishing exact particulars of any rare bird at the time of its observation or capture. For several years past I have been accumulating material for a vertebrate Fauna of the County, but there still remains much work to be done. In cases where a bird has been killed it is desirable to ascertain the sex, if possible, by dissection, and to make accurate notes on the spot of the place, time, and circumstances under which it was obtained. I need hardly say that any such assistance will be acknowledged by me. With regard to the mammals, a fine field is open for research. The Bats of the county have never been thoroughly investigated; the Polecat is disappearing; and the smaller rodents are but little known. Our Society has done little in past years to deserve the title of a "Natural History" Society; but, perhaps, now that attention has been called to the fact, Derbyshire will not prove to be behind the sister counties in possessing keen and reliable observers.