



## POACHERS FURRED AND FEATHERED.

By G. E. LODGE.



NO one can expect to be a successful preserver of game who does not make it his business to keep in check the various depredators to which game is invariably exposed. A well-stocked preserve is always attractive to the poaching fraternity, and raids of one kind or another may certainly be expected, and must as certainly be guarded against. But there are poachers and poachers. With the gentry who appear occasionally at Petty Sessions and the Courts of Assize this paper has nothing to do: its exclusive business is with the far more interesting poachers in feathers, and the poachers in fur, to which is applied the generic title of "vermin," and which are the natural enemies of game of every sort and description. To keep these enemies down is one of the chief duties of the gamekeeper, and it must be confessed that, as a general rule, he enters upon this part of his work with a right good will. In his zeal to show a good head of game on his master's manor, he ruthlessly traps, snares, shoots, and otherwise destroys everything that seems likely to interfere with this, the laudable object of his ambition. This habit of indiscriminate destruction grows by indulgence, and to this cause is due the now almost total extinction of many birds of prey, which are not only beautiful in themselves, but so far from being in any degree prejudicial to the existence of game on a gentleman's estate, are absolutely serviceable in the good work they do by following the instincts of their nature in destroying other foes to game far more mischievous than themselves. But the average gamekeeper is very slow to take in new impressions, being perfectly content to believe in the old traditions about hawks, owls, *et hoc genus omne*, which he has inherited from his forefathers in the craft. Many keepers are not even able to distinguish hawks in their various stages of plumage, and as for watching carefully to see what they principally feed upon, nothing is farther from their thoughts or intentions. A hawk is a hawk, and as such they are content to leave him; an owl is an owl, and nothing more; and so all such "vermin" are nailed up in triumph on the walls of their outhouses, or are suspended by the neck between two trees at the end of one of the sides of the plantation.

It is unfortunately true that some hawks must perforce be killed, particularly sparrowhawks, as they doubtless do a certain amount of mischief. The goshawk would certainly be a dire depredator if he were found in these parts. But for many years now he has been practically extinct as far as the British Isles are concerned. Now and again a straggler from the Continent turns up; but these visits are so few and far between that the game preserver need be in no fear of molestation from this quarter. But kestrels, hobbies, merlins, and even peregrines, do comparatively little harm, in fact hardly any at all, in proportion to the good with which they may be fairly

credited. Kestrels feed almost entirely on mice, and do not disdain a meal of young rats, by day; while the owls take up the same hunt by night. Is the price of a young partridge which the kestrel occasionally devours, too much to pay for the thousands of mice which each pair of kestrels will kill in the course of a year? Hobbies again feed largely on insects and small birds, and therefore need not be molested by the keeper. Merlins are too small to do any considerable damage on the grouse moors, as they feed almost entirely upon small birds. Peregrines undoubtedly attack both grouse and partridges, but when one remembers that these hawks invariably take their quarry on the wing, and that the quarry is not likely to rise when a peregrine is anywhere in sight—they lie so close in fact, that it is often difficult to flush them with dogs when a peregrine is "waiting on"—we may be sure that they have comparatively few chances of feeding on game. But on the other hand they certainly do kill many of the special enemies of grouse, such as hooded crows, which are notorious egg-stealers; and the destruction of one hooded crow probably means the preservation of several coveys of grouse. Every keeper and game preserver knows that these cunning old rascals are the worst vermin they have to deal with. Not only will the peregrine kill these crows, but his very presence on the moor during the nesting season will serve to keep them at a distance; indeed, they stand in wholesome dread of the falcon "towering in her pride of place," knowing too well the effect of the "shut in," and the mighty headlong "stoop" that invariably follows. Some sportsmen even affirm that peregrines serve in a great measure to check grouse disease by killing off the weak and sickly birds, and so preventing the spread of the disease. This may be so to a certain extent, though more probably by chance than design, for a peregrine will by no means invariably choose out the weakest bird in the covey, but will frequently single out the one that seems to us to be the strongest bird and the most difficult "flight." Often, indeed, the first bird that rises, probably an old cock, is marked out and cut down; and herein good is undoubtedly done, as old cock partridges and grouse, late in the season, should be killed down as much as possible, treated in fact as mischievous vermin, as they spoil breeding prospects.

It is much to be regretted that so many sportsmen do not combine a love of natural history with their love of sport. The majority of them however would rather kill a few more brace of grouse every year, than be the proud possessors of a pair of peregrines on their moors. They rejoice to hear that a peregrine has been shot or trapped, and when they see the noblest bird that ever flew nailed up to the keeper's lodge as a felon, they congratulate themselves that their game record for the ensuing season will probably be the heavier by a few brace of grouse.

