

SOME STRAY NOTES ON BIRDS.

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Of all living creatures, I think that birds are the most interesting. Not only so, but in my humble opinion they are amongst the most intelligent members of the Animal Kingdom.

There are a great number of puzzling questions relating to the habits of birds which have not yet been satisfactorily answered, and that those who study the subject might direct their attention to. Such, for instance, as the subject of migration and the manner of flight.

I may as well say at the outset that this paper is not intended to be a scientific one, but I wish to briefly call attention to a few of the more interesting points in connection with the study of Ornithology in the hopes that I may induce some more of the members of this Field Club to take up the subject.

We will begin then at the beginning. The first great business in a bird's life is the choosing of a mate. Now the curious thing about birds, and in fact about most of the lower orders of creation is, that it is the male who is decked out in gorgeous array. The female goes about in very sombre apparel—as a rule—this, of course, being just the opposite to what happens amongst human beings. Why this should be so it is hard to say, but perhaps in the eyes of the birds themselves the females have other compensating qualities to make up for their apparent loss in this respect. It is at the mating time that most birds are in full voice, and the woodland rings with the varied notes of its feathered inhabitants. And what joyous notes some of them are!

Conspicuous above them all, are the well known notes of the black-bird and thrush, perhaps the most beautiful of all the songsters in this country, which seems to be completely boycotted by that wonderful singer the nightingale. Now if you have ever closely observed the ways of birds you must have been surprised at the great variety of notes that

some of them possess. They have notes not only to express joy but they have also notes of warning, call notes to attract their mates, and notes for their young. Their warning cries seem to be known to other animals too, such as rabbits, for that is the only way in which I can account for some of the sudden alarms to which they are subject, as I have noticed that frequently on the warning note of a blackbird or thrush they are off like a shot.

One object of their song is, no doubt, to attract mates to themselves, if not why is it that it is at the nesting season they are at their best. Each one seems to be trying to rival his neighbour, as he goes through the contents of his *répertoire*.

But then all birds do not possess the gift of song. Who ever spoke of the song of the rook, and yet he is one of the most intelligent of birds. Perhaps it is that they have got beyond this stage, and the female rook is too intelligent to be beguiled by the most enticing of songs, and that she looks out for more substantial qualities in her prospective spouse, than the mere gift of song. If they cannot sing they can surely talk, and at this time of the year there is an incessant talking going on from about four or five o'clock in the morning until roosting time. I suppose they have first of all to talk over the situation of the nest, and then discuss their near neighbours and their plans (they have not much clothes to discuss.)

Jerome K. Jerome was not very far wrong when he said that the rooks had a kind of club and a president, but I am afraid the president has a hard time of it trying to keep order, especially when the young rooks appear, for then the cawing seems to continue nearly the whole night through. But we will come back to the rooks later on.

Now supposing that a mate has been chosen, the next business is building. What wonderful architects some of the feathered race are! But alas! there are some of them who seem to have so little idea of their business that either they do not build at all or else they appropriate what has been erected by others. Some of the sea birds for instance merely lay their eggs on a shelf of rock without any attempt whatsoever at a nest, while other birds build most beautiful erections. Here however we must note the wonderful provision which nature has made for all circumstances. The shape of the egg varies very considerably, and

in the case of those birds which lay their eggs on a bare ledge, the egg is so shaped that it is almost impossible for it to roll off. The eggs too in many cases so perfectly suit their surroundings that you may be within a few feet of the nest and yet fail to see them. I have tried sometimes to find a dotterel's nest on the sea shore, and I have spent a long time looking for it, while all the time it was within a few feet of where I was standing, the birds themselves doing their best to lead me astray by going in an opposite direction and feigning lameness, which soon disappeared however when they thought that they had accomplished their object.

The colouring of the eggs does not always seem to be protective, for we find bright coloured eggs frequently in very sombre surroundings. What more conspicuous object could there be, for instance, than a thrush's egg!

The marking, too, of the eggs of individual birds, sometimes varies very considerably, so that it is hard to say what is the principle of their colouring. But it is different with regard to their nests. In many cases the nests are made to so exactly match their surroundings that, unless you actually see the bird entering or coming off the nest it would be next to impossible to locate it.

They do not all trust to deception of this sort. Some, like the magpie, build a very formidable nest, and with the strong beaks of the owners to guard the entrance, they have little to fear from an intruder.

