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## XXIII.—Ornithological notes

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## EXPLANATION OF PLATE XIII. A.

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|---|---|
| <i>Fig. 1.</i> Earliest state of branch.          | <i>Fig. 8.</i> Perfect form of fig. 2.  |
| <i>Fig. 2.</i> Earliest state of polype cell.     | <i>Fig. 9.</i> Perfect form of fig. 3.  |
| <i>Fig. 3.</i> Earliest state of ovarian vesicle. | <i>Fig. 10.</i> Showing a cell of <i>Sert. polyzonias</i> converted into an imperfect branch. |
| <i>Fig. 4.</i> A second state of fig. 1.          | <i>Fig. 11.</i> An abortive branch of <i>Sert. polyzonias</i> converted into a polype cell.   |
| <i>Fig. 5.</i> A second state of fig. 2.          |   |
| <i>Fig. 6.</i> A second state of fig. 3.          |   |
| <i>Fig. 7.</i> Perfect state of branch fig. 1.    |   |

Chapel Street, Penzance, Dec. 3, 1844.

XXIII.—*Ornithological Notes*. By JOHN BLACKWALL, F.L.S.The Osprey, *Pandion Haliaëtus*.

ON the 2nd of November 1844, Lord Edward Thynne obligingly sent to me a specimen of the osprey, which had been shot by Mr. Griffith Jones of Glyn, on the same day, near the banks of the Lleder, a small river in Caernarvonshire, which flows past the village of Dolwyddelan. It was a male bird, and measured five feet and an inch from tip to tip of the extended wings; twenty-two inches from the point of the bill to the extremity of the tail; and weighed three pounds and a quarter, after the remains of a bull-trout, which, when newly captured, must have weighed about two pounds, had been taken from its craw.

Several days previously to the 2nd of November this bird had been seen flying about the river Conway in the vicinity of Bettws y Coed, and it is a remarkable fact, that three years since another individual of the same species was killed within a hundred yards of the spot where this was shot.

The Tawny Owl, *Syrnium Aluco*.

A hole in a decayed tree is usually selected by the tawny owl for the reception of its eggs; but in the neighbourhood of Llanrwst, where this species is numerous and decayed trees are comparatively scarce, it frequently deposits its eggs in an old nest of the carrion crow.

In May 1844 one of a brood of young owls bred in a crow's nest accidentally fell to the ground before it was fledged, and was as carefully attended to by the parent birds under this change of circumstances as those were which remained in the nest, being abundantly supplied with mice and small birds. When any person approached the spot where the young owl stood, one of the parent birds, probably the female, invariably made its appearance, and with looks and gestures expressive of the utmost solicitude reiterated a loud sharp cry, and snapped its mandibles together by way of menacing the unwelcome intruder.

Possessing a voice susceptible of considerable modulation, the calls of the tawny owl are, perhaps, more varied than they are generally supposed to be; the cry termed hooting, by which it is most familiarly known, may be heard to the distance of a mile and a half or even two miles under very favourable circumstances, and is attended by a peculiarity deserving of notice. In the first instance a plain hoot is ejaculated, which is soon followed by a tremulous one, and in the interval between the two a low abrupt note occurs, which immediately precedes the latter; such is uniformly the order of succession when nothing unusual happens to interrupt it.

Some years ago a pair of barn owls reared their young in the deserted nest of a magpie, built in a spruce fir growing in a wood at Blackwall, the family estate, in Derbyshire.

The Pied Flycatcher, *Muscicapa luctuosa*.

In my 'Researches in Zoology,' p. 166, I have succinctly noticed the fact that the pied flycatcher breeds in Gwydir woods, near Llanrwst. From more extended observations subsequently made in the same district, I may now add, that this interesting species is to be seen every summer sparingly dispersed throughout the entire extent of the valley of the Conway.

For a long series of years a pair of pied flycatchers had incubated their eggs and nurtured their young in security in a small aperture close by the portico to the principal entrance of my father's residence, Hendre House, Denbighshire, undisturbed, apparently, by the frequent passing and repassing of its inmates. The lively effect of the well-defined and strongly-contrasted black and white plumage of the male, his short but pleasant song, and the confiding habits of both sexes rendered them objects of great interest to all the members of the family, who did not allow them to be molested on any pretext whatever. Unfortunately, on the 18th of June 1843, a swarm of bees discovered the aperture, which then contained a brood of nestlings nearly fledged, and by hurrying in and out of it and flying about the entrance in large numbers, seemed determined to dispossess the rightful owners. Whenever the parent birds attempted to approach the spot for the purpose of feeding their young, they were instantly attacked and repelled by the excited bees, from which they took refuge among the branches of an oak growing near, and there manifested their anxiety by notes and actions expressive of extreme uneasiness. After having been severely stung, the nestlings fluttered to the mouth of the aperture and descended to the ground, where they all perished, their bodies being much swollen.