In common fairness, however, certain allowances must be made. When a man pays for his moor at something like the rate of a sovereign for every brace of grouse he shoots, it is only natural that he should view with some little jealousy the presence of a pair of peregrines whose devastations on the moor may upset all his calculations and disappoint his fondest hopes. But, still, let him fairly look at both sides of the question. The peregrines will certainly cost a few pounds per year for grouse killed, but, as a set off, they will have destroyed or frightened away such a number of crows as to far more than compensate the owner of the moor for the grouse killed by the hawks. Let him also remember that the noble sport of falconry flourishes much more than is generally supposed, and that the difficulty of obtaining peregrines is increased every year by the general slaughter of British peregrines, both as "vermin" and as specimens for collections. Uninjured peregrines are worth two or three pounds apiece, and young ones taken from the nest when fully fledged, command a ready sale at a sovereign or thirty shillings each. So if the peregrines must be got rid of, instead of giving his keepers orders to shoot and trap these birds, let the owner of the moor instruct his men to snare the hawks, and so take them uninjured, thus allowing his brother sportsmen of the "hood and leash" to benefit by his clemency. Peregrines are easily snared when found on any quarry that they may have killed. Do not disturb the hawk at first, but let him eat away until he has had "half a crop." Then frighten him so that he leaves the remainder of his quarry—which peg down in the centre of a bow-net. The hawk is certain to come back to finish his meal sooner or later, and will then easily be caught in the bow-net, which is pulled over him by means of a long and strong string worked by a man in ambush. A live pigeon will attract these hawks, when not found on quarry killed by themselves. But they will never be attracted by a dead bait, unless they themselves have killed it. Sparrowhawks may

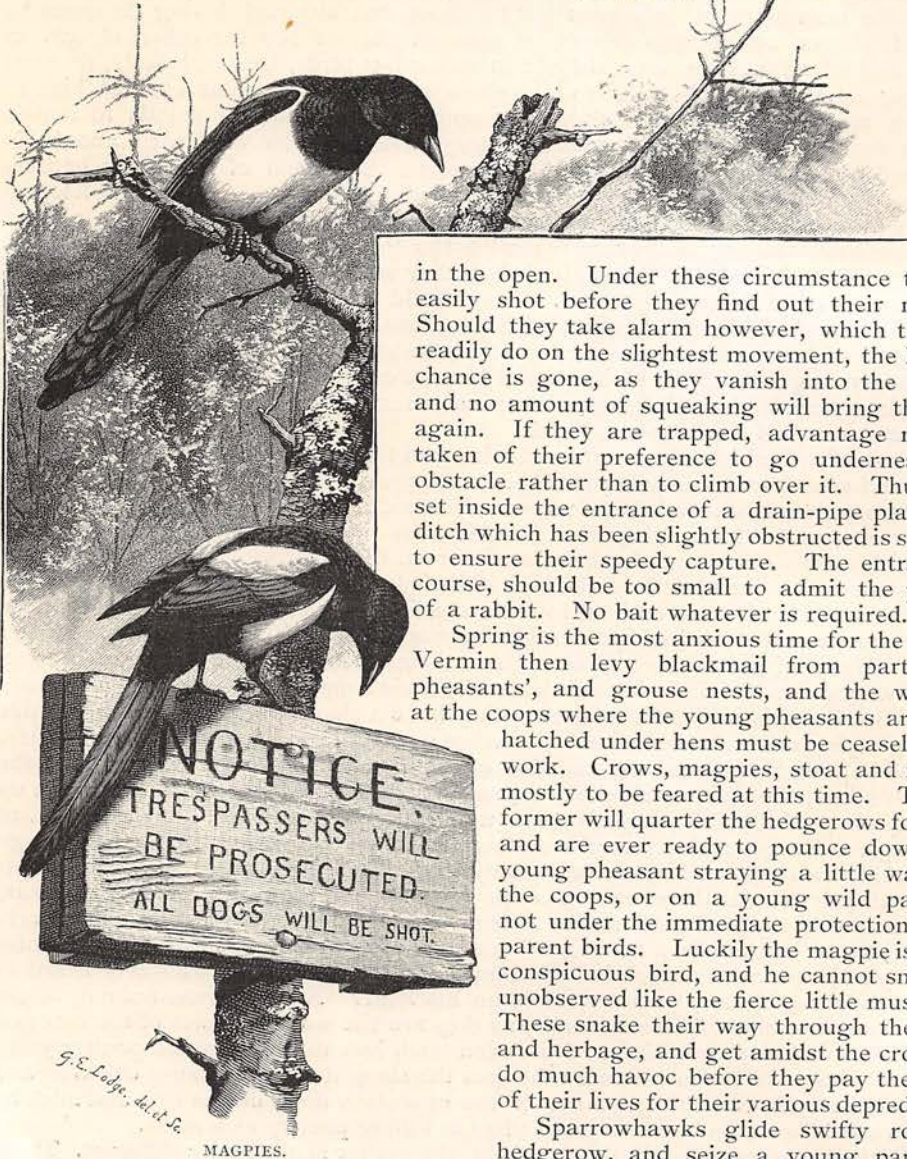
be snared in the same way. Another method, when bow-nets are not handy, is to arrange a running noose round the pegged-down quarry. Then arrange some of the strong flight feathers in a circle inside the noose, their ends stuck in the ground, and their points having an inward inclination, which will have the effect of guiding the noose in such a way as to catch the hawk high up the legs when the string is pulled by the ambushed trapper.

Sport and some knowledge of natural history should go hand in hand, and the union of the two will be found mutually helpful and attractive. Let us imagine two men going out for a day's sport. Which of the two derives the greater enjoyment from his shooting? The man who goes out to shoot a wood, or a moor, or partridge land, and who sees nothing, and cares nothing for anything except the game he is after, or the man who not only goes out to shoot, but although loving the game he sees, and shoots, or perhaps misses, is also on the *qui vive* for other objects of interest, and who takes immense delight in observing birds, beasts, insects, flowers, everything in short which adds to his store of knowledge, and enables him to look back upon the day as not altogether unprofitably spent. It stands to reason that the more a man studies natural history, the more he will learn about his game, and the better he will be able to preserve it, instead of leaving it entirely in the hands of, very often, ignorant and prejudiced keepers. Very few keepers will take the trouble to dissect the hawks and owls they kill to find out what they have been feeding on, or to examine the "castings" from under the trees where they roost or nest. If they only did so, they would learn many things of which they appear to be profoundly ignorant. They would find "castings" of kestrels composed almost exclusively of field mice, with occasionally the skull of a small bird. The "castings" of barn owls and tawny owls tell the same tale, though the presence of shrews and young rats can be easily detected in the one, and a larger quantity of small birds in the other; and a still larger proportion of remains of small birds will be found in the "castings" of the long-eared owl.

