

BIRDS OF THE CAIRNGORMS.

ALEX. TEWNION.

WITH the exception perhaps of the rock-climbing fanatics, few mountaineers nowadays confine their activities on the hills solely to climbing in its various forms. Many combine photography with their own particular branch of climbing. Some few study the rocks with a more critical eye even than the rock gymnast. Others, again, pick on some branch of natural history: perhaps the ecology of the alpine zones, perhaps some other "ology" equally mystifying to the uninitiated. But of all these recreations, pursuits, hobbies, what will you, few give greater pleasure to the layman than what is popularly styled "bird-watching."

Apart altogether from the scientific aspect, many people derive a great deal of aesthetic satisfaction merely in seeing birds as birds—gaily plumaged winged creatures flitting among the bushes or trees, swimming in the water, hopping about on the ground. Once you can identify one from the other and know a little—or a lot—about them, this pleasure is enhanced a hundredfold. Not only, be it said, because of your own increased enjoyment but also because of the pleasure given your climbing companions when you pass on some of your knowledge. Even people who aren't particularly keen on birds are interested when you mention that the little bird running a few yards ahead of them across the mossy plateau is a dotterel, a species of which probably every Scottish climber has read or heard but which few have seen—or seeing, identified. Or the long-legged bird calling excitedly from a tree stump or hummock in the glen—there is a greenshank, a rare breeding bird in the country east of the Lairig Ghru.

Rarities such as these attract ornithologists from all over Britain; for in the 300-odd square miles of glens, moors, and mountains comprising the Cairngorms region, bird life is richly represented in spring and early summer. At this time the tracts of natural pine wood and hanging birches, the lonely glens and the upland mosses and plateaux offer

to the bird enthusiast opportunities unrivalled in Britain. In the course of a day's journey across the hills and glens he will probably see many of the common birds, and with a little luck—which so often depends on the weather—he may spot two or three of the less common or even of the rarer species.

In the neighbourhood of the villages and crofts on the outskirts of the region are found those birds which most constantly associate with man and his habitations. Among these the house sparrow, the chaffinch, the robin, the black-bird, and two or three others are prominent throughout the year; while the martin, the swallow, and the swift arrive in spring. Some of the latter birds occasionally crop up unexpectedly at high altitudes. Swifts, for example, may be seen hawking the cliff-tops of Beinn a' Bhùird or Lochnagar. And on April 16 one year I saw a pair of swallows flitting across the flat plateau of Beinn a' Bhùird, only a week after I had seen my first pair of the season flying over the River Don at Aberdeen.

The wren is another bird which turns up in surprising situations, but it is as much at home in the rocky reaches of Glen Slugain or Glen Feshie as it is in a garden at sea level. High up in Ballochbuie, at the upper limits of the pine forest, I have found a young brood of wrens in the heather. The chicks were tiny morsels of down, hardly larger than a bumble bee and able to flutter only a couple of feet before sinking again into the long heather.

No account, however brief, which includes the so-called common or garden birds could possibly omit mention of the tits—the blue, the coal, and the great tit. Most beautiful of the titmice, with its varied plumage of blacks, whites and pinks, and a tail as long as its body, is the longtailed tit. Unlike the blue and the great tits, the coal and the long-tailed tits in the area confine themselves chiefly to the birch and pine woods.

Consorting with the tits in the mixed forests of pine and birch we find the goldcrest, tiniest of our resident birds. From tip of bill to end of tail this little bird measures only $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches. But it is $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches of concentrated energy, for

the goldcrest is constantly flitting from branch to branch, treetop to treetop, never at peace for longer than a couple of seconds. Its call-note and simple song are so high-pitched that some people cannot hear them. A friend of mine, more accustomed to bowlines and belays than binoculars, once spent a day with me bird-watching in the primeval pine forest. He was utterly unable to hear the goldcrest's notes and was, I am sure, convinced that the birds he occasionally glimpsed were carrying out their activities quite silently. When they remain passive under observation for more than a second, or hang upside down, tit-like, from a twig, then you may spot on their head the fiery crest which runs from brow to nape.

The old pine woods of the Spey valley—Glen Feshie, Rothiemurchus, and Abernethy—are the chief quarters of the crested tit, one of Britain's rarer birds. It is an easy species to identify. Its small size and upstanding erectile crest immediately distinguish it even though no other feature is discernible. And once seen it is never forgotten.