Towards the close of April 1844, the same pair of birds re-

turned to their favourite breeding haunt, and repeatedly visited the aperture so long occupied by their nest ; but being again assailed by the bees, which had removed to a parallel aperture on the other side of the portico, it is probable that the incident recalled the destruction of their progeny in the preceding year, for they eventually deserted the place, and selected a hole in a low stone wall by the side of the avenue leading to the house, in which they constructed a nest and brought up their young.

This instance, and other cases might be adduced, evidently tends to show that the pied flycatcher resorts annually to the same locality for the purpose of continuing its species, and that, like its congener the spotted flycatcher, it is a very familiar bird during the breeding-season.

#### The Carrion Crow, *Corvus Corone*.

It is evident from repeated inspections of the indigestible parts of objects swallowed by the crow as food, which, like the magpie and birds of the order *Raptores*, it ejects from the mouth, that vegetable substances form no inconsiderable portion of its aliment ; it devours fish also, particularly eels, in pursuit of which it wades into the shallow water of rivers and brooks that flows over beds of stone and gravel, seizing the object of its search with the bill and conveying it to land, where it is eaten at leisure. Crows thus occupied may frequently be seen by the salmon-fisher when following his exciting diversion on the banks of the Conway in the picturesque valley which derives its name from the stream.

The Rev. John Boulger of Llanrwst informs me that in June last he saw a crow on the wing with a fine living eel in its bill ; the contortions of the fish as it endeavoured to escape from its formidable enemy and the varied gesticulations of the bird, occasioned by its efforts to retain a prey so muscular, flexible, and slippery, were very grotesque and amusing ; at length the eel extricating itself from the grasp of the crow fell to the ground, and as there was not any water in the immediate vicinity, Mr. Boulger availed himself of the opportunity to examine the fish and satisfy his mind that it was not a snake.

Though of a much less social disposition than the rook, nevertheless the crow is not so solitary in its habits as it is generally represented to be in works on ornithology. When the breeding-season is over, and the young birds are capable of providing for themselves, the crows belonging to this district assemble in large flocks about the close of day, preparatory to repairing to their roosting-haunts in the higher parts of Gwydir woods ; they are very clamorous on these occasions, and do not finally retire to rest till it is nearly dark, but frequently after they seem to have settled for the night, rise suddenly in a body, renewing

their vociferous calls and wheeling about in involved curves, as they are joined by newly-arrived groups, or even without any apparent cause whatever. This habit of congregating in an evening continues till the next breeding season, and I have sometimes observed between 100 and 200 individuals in a flock.

The Rook, *Corvus frugilegus*.

Bewick, in treating upon the rook in his 'History of British Birds,' vol. i. p. 71, has remarked that he is inclined to consider the naked condition of the base of the bill and the anterior region of the head in this species as an original peculiarity, apparently intending to intimate thereby a belief that at no period of its existence are the parts in question covered with feathers, a construction of the passage which is countenanced by his having omitted to notice the fact that young rooks, before their first moult, do not exhibit this deficiency of plumage. Now as young rooks, when they quit the nest, have the base of the bill and the anterior part of the head amply provided with feathers, the question naturally arises, How is the nudity of these parts in old birds occasioned?

On referring to my 'Researches in Zoology,' p. 174-175, it will be seen that in the year 1834 I advocated the opinion prevalent among ornithologists, that the loss of the feathers alluded to above is attributable to the habit which the rook has of thrusting its bill into the ground in search of food.

An extensive examination and comparison of specimens had led me to observe that the nudity extends further and is more complete in some individuals than in others; that the more prominent and exposed parts are first deprived of feathers, and that short filiform processes, bearing a close resemblance to new feathers enveloped in membrane, frequently occur on the less prominent and less exposed parts, particularly on the flaccid skin which occupies the angle at the base of the lower mandible. In addition to these facts, I may remark that an opportunity had presented itself of inspecting a rook whose mandibles were so greatly curved in opposite directions, and, consequently, so much crossed at the extremities, that it could not possibly thrust its bill into the ground, and the base of that organ and the anterior part of the head did not manifest the least deficiency of plumage.

With such evidence in its favour, I was induced to adopt the popular hypothesis, which I now abandon in consequence of having recently proved by experiment that it is erroneous.