Buzzards also feed largely on rats and mice, and they probably also kill a few young rabbits, and snatch an occasional partridge on the ground. Game preservers evidently go on the principle that as all these "vermin" can do no good, and may probably do a certain amount of harm, they must therefore be ruthlessly annihilated. But here they overshoot the mark, even in their own interest, for they forget the rats, which are most destructive to game, and which these birds help to keep down; and they entirely forget the farmers, who are entitled to some consideration at their hands, and whose crops are enormously benefited by the raids these mice-eating birds make on the smaller rodents. Many of the farmers however are themselves ignorant of the unceasing warfare waged day and night in their favour by their supposed enemies. They themselves shoot kestrels and owls whenever they have a chance, and then they grumble at having a plague of rats and mice. But when one examines the "castings" of owls, there will be found, as a rule, the remains of five or six mice as the net result of the last night's feed, the indigestible portions, such as the fur and bones, being thrown up by all rapacious birds, and many others as well, in the form of hard, oblong pellets, to which is given the general name of "castings." If we take five mice as the average nightly raid of a single owl, we have a yearly total of 1,825 mice for one owl's subsistence: each pair of owls therefore consumes 3,650 mice in the course of a single year, without counting the food they take to their ravenous youngsters. Kestrels kill nearly as many; so we can obtain a fairly good estimate of the enormous benefit they confer on society at large, and farmers and sportsmen in particular. But who ever heard of a farmer encouraging stoats and weasels on his land? And yet these animals ought to be reckoned amongst his best friends, as they are the worst enemies of the rats and mice which do so much mischief and occasion such loss to the farm and poultry yard. Great is the rage of the farmer when he sees the slaughter of his young chickens and ducks, but he is in blissful ignorance of the execution done on the rats and mice by the supposed killers; and a rat is just as bad at killing poultry as a stoat.

Where however game is strictly preserved, the matter is altogether different. These little carnivorous animals are too deadly in their dealings with game, both feathered and furred, and are too fond of the eggs of partridges and pheasants to be permitted to live. Let justice therefore take its course, and let them die the death they have merited at the keeper's hands. Luckily they are very easily destroyed, either in traps or by guns. A weasel or a stoat once seen by a keeper on his rounds is very easily

shot. The presence of one of these animals will often be announced by a mob of small birds as they flit anxiously about, uttering their alarm notes; in fact, if he is at all intelligent the action of a single bird will suffice to arouse the attention of the keeper. All he has to do then, is to stand perfectly still, and to begin to chirp with his mouth—any sort of a squeaking noise like that of a rat or a young rabbit will be enough—and presently out comes the stoat or weasel, cantering gaily along in the direction of the noise, every now and again stopping to look about to make sure of the quarter from which the noise proceeds; and if one is still enough they will come within a few feet of a man out



MAGPIES.

in the open. Under these circumstances they are easily shot before they find out their mistake. Should they take alarm however, which they will readily do on the slightest movement, the keeper's chance is gone, as they vanish into the thicket, and no amount of squeaking will bring them out again. If they are trapped, advantage must be taken of their preference to go underneath any obstacle rather than to climb over it. Thus a gin set inside the entrance of a drain-pipe placed in a ditch which has been slightly obstructed is sufficient to ensure their speedy capture. The entrance, of course, should be too small to admit the passage of a rabbit. No bait whatever is required.

Spring is the most anxious time for the keeper. Vermin then levy blackmail from partridges', pheasants', and grouse nests, and the watchers at the coops where the young pheasants are being hatched under hens must be ceaselessly at work. Crows, magpies, stoat and rats are mostly to be feared at this time. The two former will quarter the hedgerows for eggs, and are ever ready to pounce down on a young pheasant straying a little way from the coops, or on a young wild partridge not under the immediate protection of the parent birds. Luckily the magpie is a very conspicuous bird, and he cannot sneak up unobserved like the fierce little mustelidæ. These snake their way through the grass and herbage, and get amidst the crops and do much havoc before they pay the forfeit of their lives for their various depredations.

Sparrowhawks glide swiftly round a hedgerow, and seize a young partridge, and are away with their booty almost before

the astonished old birds have time to realize what has happened, and to get out their alarm note. Among the coops should be thrown down plenty of bushy branches, under which young pheasants can seek safety from their winged foes, and at night time, of course, every coop should be shut up with its proper complement

of young birds, and so housed safely from the raids of stoats, and rats and weasels.

