

Bird Eccentricities in Derbyshire.

BY ARTHUR COX, M.A.



IF all the birds with whose appearance and habits we are acquainted, perhaps the very last we should expect to find dwelling in the middle of a town is the king-fisher (*alcedo ispida*). Here, however, in my own garden, in Derby, a king-fisher has made its home for the past twelve months. The garden covers about an acre of ground, and is surrounded on all sides by walls which separate it from the buildings of a manufactory, the town street, and a field respectively; the nearest point of river is at least two miles off, and anything like a retired situation on the bank of river or stream is very much further away.

Considerable space in my garden is occupied by a reservoir of water for the supply of engines in the adjacent works, and this reservoir is plentifully stocked with small carp, golden and otherwise. The facilities for obtaining his daily food doubtless supply the reason for his remaining here, though what the king-fisher could have been doing in the town at all when he first discovered my pond I am at a loss to imagine.

For the present here he is, and seems quite disposed to remain. I see him daily, perched on the overhanging bough of a thorn tree, or squatting on the edge of a rough plank bridge which is thrown across one part of the water. There is no "cover" of any sort, or possibility of his getting out of sight. When disturbed,

the bird will just rise and drop himself over the wall into a plantation of trees in the adjoining field, returning almost immediately to his hunting, or, to speak correctly, his *fishing*, ground.

One peculiarity about the situation is this, that the water, after having been used for the engines, is discharged back again into the reservoir, the temperature of which is consequently often too hot to bear the hand in. The water is never cold except sometimes at night and on Sundays, and one cannot suppose the king-fisher takes his meals at those times only ; he must, then, habitually plunge into quite hot water ; but this he has clearly come to regard as an agreeable process. Long may he so continue to enjoy himself. The fish increase rapidly, and I trust there will always be plenty for him to eat here so long as he prefers town life and hot water to the more usual habits of his fellows on the retired banks of a running stream.

The Derwent has always been a favourite resort of king-fishers, and I have myself constantly seen them in different parts of the county, but for one of these birds deliberately to take up his abode in a town garden miles from any spot one would look upon as its natural haunt, is, as far as I am aware, unprecedented. Should anyone reading these notes be able to supply information on this point, I hope they will be good enough to do so.

I may add that once, early last spring, we saw *two* king-fishers in the garden, sporting, and chasing one another like a couple of starlings, chattering all the time. I was in hopes this might be preliminary to some domestic arrangement, but the second bird disappeared, and has not been seen since ; possibly it was afraid of getting into hot water.

Another eccentricity in bird life occurred in this county the summer before last. The actors on this occasion were a pair of swans on the property of Mr. Hall, of Holly Bush. These birds, alone and unaided, hatched out and reared *ten* cygnets. The number is, I think, without precedent. I have consulted all available authorities, and invariably find the number of eggs or young swans given as five, seven, or *rarely* eight ; one instance

only is recorded of nine, and there was a doubt as to all the eggs having been laid by one swan. At Holly Bush, however, there was no room for doubt; this one pair of swans only inhabited the pool, and the existence of the ten cygnets was verified and vouched for by more than two or three sceptics.

I have put these notes together at the request of several of my friends who consider them worthy of chronicle. Should they lead to the careful record of any interesting peculiarity in the habits of our feathered surroundings, which those who read them may observe from time to time, their purpose will be answered.