Being supplied by George Davies, Esq. with two young rooks taken from a nest in his rookery at Cyffdu on the 17th of May 1843, I put them into a large wooden chicken-pen, purposing, when they could take their food without assistance, to remove one of them to a garden enclosed with walls, where it might have

an opportunity of employing the means of procuring sustenance common to the species, and to let the other remain in the pen. This plan was frustrated by the unexpected death of one of the young birds soon after it came into my possession; but the result of the experiment, as will be seen in the sequel, was not at all affected by this untoward circumstance. In the month of August the surviving rook lost only a few feathers from various parts of its body, but did not moult regularly till July and August 1844, when the feathers at the base of the bill and on the anterior region of the head were cast off, and have not been renewed to the present hour, though the bird has always been remarkably healthy and has never on any occasion been suffered to leave the pen for a moment. That rooks in a state of liberty usually moult in the autumn of the year in which they are disengaged from the egg may be inferred from the fact, that although numerous individuals, whose shrill voices evidently denote that they are young birds of the season, may be seen in the months of June and July with the base of the bill and anterior part of the head abundantly supplied with feathers, yet for several months prior to the breeding-season not one can be perceived, at least as far as my own observations extend, which has not those parts denuded.

From what has been stated, it is evident that the phenomenon under consideration has a physiological, not a mechanical cause, though the removal of the plumage may be facilitated by the frequently repeated act of thrusting the bill into the ground, and the circumstances which seemed to support the opposite conclusion admit, for the most part, of an easy explanation upon this view of the subject. The difference observable in the extent and completeness of the nudity at the base of the bill and the anterior part of the head of the rook probably depends upon the progress which has been made in moulting, especially among the younger birds; and the earlier denudation of the more prominent parts may be occasioned by the friction consequent upon the manner in which the bill is employed in procuring food. The short fili-form processes so common on the depressed and less-exposed parts present a difficulty of which no satisfactory solution suggests itself; but the state of the plumage on the head of that rook whose mandibles were greatly crossed may be accounted for on the supposition that it was a young bird which had not moulted.

Had the experiment recorded by Mr. Waterton in his 'Essays on Natural History,' p. 136-139, been successful, this question, upon which public opinion has been so long divided, would have been settled some years earlier; unfortunately, however, both the young rooks selected for the purpose of deciding it met with untimely deaths, one before it had begun to moult, and the other soon after it had commenced moulting. On Mr. Waterton's return from Bavaria, his gamekeeper, to whose care the latter bird

had been consigned, informed him that at the period when its existence terminated "the lower mandible had begun to put on a white scurfy appearance, while here and there a few feathers had fallen from the upper one." It is to be regretted that the issue of this experiment was not more satisfactory, as from the nature of the case it was impossible to determine whether the feathers lost from the base of the bill would be renewed or not, though feathers shed from other parts in the act of moulting are known to be reproduced.

The rook visits orchards and gardens when cherries and walnuts are ripe, for the purpose of feeding on those fruits; it also devours grain of various kinds, and frequently commits depredations in potato-grounds by abstracting the newly-planted sets; but I entirely concur with those naturalists who maintain that the injuries it inflicts on the farmer and gardener are vastly more than compensated by the benefits it confers upon them by the destruction of noxious insects.

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XXIV.—On the "Nigger" or "Cotton Spinner" of the Cornish Fishermen. By CHARLES WILLIAM PEACH, of Goran Haven, Cornwall\*.

[With a Plate.]

THROUGH the kindness of Mr. Couch of Polperro, some time ago, I was gratified with a sight of Professor Forbes's 'History of the British Echinodermata.' In that interesting work, at page 241, he says, "We have as yet no representative of the typical *Holothuria* with twenty tentacula in the British fauna." It is gratifying to me to be able to present to your notice that link, which was then wanting,—a *Holothuria* with twenty tentacula; and as it is a *new* and interesting subject, I trust I shall be pardoned in giving you a lengthened history of its appearance, habits, &c.

This *Holothuria* is very common in deep water off the Deadman in certain localities (rocky ground), and is called by the fishermen a "Nigger," and at times a "Cotton Spinner"; it is held by them in great detestation, from its throwing out what they call "cotton," of which more by and by, and from its slimy nature, and also because where the "Niggers" are numerous and get into the crab-pots, it is very rarely that either crabs or lobsters are caught, and therefore they kill all they come near with their knives, because they do not like to touch them. This is not wonderful, for their appearance is anything but prepossessing; yet they are interesting objects to me, and no doubt will prove so to others, after I have described them.

\* Read before the Royal Polytechnic Institution of Cornwall, and communicated by the author.