It is well known that young game of all kinds suffer much more from the attacks of vermin than after they have attained maturity. Very few head of adult game are killed by sparrowhawks, although occasionally a few partridges will fall victims to the attack of the female of this bird, the male bird being far too small and lightly built to attack such heavy quarry, confining its attention exclusively to small birds. Sparrowhawks, in a state of nature, never feed on four-footed animals, but live entirely on birds. A male sparrowhawk is a beautiful little creature, especially when he is in his adult blue-grey plumage, with red-barred breast, very slenderly built, with small head and long square tail. If you happen to know a plantation that he usually frequents, especially for roosting, you may have a good view of him at pretty close quarters if you go quietly there just before dusk, at the time when the wood-pigeons have all come in, and have at last quietly



G. E. Lodge, del. et sc.

A JAY TRAP.

settled down after many flappings from one tree to another, before making up their minds where finally to roost. The pheasants have all gone crowing up to their

perches in the spruce firs, and most things are silent and still. You take your post in a dense thicket of young spruce firs, about twenty feet high, with some young ashes interspersed among them. Here you may command an open glade through the fir trunks, and watch the rabbits and hares through your field glasses. Presently you hear a chaffinch's sharp "Pink, pink, pink!" which is taken up by another and still another, until there is quite a chorus of alarm cries. It may be that they have viewed a stoat or an owl, or possibly the very sparrowhawk you have come expressly to see. So you glide cautiously among the tree trunks, peering carefully about in every direction, the dense foliage growing low down on these young trees screening you from view, until at last through a thicket of twigs you see an upright object perched on a bare ash twig, and after manœuvring the twigs a little to get a better view, you plainly see a little sparrowhawk not more than ten yards off. He is straight breast view on, and his white and red-barred breast feathers show strongly against the dark fir-foliage background. He sits bolt upright, on one leg, his flank feathers streaming over his wings, and his bright yellow eye glancing, now in this direction now in that. Except for the movement of his head he is quite motionless, and looks like a sentry on guard. He takes no notice of the chaffinches' chattering all around him, having a full crop, very likely the result of a dainty meal off some luckless member of the same family not an hour ago. Presently he disappears without the slightest warning, gliding like a flash through the thicket of spruce firs, and you see him no more. But he is very handsome at such close quarters, and the sight of him will amply repay all the trouble you have taken. What a pity that he sometimes takes a young partridge for his breakfast, and more frequently a chick or duckling from the farmyard! What a pity, too, that he can offer no extenuating circumstances in arrest of judgment, and that he cannot point out a single atom of counterbalancing good to be placed to his credit! It is sad to think that he must be regarded as felon, and must be shot down and trapped whenever met with. The difference in size between the two sexes of this hawk is more apparent than in any other kind, the female being about three inches longer and more than proportionately stronger, and more stoutly built than the male bird. Unlike hobbies and kestrels, which always utilize the old nests of crows and magpies, unless when kestrels build in rocks or ruins, or holes of trees, sparrowhawks invariably build nests for themselves. This nest is always in a wood, but not always in the thickest part of it, as sometimes they will choose a tree in which to build, alongside of an open ride. They are fond of building in larches. Scotch firs are also favourite trees of theirs, and so are oaks. A plantation of young oaks is a very likely place in which to find a sparrowhawk's nest, generally half way up the tree and against the trunk; the nest itself is generally of a fair size and almost flat, built entirely of twigs. The young birds show the difference of sex when only a few days old, the females being much larger than the males. If the old female is killed at the nest, the male will continue to feed the young ones for a time, but will be too shy to approach the nest and tear up the food for his youngsters. But he will drop neatly plucked birds into the nest from above; and if the young ones are too small to tear up the food for themselves they will inevitably come to an untimely end from starvation. Also if the eggs are taken, the birds will return to the nest, and if a trap be set in its midst they will pretty certainly be caught. And curiously enough they will often be caught round the head, which shows that they must grope about in the nest in wonder at what may have become of their treasured eggs. Their nests are sometimes robbed by jays, who are great egg-stealers, and will take any egg or young bird that comes in their way.

Not only are jays great egg-stealers, but they pay frequent visits to kitchen gardens, for the sake of the peas they hope to find therein, and of peas they are very fond. Indeed, a pair of old jays and four or five young ones, almost as big and wicked as their parents, will create not a little havoc amongst the peas. The easiest way of trapping jays is to make a little platform of sticks partly arched over with fir boughs; these are erected along the edges of the rides in a plantation, with a couple of gins covered over with moss, and a thrush's nest half full of eggs. The same contrivance will suffice also for the capture of jackdaws, which in some places take to egg-hunting as an ordinary practice. But jackdaws do so much good in company with rooks in the fields, that it is generally a mistake to kill them down. Rooks too, in some places, are great poachers, and are as much addicted to egg-stealing as any old carrion crow or magpie, and may be often seen hunting up and down the hedgerows for partridges' nests.

Hooded and carrion crows are best caught in gins placed round some carrion—a dead cat, or rabbit, or some kindred dainty. The traps must be carefully concealed, according to the nature of the ground, either with a thin sprinkling of grass or moss, or a little earth. In these traps an old rook will not unfrequently be found, plainly showing that the rook is by no means averse to a flesh diet, even when it is a little "gamey." Another good bait for these birds is a hen's egg, placed in a conspicuous place—if in shallow water so much the better—as a little pathway from the dry land can be easily made leading up to the bait, and a trap set at the end of it. Poisoned bait is also in occasional request, but there is a certain amount of danger attached to this method of destruction, as dogs or foxes, even if they cannot get at the poisoned bait, may consume the dead bodies of the victims, and so get the poison into their system, and thus come to an untimely and inglorious end. Traps and snares are much better for the purpose than either poison or guns. The former are silent and safe as regards other animals; the latter are dangerous and disturbing to the coverts. It is easy



TAWNY OWLS' NEST.