While the crested tit has spread to some extent to the north and north-west of its chief breeding area, there is no certain evidence of its having spread south to upper Deeside, where identical conditions to those in the Spey valley exist in Ballochbuie and in Glens Quoich, Lui, and Derry. Some years ago a letter in the press announced that a pair had bred near the Bridge of Dee at Invercauld, but to my knowledge the report was never confirmed. Nor, despite many intensive searches, have I so much as heard the characteristic call-note of the crested tit in the upper Deeside woods. But though it is a sedentary species, the crested tit is strong enough on the wing to cross the Lairig Ghru or the Lairig an Laoigh without trouble. We may find it on Deeside yet.

The great spotted woodpecker, a strikingly plumaged, boldly pied bird about the size of a starling, with a crimson patch on its head and crimson undertail coverts, is found in small numbers in the old pine forests at the base of the Cairngorms. The first warning you may get of its presence may be a machine-gun-like rattling or drumming, a sound produced by its bill hammering quickly and repeatedly on a

dead tree. If you succeed in tracking the noise to its source you may be lucky enough to see the bird searching for food, bounding in short steps up the trunk of a tree in very similar fashion to a tree-creeper.

Another bird of the old forests, the Scottish crossbill, occurs more frequently than the woodpecker. It can be identified, if you see it closely enough, by the crossed tips of its mandibles. There is a strongly marked sexual dimorphism in the crossbill, the male bird's body plumage being of various shades of pink while the female's is predominantly yellowish-green or green.

Among others of the small woodland birds, the siskin, the lesser redpoll, the redstart, the tree pipit, and the wood and willow warblers deserve more than the mere mention that space permits. I have, for instance, heard in June the song of the willow warbler emanating from a small clump of birches at almost 2,000 feet on the Glen Geusachan face of Devil's Point, possibly the greatest height in Scotland at which this bird has been heard singing. The next nearest trees to this lonely spot are over 2 miles away, on the banks of Allt Preas nam Mearlach.

The biggest bird found in the pine forests is the capercaillie, largest of British game birds. The cock caper looks rather like a thick-set turkey as it jinks round the open pines or crashes in headlong flight through the close formations of a conifer plantation. The hen caper is a smaller bird, predominantly brown in colour; it often conceals its nest in a pile of fallen branches or in the heart of a clump of heather, so that it is seldom found. The black grouse, another game bird, frequents mixed pine and birch woods of an open character, or moors where pines and birches grow. The blackcock, as the male black grouse is known, rather resembles an overgrown red grouse but is very much darker in plumage and has a long lyre-shaped tail. The female is the greyhen: it is often confused with the hen caper but is smaller and darker in plumage. The red grouse, whose explosive "go-back, go-back!" is sometimes disconcertingly human-like in its tone, is of course the typical bird of the heather moors.

In the open glens, on the upland pastures and moors, the skylark sings everywhere up to about 2,250 feet. That ubiquitous bird, the meadow pipit, goes one better and is at home anywhere between sea level and the summit of Macdhuì. So, too, is the wheatear, a handsome little bird which one may watch in the early morning flirting its white rump at the Bay of Nigg and in the afternoon on the barren stony plateaux 4,000 feet above the sea.

The trilling liquid music of the curlew expresses the wild spirit of the glens and moors. Mounting steadily upwards until it is 300 or 400 feet above the ground, the curlew commences its earthwards glide and at the same time utters a few preliminary trills. Then the full rapture of its wild song bursts forth in a flood of joyous melody which ends as the singer alights in a long, haunting, melancholy trill.

The lapwing, probably the most familiar of all waders, has of recent years spread into the Cairngorms glens. I have seen a pair as high as Lochan Feith na Sgor, the Lairig Lochans at the foot of Carn a' Mhaim, on a small piece of meadowland near the largest lochan. Here, too, I have found the nest of the black-headed gull on the little islets in the lochan nearest the Lairig path. This spread of the black-headed gull from a coastal to an inland habitat is interesting, but has been made at heavy cost to other species. For the black-headed gull is notorious for its depredations on the eggs and chicks of other birds, whether coastal, moorland, or mountain species.

In the upper glens a familiar sight is the red-necked oystercatcher; less familiar, because of its crepuscular habits, is the snipe. This species reaches up to around 2,000 feet, at which height I have disturbed it from marshy ground on Meall an Lundain. The golden plover and the dunlin are two other waders whose breeding range ascends even higher than this, for they are found on the Yellow Moss and on Am Moine Mhor, which border on 3,000 feet. It is an eerie experience to camp alone for days in mist on Am Moine Mhor and hear only the melancholy calls of the golden plover, or to wander over the peat hags and mosses with the plovers anxiously escorting one from their nesting territories.

