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VI. *Notes on the Habits of some of the Birds of the Transkei.*
By H. W. OAKLEY.

[Read November 26, 1879.]

The remarks I am about to make on the habits of some of the Birds of the Transkei have been gathered chiefly in the neighbourhood of Ibeka.

Foremost on my list stands the Common Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), the Aasvogel of Dutch colonists.

It has always been a source of some controversy as to which organ this bird is indebted for the discovery of its food, whether to the sense of smell or sight, or both combined.

From my observations I have no hesitation in saying that I believe the organ of sight is the one alone employed, and my reasons for arriving at this conclusion are these, viz.: Usually within an hour or more of the death of some animal, such as a horse or an ox, the carcase is attacked by crows, often in considerable numbers, who fight and fly up and down in a manner that is calculated to attract the attention of such a sharp-sighted and hungry creature as a vulture, from long distances. Be this as it may, soon after the crows make an attack, and rarely if ever before, a careful observer may see a bird apparently little larger than a speck appearing over some hill or mountain in the far distance, and as this speck increases in size another and another may be seen following.

This bird as it gradually and unerringly approaches the carcase is soon made out to be a vulture. On arrival it immediately commences its meal, and its company is being continually increased by fresh arrivals.

My opinion is that the vulture is attracted first to its repast by the crows, who are always near at hand, and that one vulture is attracted to the spot by the preceding.

In support of my belief that sight is the only organ employed, I may mention that the olfactory organ in birds is, as far as I am aware, not peculiar for anything extraordinary in its development, while the eye certainly is; in addition to the structure found in the anatomy of the eye of most animals we find that the eye of a bird is provided with a second or rather third eyelid known as the nictitating membrane, that the form of the eye is maintained by a ring of bony plates situated in the sclerotic coat, and that there is

a peculiar membrane known as the marsupium, placed at the back of the vitreous humour, and which undoubtedly exercises a considerable influence over the power of focus, and also that the optic lobes of the brain are very highly developed. It is said that the vulture never feeds on dead animals until the latter have arrived at a considerable stage of decomposition, and this accounts to some extent for the popular belief that the sense of smell is the organ that guides it to its meal. But this is very far from being the case, as I have repeatedly seen the vulture feeding on animals that had not been dead an hour, and Layard speaking of vultures says:—"On killing a spring-buck or any animal, it is curious to see how they come trooping in a lengthened string to their anticipated banquet. Though not one may be visible when the shot is fired, in seven or eight minutes hundreds will be gliding to the spot."

The fact is, the vulture is perfectly indifferent as to whether his food is fresh, or in an advanced stage of decomposition, indeed did he prefer the latter his taste may be considered somewhat refined, if we judge from those bipeds who tell us in cookery books that a pheasant is not fit to be roasted until after having been hung by the tail the body suddenly takes leave of it.

Another popular belief is that the vulture never touches a horse that died of glanders. This is quite erroneous! At Ibeka many of our horses were attacked by glanders, and when dead they were invariably eaten both by crows and vultures; I have seen at least twenty instances. It may be worth mentioning that according to my observations during the late campaigns in South Africa, I have never seen a single case where the vulture had eaten the body of a Kaffir; dead bodies have been lying for many days around our camps, but I know of no instance where they had been consumed by this bird. In one case a horse and man were lying side by side; the horse was soon eaten, but the man left untouched.

Of owls *Otus capensis* appears to be least known; it is described by Layard as *rare in South Africa*, but as far as I have seen it is one of the commonest in the Transkei. It frequents marshy places where rushes abound, under cover of which it conceals itself; and indeed there are very few marshes in the neighbourhood of Ibeka where on walking through several may not be roused from slumber. On disturbing this bird it flies for a short distance and then settles quietly again, turning towards the intruder on its domain, and eyeing him with a careless sort of stare. It appears however to see very well in broad day-light, and never allows itself to be approached too closely while exposed to view. It is somewhat gregarious in its habits, as it would be an unusual occurrence to find less than three, four, or five together.

On examining the stomach of one of these birds that I shot I found it contained a frog.

A friend saw an owl of this species attacked by some crows and two large birds which he described as eagles; on driving the assailants away, it took refuge under the bank of a stream, was easily caught and then handed over to me. I placed it in my tent on a cross bar attached to the pole, where it remained perfectly quiet during the day and apparently well; but on letting it loose in the evening it flew for about a hundred yards and then suddenly dropped dead.

The Kaffrarian Grosbeak (*Chera Progne*), Kaffir Chief, or long-tailed Finch of Colonists, is very abundant in the Transkei, inhabiting the sides of the streams, vleys or marshy grounds which are plentifully supplied with tall reeds and rushes, among which it breeds. This bird feeds exclusively, I believe, on grass and other small seeds, which fact seems well known to the Kaffirs, who place it in their list of harmless birds. It may not be uninteresting to remark that as far as I could understand the natives they divided birds into two great classes, the harmless and the destructive; the harmless are those that do not molest their crops, while the destructive are those that feed on them. It is said of the male Kaffrarian Grosbeak during the breeding season when he has attained his long tail, which measures from 16 to 18 inches in length, that his flight is so impeded that he is often run down and captured, especially during rainy weather; but although I have repeatedly chased him not only on foot but on horseback I never succeeded in catching one. I have also promised the natives rewards to bring me specimens alive, but I never received any.