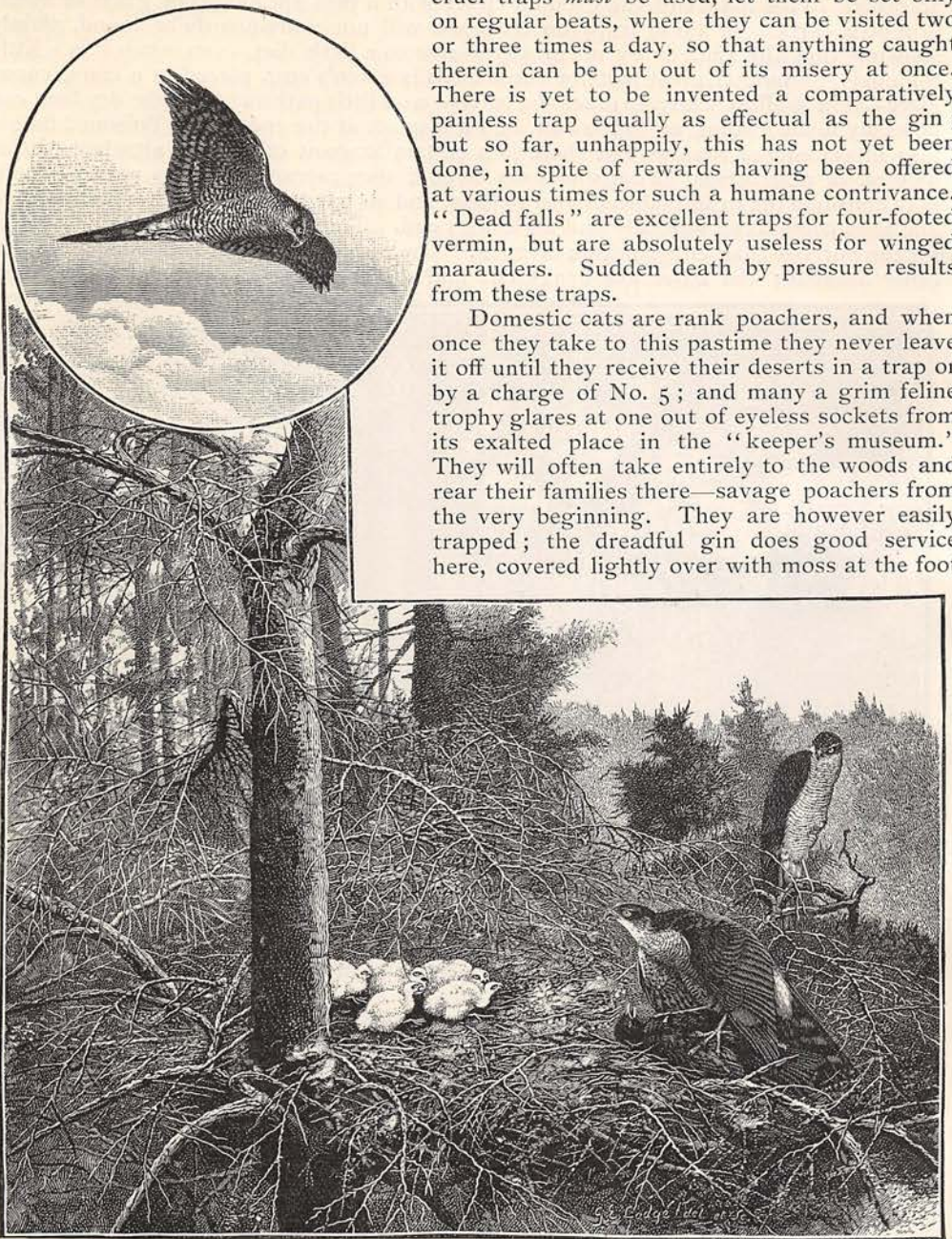
enough to lie in wait in the coverts with a gun, and to shoot jays, and magpies, and hawks as they come in to roost, but the noise of a gun disturbs the coverts, especially when the birds are nesting. A keeper who puts his chief trust in traps and snares to keep the vermin down is worth more than the man who is incessantly blazing away in the coverts at all times, in season and out of season. Trapping is a very difficult business, and not easily acquired by many people. But some keepers are very proficient in the art, and there is certainly great sport to be obtained by a clever trapper. Not only must he be well versed in all sorts and conditions of traps and snares, but he must also be well acquainted with the habits and customs of the animal he wishes to secure, and this of course implies a close observance of nature which always carries with it its own reward.

And here let a word be spoken in the cause of humanity. The gin is admittedly the most effectual all-round trap. It is also admittedly the most cruel. It is in fact a most barbarous engine of destruction, and therefore when used the game preserver should insist upon his keeper only setting these traps in such places as he can visit frequently. Too often the keeper has everything his own way in regard to trapping, and will set lots of gins in all directions, and will satisfy himself with visiting them two or three times only in the course of a week—sometimes less frequently still. The consequence is that any unfortunate creature that may be caught, no matter how much it may deserve death, dies in an altogether unnecessary excess of pain and torture,

after having lingered in acute agony for, perhaps, several days, until hunger and thirst, combined with physical exhaustion, put a tardy end to its sufferings. If, then, these

cruel traps *must* be used, let them be set only on regular beats, where they can be visited two or three times a day, so that anything caught therein can be put out of its misery at once. There is yet to be invented a comparatively painless trap equally as effectual as the gin; but so far, unhappily, this has not yet been done, in spite of rewards having been offered at various times for such a humane contrivance. "Dead falls" are excellent traps for four-footed vermin, but are absolutely useless for winged marauders. Sudden death by pressure results from these traps.

