

THE COUNTRYSIDE IN WINTER.

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Every season of the year has its own peculiar interest for the Nature lover, because there is always life of some sort to be observed and studied; and Winter has, I think, some special charms which I hope to bring out in this paper. I am afraid, however, that there are a good many people who see no beauty in winter at all. To the ordinary town dweller, winter in the country represents nothing but dreariness and deadness. To them the trees and the flowers are as dead things, the charm of the birds is gone with their song and with the departure of some of the more familiar species. But those who study to unravel some of nature's secrets, will tell such people that they are labouring under a wrong impression altogether, for nature is all this time busy at work, and some of the most interesting of nature problems present themselves for our attention at this time of the year.

We miss the flowers of the field and hedgerow no doubt; we miss too, the hum of the bee and insects of various kinds, such as the gorgeous butterfly and the darting dragon fly, while we also note with pleasure the absence of the destroyer of our pears and plums, that golden banded insect which often pays too much attention to our own bodies, viz.—the common wasp. The poet has told us—"How doth the little busy bee," but he has not told us of the doings of his near relation. There are, however, many compensating pleasures for the loss of those things that we delight in at other seasons. We have the interest of the birds with us still; and we may even make a closer acquaintance with them in the winter than at other times. Even if we do miss some of our friends, yet there are some new acquaintances to be made, though as they do not make their homes with us we look on them more or less as strangers.

Where are all our old friends gone, and why are they gone?

The swallow, for instance, has perchance, gone as far south as Africa, and even now he may be meditating his early return to the home of his youth. But why should he go so far afield, and why when he has got so far, does he not stay where he is? That is a question that has not yet been satisfactorily answered. It was at one time a common idea that the swallow instead of emigrating, hibernated in this country, and even old Gilbert White was of this opinion; indeed in his days, there were some people who imagined that the swallows spent the winter somewhere under the water, and there have been frequent accounts of their having been found hidden in holes, but like the stories of frogs found in the middle of the rocks, there is never any corroborating evidence brought forward.

This idea which is not indeed entirely exploded yet, is partly due to the occasional appearance of an odd swallow or two out of season, as if they had only just come to life. There must, however, be other reasons to account for their unexpected appearances. It may be that they are due to the prevalence of the wind for a long time in one particular direction, or to some storm which has driven the birds out of their course; but whatever it is, the birds must soon find out that they are on the wrong track, for there is no account of their remaining long in any of those localities where they have made their sudden appearances.

Some birds, such as swallows, swifts, cuckoos, etc., depart from the country altogether without leaving a single representative behind, but there are other species which do not thus emigrate *in toto*, but only go in comparatively small flocks, leaving many of their species behind. There is no reasonable doubt but that this is the case with some of our common birds. Some birds again, only change their quarters from one part of the country to another, as for instance the Rooks, who only take up their winter quarters as a rule at a short distance from their usual nesting places.

At the present time indeed (February), the rooks are very busy talking about matrimony and probable sites for new nests. This, however, is only in the morning or evening, for the birds do not stay in the rookery at night or during the greater part of the day. I think that most of them only go to a neighbouring wood for roosting purposes

where they are not in quite such an elevated position as in the ordinary rookery here, and where no doubt they do not feel the wind so much.

If, on the one hand, we do lose a great number by emigration, on the other hand we gain by immigration. Among our winter visitors we have the Fieldfare and Redwing which come to us in large flocks, and we have also visits paid to us here in the south by the Wild Geese, which form a most interesting sight as seen flying in their peculiar formation of a \triangleright . A few days ago I passed a large flock or gaggle of these Wild Geese feeding in a field about fifty yards from the main road near Temple Mungret.

Another sign of the winter season is the change in the plumage of many birds—witness for example the common black-headed Gull, which seems in winter to be named on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle, seeing that the distinctive colouring is gone from the head. Why this should be so is a colour problem still waiting for a satisfactory solution.

