

THE PTARMIGAN.

BY REV. D. C. MACKAY.

AMONG birds that inhabit our higher elevations the ptarmigan is, unquestionably, the first to be noticed. No doubt other birds may be met with occasionally as high as this species, but no other is so essentially a denizen of the heights. There is no other bird, indeed, which nature has furnished with the means of maintaining life in such lofty situations independently of season or weather. The haunts of the ptarmigan are so remote that it is not generally so well known as many a less interesting bird whose home lies beyond many lands and seas. Again, the creature's scheme of protective colouring is so perfect, and its reliance on this favour of nature so implicit, that it generally succeeds in evading detection on the part of those who, at a time, may chance to visit its far-off home. I believe I should not be far wrong in hazarding the proposition that there are many amongst us who though flattering themselves that they are fairly familiar with most of our higher summits have never even seen a live ptarmigan. The very name of the bird begins with a mystery; for no one can give the date or the reason of the accession of that initial P. The designation comes from the Gaelic *tarmachan*, a term whose radical significance seems to occasion some controversy among Gaelic etymologists. Coming from this source, the word appeared first in our language under the form "termagant," or "termigant" as it was spelt by James I. Later on the P crept on for no assignable reason, unless it be, indeed, to assimilate the name to that of many other strange birds which open the battery of their scientific nomenclature with the prefix "pter"—from the Greek word for a wing. But the ptarmigan has nothing to do with Greek, and has as little right to the initial P as it has to the name imposed upon it by a fearless school-mate of mine, who, encountering the strange word in a lesson, straightway dubbed it

“petermargan,” and was sailing on in blissful confidence when pulled up by didascalor authority.

In appearance the ptarmigan bears a close resemblance to its cousin on the lower levels, the red grouse. No doubt the complete dissimilarity in colour constitutes, of itself, a considerable difference; but, apart from this external and accidental variance, the two species have many features



Photo by

A PTARMIGAN'S NEST.

S. P. Gordon, F.Z.S.

and characteristics in common. Like the red grouse, the ptarmigan is short and stout in build; it has also a similar bill, which is short, thick, black and slightly curved; it wears similar hose of rough white hair or small feathers, only, in the case of the ptarmigan, these are thicker, and the final hairs often nearly conceal the spurs. It is also equally nimble on the wing, though, at first sight, the plump, round

body does not seem to be particularly well adapted for flight. There are, besides, several other less obvious points of resemblance between the two, such as monogamy and anatomical structure. In size it is rather smaller than the red grouse. But, now that we have been introduced by its better known relative, let us approach our hero in person.

The most striking point in the ptarmigan is, undoubtedly, its varying colour. At the time of writing—*i.e.* in the month of June—it is about to assume its summer dress, which consists of a pale brown or ash colour on the upper parts of the body, varied with darker spots and streaks of orange. On the head and neck these spots or bars are more pronounced and are intermingled with a certain amount of white. The under parts of the body and the wings are white, except the shafts of the quills, which always remain black. As the autumn advances, this dress is gradually replaced by the winter vesture, which is practically a pure white. In the male bird a bar of black extends from the eye to the bill. Books of reference inform me that this bar is absent in the female, though I must confess that I have never personally noted this absence; still, I have no doubt that the books are correct, especially as the presence of this dark amongst the predominating white must, certainly, be a much more noticeable feature than its absence. Apart from this and the black quills of the wings and some of the feathers of the tail, the winter plumage is as white as that of the whitest sea-gull. But this interesting animal has still a third dress to assume during the course of the year. This it dons at the approach of the breeding season, the prevailing hue seeming, then, to be a blend of the other two, a fact which probably led to this third moult being so long ignored, the spring plumage being naturally looked upon as the period of transition merely between the two extremes though it is richer and more glossy than either; but it has, at a comparatively recent date, been definitely ascertained that it is a distinct plumage, so that there are, really, three well defined moults in the year.

In all this we have one of the most wonderful examples of the protection which nature provides for her helpless

children. If the prevailing tints which the hills wear in summer were mixed up together, the result would probably be something very similar to the summer dress of the ptarmigan. The truth of this statement readily comes home to anyone who has been directed to look at that flock of ptarmigan just under the big boulder quite near, and has utterly failed to locate them until they moved. When they squat close among the ashy, grey rocks it requires a well trained eye or a good glass or both to detect them. With a glass one is sometimes surprised to discover a bright, little eye where all seemed to be cold hard stone. But one might argue that as the summer wanes the rich lichen with which the rocks are clothed will fade and grow light, and then the birds will be better revealed in their darker hue amongst it. No, no, nature is not to be caught thus napping in her vigilance over her children. As the lichens fade on the rocks the summer dress of the ptarmigan also fades, and the first stray threads of the winter coat appear. And yet later on the summits may be nearly white of a September morning with a light shower of snow, and now also this wonderful animal, keeping pace with its surroundings, is as pale as the hill-side becomes under the first cold grasp of winter; and, finally, at the dead of winter it becomes as white as its home on the snowy peaks. In the light-hearted days of spring it wears its richest dress, but who has not noticed that it is precisely then that the tints on the high hills are the brightest—just when the tender, new vegetation is breaking through and vivifying the sodden growth of the year that is dead?

No doubt, we have in nature other examples of a perennial adaptation to a varying medium, but none, I think, that is so artistically or so accurately carried out, and none that so infallibly demonstrates the providential care that is lavished upon these creatures that are so destitute of any means of self-defence.

The ptarmigan lays eight or ten eggs of a pale yellow or almost a cream colour dappled with blotches of light brown. They are generally laid towards the end of April in a nest that is merely a hollow in the bare ground, lined roughly

with grass or other vegetable matter. As soon as the young are hatched they are ready to scuttle off and bustle about with their mother in search of food, and they know their nest no more.

The food of the ptarmigan consists of a very slender species of heath (the crowberry?) which grows plentifully on the highest ridges. I regret that I cannot give its correct name; it is not given to every man to be a botanist or a naturalist with a long list of classical labels ready to be affixed to any fauna or flora he may encounter. For this reason I have avoided the use of these obscure terms in this article, and have not been tempted to call the ptarmigan (even within brackets) a *lagopus* or any other names of indecorous sonority. The bird itself is extremely simple in its speech, limiting its vocal efforts to a low, harsh croak. This sound may sometimes be heard among the rough boulders and rocks about the tops of the hills, while all the time the author of it completely evades detection. If really disturbed the birds will sometimes run and creep about, showing very little sign of fear. When they take to the wing they generally get up in a body, there is an instantaneous glitter of their light feathers as they make off, then almost immediately they wheel together and away they go, *en masse*, across the glen to the top of another range of mountains.