Domestic cats are rank poachers, and when once they take to this pastime they never leave it off until they receive their deserts in a trap or by a charge of No. 5; and many a grim feline trophy glares at one out of eyeless sockets from its exalted place in the "keeper's museum." They will often take entirely to the woods and rear their families there—savage poachers from the very beginning. They are however easily trapped; the dreadful gin does good service here, covered lightly over with moss at the foot



SPARROWHAWKS' NEST.

of some tree and in front of a newly-killed rabbit, which has been cut open, the bait and trap being almost surrounded by a little *sareba* of twigs stuck in the ground, so that the cat may walk into the trap set just inside the entrance. A charge of shot from the keeper's gun as he goes his early rounds will put a speedy end to the poaching cat. Many an old dame has wondered what has become of "pussy" that was purring so comfortably in front of the fire the last time she was seen, and looking



so contentedly innocent that the old lady can never be got to believe in the real ferocity of its nature. Would she recognize one of those grinning skulls as belonging to "pussy"? No, no; especially as she has always vehemently affirmed that, whatever might be said of others, *her* cat never poached. So it comes about that many a cat pays the death penalty for indulging its sporting instincts, and it is quite possible that a guileless pussy—if indeed there be such a thing—may be occasionally sacrificed if found out of bounds or in bad company. In the spring-time cats are especially mischievous, and unless the place is well trapped, many a sitting partridge will be taken, and a whole covey will be consequently lost. It is quite heartrending sometimes to come across partridge nests in the hedgerows, and to find what havoc has been committed by vermin. One nest of eighteen eggs, within a few days of hatching, will be found tenantless. The eggs are there all right, but alas! instead of the old hen-bird sitting comfortably upon them, a mass of feathers close by tells at once that a poaching cat has surprised the bird and made a meal on the spot. Another lot of fourteen eggs will be found eaten by rats, a third harried by crows or magpies, and so on, until the wonder is that there are any partridges left to afford sport for the ensuing season, especially if, as is frequently the case, inclement weather sets in at hatching time, and destroys or retards the appearance of that insect life which is so essential to the existence of young game birds; and so the broods that escape the vermin succumb to starvation through bad weather, or get drowned in the ditches and furrows which hold rain-water, the old hens, weak from sitting, very often coming to grief with their broods. The first of September, when it comes round, often has a woeful tale to tell; single birds, pairs, and small coveys showing how much the partridges have had to contend with during the early summer time.

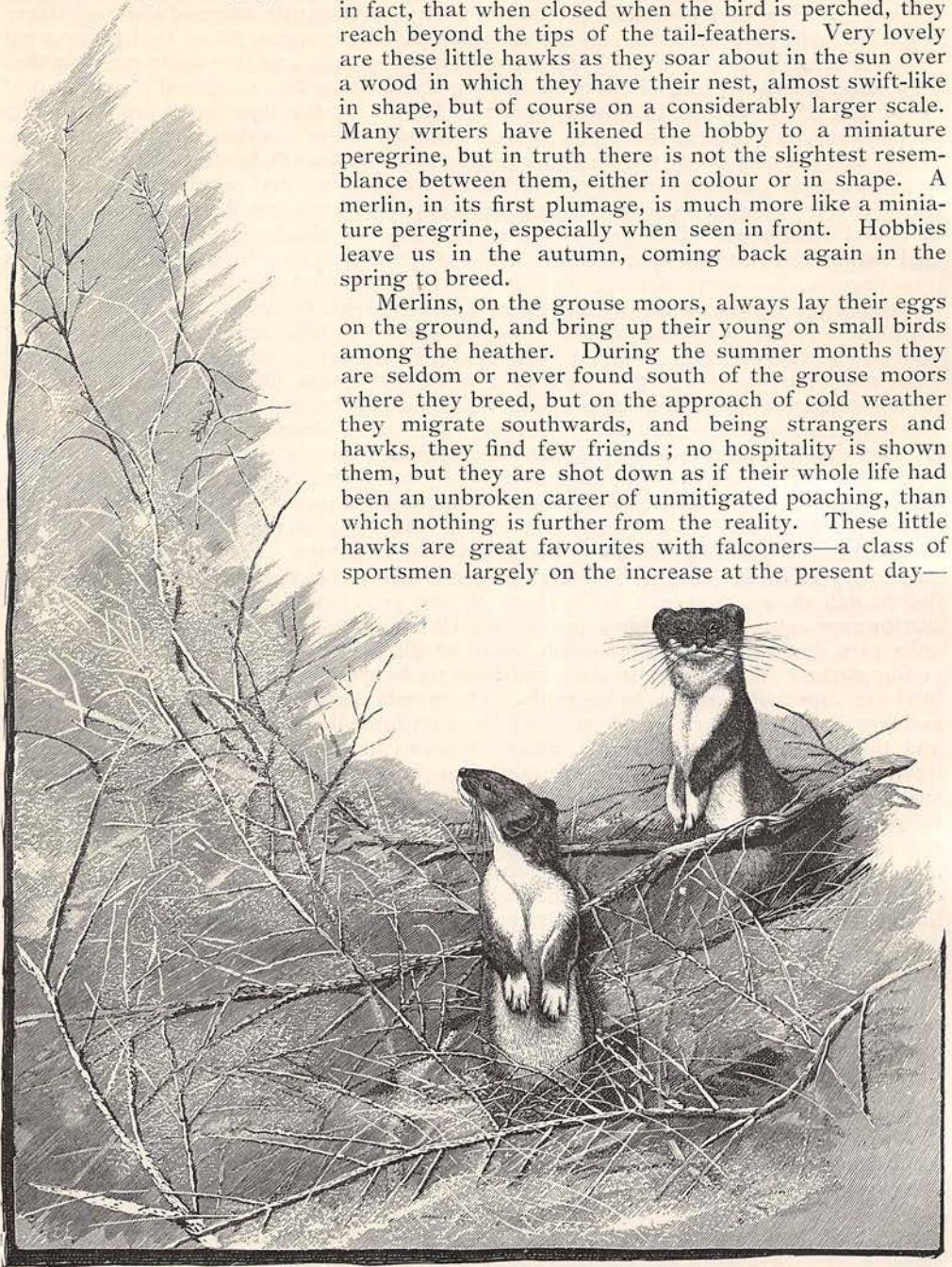
Luckily for our English game preserves that thorough rascal, the hooded crow, only visits us in the autumn, leaving us again before the nesting season begins. On the Scotch moors however he is there all the year round. His black relative, the carrion crow, every whit as big a rascal, is with us always. In many places this bird is quite rare, but where he does flourish, there let the keepers look out for their eggs and young game. Young rabbits also, and leverets he will successfully attack, and water-fowl are especially subject to his raids. He prowls about over the marshes and fens, and woe betide the duck's nest on which he casts his evil eye; every egg will disappear and the young ducklings as well, unless they can hide in the thickets of reeds where their nests are mostly found. This marauder must be killed at all hazards. A dozen sparrowhawks will do less damage to game in a single season than one solitary crow. Eggs or carrion are the most attractive bait for him, and he must on no account be spared. He usually builds in a high tree in the middle of a wood, but sometimes a nest of this bird will be found on a comparatively small tree in a hedgerow, in open country. But he should never be allowed to nest at all. Lie in wait for him and shoot him at the nest, if you can't get at him in any other way. He will also, with the magpie, rob the farmyard of young chickens and ducks. A good way to get a shot at this kind of vermin is to tether either an owl or a cat under a tree in the open, while you snugly entrench yourself within easy shot, taking care to be well hidden. Magpies are often trapped at their old nests, which they visit early in the spring; but the worst of this plan is that you are just as likely to trap the useful kestrel, who takes possession of the nests of crows and magpies with the laudable intention of bringing up his own family therein. Kestrels prefer laying their eggs, if possible, on rocks or in ruins, and occasionally they will lay in holes of trees, much more rarely in straw-stacks, and then only in very open country where other available nesting sites are not to be had.