The golden plover is somewhat smaller than the lapwing, speckled black and goldy brown above—at a distance it appears to be brown—and with pale, almost white cheeks, throat, and upper breast. Its underparts are black during the breeding season. Occasionally the white patterning on throat and cheeks is replaced with darker colouring, which in some birds appears almost as black as in the Northern form of the species. The dunlin is a much smaller bird; it is easily recognised by its chestnut-brown and black back and the black patch on its lower breast and belly, while another noteworthy point is its whistling call, a reiterated purring or trilling note rather like a referee's whistle.

Of the ducks the Cairngorms have less than a fair share, though no doubt this is due to lack of suitable localities. Keepers wage merciless war on the handsome goosander, our largest sawbilled duck, which is found in most places where the trout fishing is good. Mallard nest in the boggy glens, and teal among the reeds in the little lochans; while a few pairs of tufted duck and wigeon are found on some of the lochs.

The hoodie or grey crow, a solitary species whose nest may be found in a birch near the head of a deserted glen, is one of the most hated of birds. It is a notorious thief and plunders without compunction the eggs or young in any nest it comes upon; barring, that is, those of the birds of prey, for the hoodie crow is a wily bird if ever there was one, and knows when to take no chances. The raven, largest of the crow family has returned to the Braemar area after many years' absence; but except during the shooting season, when it scavenges the deer forests, it is still a rare sight in the Cairngorms.

The golden eagle, largest and finest of our birds of prey, is more common in the Cairngorms than is generally realised. Its eyrie is not commonly situated, as people usually suppose, on a lofty ledge thousands of feet above sea level. The eagle often sites its nest in an isolated position, 1,500 to 2,000 feet above sea level, perhaps half-way up a low crag or near the top of a pine tree on a desolate hillside. There are few eyries in the Cairngorms higher than 2,500 feet.

The only bird which may be confused with the golden eagle is the buzzard, a species which occasionally crosses to Deeside from the Spey valley. There is at least one resident pair on Deeside, in the Ballater-Crathie area, but they seldom if ever roam as far as the main massif of the Cairngorms. When the buzzard is hunting a hillside there is little possibility of confusion with the eagle, for it frequently utters a mewling note; whereas the eagle is a silent bird. But when one or the other is seen at a distance even the experts may disagree. When both are seen together the eagle's much larger size is readily distinguished.

Ranking high in the diet of the golden eagle is the ptarmigan, surely the hardiest of our mountain birds. Summer and winter, the "white grouse" have their home on the barren plateaux and scree-strewn corries, descending to the glens only during prolonged snowstorms, when all vegetation at a higher level is buried deep under snow. The ptarmigan is an easy bird to identify. Its harsh "krak-karr" alarm note sounding among the screes is unmistakable, though the bird itself cannot be seen—not an unusual event, since the ptarmigan's plumage blends so perfectly with its habitat that often only movement betrays it. In winter both sexes are clad almost entirely in white; throughout the year the primaries and underparts of both are white and in summer combine with their generally brown plumage and grouse-like appearance and size to prevent confusion with any other species seen on the hill.

Keeping the ptarmigan company on the high tops and corries one may find the snow bunting, a small passerine which breeds sparingly in the Cairngorms. The male bunting in breeding plumage is a beautiful black-and-white bird, the female brown and white. The dawn song of the male snow bunting is musical and far-carrying. Ringing out across a rocky corrie thousands of feet above the rushing burns, it is a fitting reward for a stiff climb and a cold vigil overnight. The nest, deep down in a hole among boulders, is very difficult to find. I have searched for years without success, but as only two or three pairs breed in the Cairngorms—and in some years perhaps none—this is hardly

surprising. One consolation is that oölogists must find the search equally fruitless, which is more than can be said of their activities concerning some other birds, such as the high-nesting dotterel and the golden eagle.

In conclusion, I find on re-reading this short outline of our Cairngorms birds that I have omitted a great deal I really meant to discuss: for instance the dipper, a bird equally at home on a lowland stream or a rushing mountain burn; even more, the complex moults of the ptarmigan; and the snow bunting—how is the small basic stock of breeding birds maintained? These and a host of other birds and bird problems provide an almost inexhaustible source of material for the attention of the bird-watching mountaineer. So next time you prepare for the hill why not carry those old binoculars with you? The results are worth it.