The harmony of the nests of some birds with their surroundings is really wonderful. The chaffinches and goldfinches for instance, frequently build in the fruit trees in the garden, and they are covered with lichen and moss, so that they appear part of the tree; in fact, so close is the resemblance, that I have been looking at one for some time without recognising that it was a nest. The curious thing is that, if by chance they build in any other place they use nearly the same materials and the nest becomes more conspicuous. Why is it that some nests are covered at the top while others are uncovered? Is it altogether a matter of protection, or, is it that we here see a further stage in the development of the building instinct?

Again, why is it that large birds like the rooks who are well able to defend themselves build at such a height, while most of the smaller

birds build within a foot or two of the ground, or, actually on the ground? Perhaps it is that the nests of the latter are more fragile, and so could not stand the winds to which they would be exposed if they were at the tops of the trees.

It certainly is remarkable how the nests of rooks placed at the top of very tall trees do withstand very violent storms. The rooks, of course, take a great deal of care in building them, and I have seen them rejecting twig after twig before they carried off one which they regarded as suitable for their purpose. But it sometimes happens that after all their trouble the selected twig drops when they are putting it on the nest, and the curious thing is that they will not pick it up again but will make a fresh journey to secure a new *kippin*.

It is most interesting to watch the operations of these birds. Frequently a lazy or specially cute bird will cause his neighbour's building to be rather protracted. I have, for instance, watched a rook who was apparently very deeply interested in a pair building quite close to him, but whenever the pair went off for fresh materials, he quietly hopped on to the nest and picking off one of the twigs, he flew away with it to an adjoining rookery, using it for his own purposes. We read about little birds in their nests agreeing, but at any rate this is not the case with all the inhabitants of a rookery, for I have known a committee of rooks held over a nest which was in process of building, to have proceeded deliberately to pull the nest to pieces every time that the unfortunate owners attempted to go on with the building. Whether the bird so treated was a bad character, or whether he had made himself unpopular by his peculiar habits, or whether it was merely the position of the nest that was objected to, we cannot of course say, until we know something more of their language. What a convenience it would be if they could learn *Esperanto*. But to proceed with our subject. We may suppose the birds to have been hatched and to be looking out anxiously for their first feed. What capacious maws some of them have! The parents seem to spend all their time feeding them, and they require a varied diet. Some birds go in strongly for worms, others for insects, and others for fresh meat, young birds, etc., and so on. Some birds bring the food for their young in their beaks, others I believe swallow it first and then proceed to degurgitate (to use a polite word), for the purpose of feeding their family.

What a surprise it must be for the foster mother who finds herself landed with a young cuckoo, for then surely, her labour is doubled, or trebled, to supply the wants of the big stranger. The natural instinct is a strange thing when it permits all the rightful members of the family to be jostled out of their home, while the intruder is pampered up and installed as "the family." Is it a case of the survival of the fittest? Certainly, it is a case of the survival of the biggest, but the biggest is not always the best or most useful. We must, however, pass over many interesting phases of the family history and imagine that the birds are fully fledged and setting up on their own account, and this brings us to the strangest and most wonderful chapter of the whole history, and that is their migration.

Many kinds of birds, of course, remain with us practically the whole year round, but a large number have winter residences, perhaps hundreds of miles away. What instinct is it, or is it something more than instinct that leads them to undertake this great journey, and how is it that so many thousands of young birds proceed so unerringly to their destination though they have never been on the road before? The wonder is that so many of them arrive safely, when we consider the numerous dangers that they have to pass through both by sea and land. We can understand birds of strong flight like the swallows accomplishing their long journey in safety, but what of the many birds that we only see proceeding by short jerky flight, how do they manage when they are crossing the sea as many of them have to do? We now know that some of our migrants go far down almost to the heart of Africa, and it would be very interesting to know how long they take to do the trip. A great part of their travelling is done by night, and especially is this the case in crossing the Channel. There is good reason for this latter, because otherwise, many of them would fall a prey to the voracious sea birds and hawks. One observer, indeed, wrote a note some time ago to the effect that he had seen some large flocks of small birds arriving on the coast by daylight, having evidently been delayed by a storm and no sooner did they appear near the coast than they were at once set upon by the gulls and other birds, and hundreds of them fell victims to the enemy. Now, it is a well-known fact that these migrants arrive nearly always about the same date and leave generally about the same