This bird breeds about November; and in December and January dozens of young birds accompanied by one or more males and females may be seen flying about or perching on the rushes.

When the male bird flies up the side of a hill, keeping close to the ground, he has a very peculiar look, quite unlike a bird, resembling more a thin black dog than anything I can liken him to.

In the winter the male loses his long tail and black plumage and assumes the sober brown colour of the female.

Usually associated with this bird is the *Vidua axillaris*, a bird whose habits are precisely similar to those of *Chera Progne*, the plumage also being somewhat alike except in wanting the long black tail.

Another little bird of this genus (*Vidua ardens*) is tolerably abundant about the sides of running streams especially the Quora river near Krel's late Kraal; I have not seen it except in parties of about a dozen containing usually three or four males the rest being females or young; it feeds on grass seeds, and while watching a party eating, I have suddenly seen the whole, apparently without reason, rise up suddenly in the air and fly off in a straight line until lost

to view ; when it happens as it does sometimes that a considerable number of males are present the flight reminds one of a shower of rockets.

The plumage of the male in the breeding season is black with a broad crescent of orange on the under side of the neck ; the tail is black and considerably lengthened, reaching from seven to eight inches.

Inhabiting the same locality as the preceding is the King Roodebec (*Vidua principalis*), a little black and white bird not much larger than a common Roodebec, but in the male during the breeding season having the four middle tail feathers lengthened to eight or nine inches. The habits of this bird are similar to those of *Vidua ardens*, but it is much more confiding and familiar. In the evenings while our horses were being fed in a line outside our camp this little bird would invariably come in considerable numbers and wait a few yards off for any grains of Kaffir corn or oats that might be left. I have often noticed that the male bird is never still for more than a few seconds at a time ; first he would settle on the ground, then hover a few yards in the air, then settle on a stone, then hover again, and so on. Like the preceding bird, the King Roodebec is generally seen in parties usually of six or seven, each party being composed of two or three males and the rest females or young.

The beautiful rock pigeon (*Columba guineæ*) is very abundant in the Transkei, but only appearing in flocks about the same time as the locust bird. It visited our camp at Ibeka in large numbers night and morning during the time our horses were feeding, and would wait patiently at a distance of about one hundred yards until they had finished, and then directly the horses were driven away, the whole flock would wing its way to the feeding ground, where it would remain for upwards of an hour or so unless molested ; afterwards not one was to be seen near the camp until the time again came round for the horses to be fed.

This pigeon usually builds in the crevices of rocks ; yet I have seen several instances of its breeding in the hollow of a tree ; in one case I saw the old bird sitting on her eggs, and in another I found the young ones almost ready to fly, both nests were made in a tree known as the Kaffir-boom and which overhung the Quora river near Kreli's Kraal.

The common South-African Pratincole (*Glareola Nordmanni*), or small locust bird of Colonists, makes its appearance in the Transkei in large numbers at the beginning of the year. At first only a few are to be seen hawking about in the air after insects with the same ease and swiftness as swallows, or running along the ground with considerable rapidity like plovers, here and there pausing but for an instant to pick up a young locust or grasshopper ; and often if shallow water is near running into it and enjoying a bath.

Shortly after the first arrival makes its appearance the number increases until at last a flight of many thousands appears on the scene throwing a shadow over the ground it passes, and the rustling of wings passing by or over one's head is sometimes almost startling. To give some idea of what a number there must be in a flight, I may mention that on the 24th of January last I fired four shots from a breech-loading gun at a flock passing by me, I killed and picked up fifty birds; and on the next day I saw a number fly across and come against the telegraph wire at Ibeka, I with others picked up thirty of these birds either dead or disabled.

The locust bird is excellent eating, so that these eighty birds killed in two days were not wasted.

It would be interesting to note if the locust bird as well as others in time learn to avoid telegraph wires, as it seems is the case in Europe. I remember a Somersetshire farmer relating to me one day while shooting over some of his ground that when the wire was first stretched across his farm it was a common occurrence to pick up partridges, pheasants and other birds that had killed themselves by flying against it, but now, he said, I do not pick up one bird in a year.

The black duck (*Anas sparsa*) is tolerably abundant in the Buffalo River especially so at Fort Murray, near King William's Town, and more or less so in all the rivers up to the Orange River and probably still farther, but here my experience ends. It appears to prefer broad and deep rivers with steep banks and overhanging vegetation, under which it usually lies hidden during the day; but is also not unfrequently met with in vleys and streams whose sides are plentifully supplied with rushes, flags or bushes. When hidden under a bank, although perfectly concealed by vegetation, on hearing footsteps overhead it invariably leaves its haunt and flies a considerable distance if not stopped by a shot.

In the mornings and evenings it is more difficult to approach, and is usually only killed when the sportsman lies concealed amongst thick vegetation over which it flies to and from its feeding ground. It is most difficult to kill by shooting at the back of the bird, whereas a well-directed shot at the breast if it is flying overhead invariably brings it to the ground.

The black duck is almost solitary in its habits, as it is unusual to see more than one or two in company. In flying this bird utters a peculiar quacking noise, reminding the hearer of the European corn-crake (*Crea pratensis*), and which can be heard a long distance. It begins to breed in September, making its nest under the banks of rivers amidst flags and rushes. Its eggs are of a moderate size and beautifully white and glossy.