It is a beautiful sight to watch a kestrel hovering over a stubble, balancing itself by shivering wings and wide open tail, while it scans the ground beneath for prey. In this way it will stop and hover several times over one field, and having, as it were, beaten that ground thoroughly, it will fly off to another, and there repeat operations until it spies a mouse or a shrew, when down it comes, seizes the hapless little rodent and flies off to eat him at his leisure—an operation generally performed upon the ground.

Hobbies, when undisturbed, will return year after year to the same wood, in which to bring up their young in an old crow's or magpie's nest up some large oak. These rare and very beautiful birds should never be shot. They seem to feed mostly—some say almost entirely—upon insects. Unfortunately, few keepers are able to distinguish different kinds of hawks on the wing, and even when they do they are just as prone to

shoot a harmless hobby, kestrel, or merlin, as the more destructive sparrowhawk. Hobbies are peculiarly graceful on the wing, having very long narrow wings, so long, in fact, that when closed when the bird is perched, they reach beyond the tips of the tail-feathers. Very lovely are these little hawks as they soar about in the sun over a wood in which they have their nest, almost swift-like in shape, but of course on a considerably larger scale. Many writers have likened the hobby to a miniature peregrine, but in truth there is not the slightest resemblance between them, either in colour or in shape. A merlin, in its first plumage, is much more like a miniature peregrine, especially when seen in front. Hobbies leave us in the autumn, coming back again in the spring to breed.

Merlins, on the grouse moors, always lay their eggs on the ground, and bring up their young on small birds among the heather. During the summer months they are seldom or never found south of the grouse moors where they breed, but on the approach of cold weather they migrate southwards, and being strangers and hawks, they find few friends; no hospitality is shown them, but they are shot down as if their whole life had been an unbroken career of unmitigated poaching, than which nothing is further from the reality. These little hawks are great favourites with falconers—a class of sportsmen largely on the increase at the present day—



STOATS.

and after the lark season is over, about the end of September, their jesses are cut off, and the hawks are allowed to go free. But of these, probably more than ninety per cent. meet their death at the hands of the unthinking keeper or the prejudiced sportsman. Thus do men rest satisfied with old traditions, and will not trouble themselves to find out fresh facts for themselves.

Other vermin of lower grade are hedgehogs, and they very seldom meet with any mercy from the gamekeeper. They have a bad name as egg-stealers, and some go so far as to aver that they kill the young partridges and pheasants as well as suck their eggs, and so the poor little beast is generally sacrificed. When he is trapped he utters most heartrending squeals, very much like a baby at his christening. Traps indeed are never set for hedgehogs, but they are sometimes caught in traps set for other vermin. They are particularly helpless, and have no means of getting out of the keeper's way. They can neither run fast nor have they the knack of disappearing suddenly down a friendly burrow. Their only resource when found, as they often are by the dogs, or when they betray their whereabouts by rustling along on their evening prow, is to roll themselves up tight and keep still. But, alas! for poor old hedgehog, his array of bristling spines is no proof against a keeper's hobnailed boot, and accordingly he is summarily despatched.