The birds often have a very hard time of it in a severe winter, owing chiefly to the difficulty they find in obtaining sufficient food to sustain life. It is a common though erroneous idea when a number of dead birds are seen after a frost that it is the cold which has killed them. Wild birds, however, do not seem to mind the cold very much, for they can be frequently seen enjoying a bath in icy cold water, so that it is probable that they are not really very susceptible to cold. No! It is starvation, not cold, that kills them in frosty weather. And how tame they become at such times. This tameness is partly due to utter weakness and inability to use much exertion, and also to the hope that there is a chance of food in prospect.

One day during a very hard frost this winter I passed on my bicycle some hundreds of birds of various sorts hopping feebly along the pathway and road searching in vain for food, and so weak that they hardly troubled to get out of the way of the bicycle. Even the hard-billed birds were with difficulty able to procure any food. Fortunately the frost only lasted a short time, but what a bill of mortality there would have been amongst our feathered friends if the ground had remained so frost-bound but a few days longer. Have you ever watched a bird turning over the leaves in winter on the look out for a juicy morsel; just think what a number of leaves he must turn before he gets

a satisfactory meal. Many human beings have to work pretty hard to obtain sufficient food to keep them alive, but they can hardly work much harder than some of our feathered songsters have to do in bad weather.

What wonderful appetites some of them have! Anyone who goes in for feeding the birds must soon find this out for themselves, and also that some of them are particularly greedy.

This winter we have had one most persistent hen blackbird who seems to know all our mealtimes and she is always on the spot waiting; in fact, I often wonder how she finds room for all the crumbs that she disposes of. Have you ever carefully watched a Robin putting away worms? If anyone has a healthy appetite surely he has. When you are digging in the garden one robin will perhaps follow you all the day putting away worm after worm, and some of them very big ones too. He certainly must eat in a day several times his own weight in worms, or else the yards of worms must melt in his mouth!

What a vast amount of good these birds must do in ridding the land of pests! There are heavy charges, of course, to be brought against a few of them, such as the Bullfinches, Sparrows and Wood-pigeons, but in the winter they cannot do very much damage, in fact, their good work then almost compensates for the evil done at other times, though I am not sure that I can say this much for the Woodpigeons, because they have created havoc amongst my cabbages this winter.

The birds have detained us long, but one is loth to leave them, so we can only just touch on some of the other matters which interest the naturalist in the winter. It is a time of recuperation for many trees and plants, though some of the latter are killed off by the first touch of frost.

There is not much sign of life in the trees after all the leaves have fallen but they are gathering strength for the Spring to clothe themselves anew in their suit of green, and to perform the various functions which they fulfil in the economy of nature. How beautiful some trees are in winter! One marvels at the wonderful and delicate tracery and interlacing of their branches as seen on a bright day with the sky as a back ground—a beauty which gives place later on to the glory of their foliage of green.

How many living things lie concealed in the little nooks and crannies of a tree passing the winter in a kind of deep sleep. That is another of the wonders of winter—this long hibernation—or sleep of insects and animals. What a curious thing a chrysalis is for instance! Why should a butterfly have to pass through the various stages of egg, caterpillar, and chrysalis, instead of emerging in all its glory at once from the egg? And what goes on inside a chrysalis to cause such a transformation? There is no sign of life about a chrysalis unless you pinch its head, and then it will give a few convulsive jerks with its tail showing that there is still some vitality left though it is incapable of any other motion. But all insects do not pass the winter in this state, some of them instead, hibernate in a perfect state. We sometimes find butterflies in various odd corners, dead to all appearance, but put them in a warm, bright room, or in bright sunshine and they will come to life again, only to return to sleep when the warmth is gone. What a wonderful provision nature makes too in the case of the Wasp family. The female, that is the Queen, alone survives as a rule; and we could very well spare her though she is a female and a queen. But presently she will wake up and build a few cells and lay a few eggs, and then when these latter are hatched out and have passed through their different stages they will help her to build more cells and to provide for a larger family.

But for all these things flowers are necessary, else where are the pollen and honey to come from for the feeding, and so first must come the flowers before the wasps or bees, and the latter benefit the former in the way of fertilisation, just as much as they themselves are benefited, but that is another story of the economy of nature which we may return to perhaps on some other occasion. Enough now to have shown that, even in Winter, the countryside has a great deal of interest for the humble lover of Nature and her ways.