All sorts of things are at times caught in the traps set for vermin. A long-eared owl has been caught in a trap baited with eggs, and immediately the conclusion was jumped at that owls were egg-stealers! What more proof could be wanted to satisfy the ignorant keeper? Here are the eggs, here is the owl! A bullfinch has also been caught in a similar way: but even the keeper would hardly go so far as to assert that the bullfinch as well as the owl was after the eggs, although the proof was just as strong. No! but the owl is always suspected of poaching proclivities. and so no quarter must be shown him. Scanty evidence will quite suffice.

Long-eared owls are residents with us all the year round, and lay their eggs in old nests, very often in old squirrel's drays; in such nests will often be found freshly-killed young rats, field mice, and small birds, which they surprise and pounce on while at roost. Comical and fierce little fellows are these young owls, all covered with down, with black faces and round yellow eyes, with always a very astonished expression on their countenances. At an early age these owls spread out their wings over their backs, and snap their beaks, and hiss, and roll their eyes, and blink in the most approved fashion on being looked at by such a stranger as a specimen of the noble genus *homo*. Young game are either too safely shut up in their coops, or those that are wild are too snugly ensconced under their parents' feathers, to be molested by owls. A very small rabbit, indeed, stands in some danger, but the foxes are allowed as many rabbits as they like, as a reward for the sport they give us in the field; so why should an occasional young rabbit be grudged to an owl in return for the enormous quantity of rats and mice which he regularly consumes?

The short-eared owl, commonly called the woodcock owl, on account of his appearance here at the same time with the woodcocks, only comes to us for the winter. He is frequently flushed out of turnip fields, while partridge shooting, or from the sandhills on the east coast, when he first arrives. He is a very handsome bird with a smaller head than most other owls, and has frequently been seen flying in sunshine, evidently in search of prey. Tawny owls, also called brown and wood-owls, breed in hollow trees, and occasionally in open nests, such as those of old crows in fir trees, while barn-owls never lay their eggs anywhere but in darkness. A hollow tree, holes in ruins, rocks, or even houses and barns, are the places where they bring up their grotesque-looking brood. They have sometimes been found sitting on seven eggs, but five is the usual number. The old birds may often be caught by climbing noiselessly up to a hole which they are known to frequent. The roosting holes may easily be discovered by the accumulation of castings found on the ground beneath the tree. Examine these pellets carefully, and you will find each composed of five or six mice or shrews, the skulls generally entire. But when you have caught your owl, be satisfied with yourself and do him no harm, but look upon him as a quaint, friendly fellow, and let him go in peace.

Squirrels are often condemned as rank poachers, and consequently are in many places mercilessly killed down. They have indeed a bad habit of robbing small birds of their eggs and young, but that they will also extend their bird-nesting propensities in the direction of game has never been clearly proved. In districts where young plantations abound they do much damage by nibbling off the top shoots of the fir trees. In the spring too, they are much addicted to nibbling off the young shoots of chestnut trees for the sake of the dainty morsel from which the leaves spring, leaving the young leaves strewn in profusion on the ground. They also strip bark from the spruce firs, sometimes to a grievous and unsightly extent. They are frequently

"mobbed" by little birds, and they have sometimes been seen disputing savagely with jackdaws at the entrance of the latter's nest-hole, evidently with the object of dining off the jackdaw's eggs. Every one, however, appreciates the beauty and graceful actions of these little animals, and as their villainy hardly extends beyond damaging trees, they are most frequently and properly left in peace. If their nest has been disturbed by any intruder, they have a curious habit of removing all their young ones to another hiding place in an incredibly short space of time.

In the summer time the woods and hedgerows are full of leaf, and rank with all kinds of vegetation, so that it is comparatively easy for our furred and feathered friends to hide themselves from their numerous foes, and as they are then busy with their family duties, it behoves them to be very quiet and wily so as not to betray their nests to the ever-watchful keeper. In this way many of them escape the various dangers which surround them from all quarters, and young sparrowhawks, and magpies, and various other poaching birds, manage to make a good start in life, and in course of time to bring up numerous families of their own. Indeed it is marvellous how any of them contrive to succeed in the struggle for existence, for there is scarcely a district that is not strictly preserved, and therefore carefully watched over and guarded by keepers. But in spite of all precautions taken to keep them down, the race of vermin, somehow or other, manages to thrive and abound. The jay, for instance, has few friends, because though he chiefly lives on acorns, beechmast, &c., he is known to be partial to pheasants' eggs, and the keeper accordingly has his eye upon him. A troop of big young jays may often be seen flying to a densely-foliaged elm, in a hedgerow, just outside a plantation. It is the easiest thing in the world to get under the tree without being observed by the jays, and you would be amply rewarded for your pains. You will hear them at first talking to one another in a low key, though you may not be able to see a single feather. Presently perhaps one of them sees you before you discover him. He at once gives a very low alarm note, and straightway they are all perfectly silent and still, and will so remain until you are quite sure that they must all have flown away; but after half an hour's perfect silence you will hear one of them venturing once more to talk to his neighbour in a low voice, and then a second will hop on to another twig, and soon you may perhaps catch a glimpse of part of another and fire at the spot where you deem its body ought to be. Whether or not you succeed in hitting your bird, the whole troop will fly back into the plantation, and there you had better leave them, and not disturb the covert by shooting again. It is just possible for you to secure another with your second barrel as they fly back to the wood, but in all probability the foliage will be too thick for you to clear it in time.

