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CURIOUS CHARACTERISTICS OF BRITISH GAME BIRDS.

By H. A. BRYDEN.

THE partridge is a singular combination of nervousness and courage. Its natural fear of mankind and its incessant dread of the assaults of such bloodthirsty enemies as stoats, weasels, foxes, and hawks, are, of course, well known. Yet few creatures are more truly courageous. During the pairing season the male partridge is one of the most pugnacious and determined of all birds, and the courage and devotion shown by both the parent birds in defence of their young is, in its way, almost unequalled. In the days when kites were still plentiful in Britain, Markwick, a reliable observer, has placed it upon record that he has seen the old birds fly up at this most formidable bird of prey, "screaming and fighting with all their might" in order to preserve their brood from its assault. A hen partridge will stand up boldly in defence of her nestlings, even against so bloodstained and terrifying a marauder as the weasel or stoat. In passive defence of her young she is equally brave, and will suffer herself to be carried from her nest sooner than desert her eggs or nestlings. Mr. Macpherson, in his monograph on this bird, mentions the case of a sitting hen partridge which allowed a schoolgirl to pick her from her nest and carry her home in her apron, a distance of a mile. Happily the order was at once given to replace her, and the brave mother not only quietly resumed her seat on the nest, but in due time hatched out a covey of partridges. When the young are hatched the old birds are equally courageous, and will practise curious shifts and strategems to save their fledglings. A partridge has been seen to feign itself wounded, and run tumbling and apparently maimed just in front of the nose of a pointer which had come suddenly upon its brood, and this stratagem was not once but twice enacted.

One of the most singular features in connection with partridge life is the fact that during the nesting season the hen bird loses for the time, or has the power of suppressing, the strong scent which characterises her race. And it would seem that the nearer a bird nests to a path or building, the greater is this power of suppression. This curious fact, it is to be noted, is common to grouse and other game birds also during the nesting period.

Few birds make tamer or more interesting pets than the partridge. Years ago a Sussex lady had a tame partridge, which she kept about her for many seasons. It came into her possession as a tiny chick, and displayed extraordinary affection and intelligence. It had the run of the house, but its favourite abiding place was the dining-room, where, perched on the back of its mistress's chair, it was in her presence thoroughly happy. In the absence of this lady, it showed undoubted marks of grief and concern. At bedtime it invariably accompanied its mistress upstairs and took up its position near the head of her bed. Other instances of the successful taming of young partridges are

well authenticated. It is a fact worth knowing that tame partridges kept about a place in the country are useful in attracting a stock of wild birds near home. The late Mr. Francis Francis, the well-known angler and sportsman, fully established this circumstance at his place in South Bucks.

Touching the handsome horse-shoe marking which is so often found to adorn the breast of our English birds, it is to be remembered that it is either entirely absent or very imperfectly developed in the full-grown female. It distinguishes the adult male, but not the immature male bird; while it is, curiously enough, to be found on the breast of the young female.

Why does the partridge tower? That is a question once hotly debated, but now set completely at rest. A towering bird has been so hit that it suffers from an escape of blood into the lungs or windpipe. It chokes, and in its piteous desire for air flies upward and upward until it can fly no higher. Then it falls, rocket-like, to earth, and is found stone dead, usually on its back.

An abnormally dry season (preceded by a good nesting time), such as those of 1893 and 1897, suits partridges better than any other. There probably never were more partridges in Britain than during the shooting season of the latter year. Gilbert White long ago pointed out how these birds favour a parching year. "In the dry summers of 1740 and 1741," he says, "and for some years after, they swarmed to such a degree that parties of unreasonable sportsmen killed twenty, and sometimes thirty, brace in a day." What, I wonder, would our modern gunners say of such prodigious bags? And what would Gilbert White have thought of the makers of a bag of 1458 partridges in a single day of Hampshire shooting, a record made in 1897 at the Grange, Lord Ashburton's place in that county? It is enough to make the old parson-naturalist shift uneasily in his quiet grave!

It has long been a pleasant and a comfortable belief among lovers of the pheasant that our old English bird, known to our ancestors certainly as far back as Saxon times, came originally from the Phasis, a river of Asia Minor, flowing into the Black Sea, and was imported into Britain by the Romans during their occupation. That is a picturesque belief, which it seems cruel indeed to shatter. Yet the recent researches of palæontologists seem clearly to point to the fact that this splendid bird was not improbably a denizen of Britain long before the Roman conquest. The pheasant, with its magnificent plumage and colouring, seems at first sight far more likely to be an importation from the gorgeous East than an indigenous dweller beneath the dull skies of Albion; and yet recent discoveries of fossil remains of pheasants in western France seem to indicate clearly enough that these birds had always a much wider range westward and northward than has been hitherto supposed. The old English pheasant (*Phasianus colchichus*) is identical in every particular with the bird known to the Romans and Greeks, and procured by them from the banks of that river of Asia Minor (the Phasis of the Ancients, the Rion of modern maps), from which the bird has acquired its European name. The pheasant is still abundant in the wild state among the forests, reeds, and thickets fringing the Black Sea and in other parts of South-Eastern Europe. In this country it retained its purity of descent uncontaminated for many hundreds of years, until, in fact, towards the end of the last century, when the ring-necked, or Chinese, pheasant was introduced. Nothing is more remarkable in the annals of game-bird life than the rapidity with which the ring-necked pheasant has spread itself abroad and imprinted its characteristics on the old English strain. So much is this the case that it is now rare to see a cock pheasant in this country without strong traces of the white neck-ring characteristic of the Chinese bird. It would, indeed, be a somewhat hard matter to find in any corner of these islands a real old English pheasant, uncontaminated by a trace of the Chinese strain. Other breeds are also being constantly introduced, and a glance at a poulterer's

PARTRIDGES.—BY ARCHIBALD THORBURN.

shop during the winter months will often convince the spectator interested in bird life that some of the paler pheasants before him are neither *Phasianus colchichus* nor its ring-necked ally, nor a cross between the two, but a fresh blend of these and others of the numerous pheasant family. Happily, the old English breed is being again strengthened here and there by importations of the same blood (*P. colchichus*) from Eastern Europe and the Black Sea shores, and the rich, dark breed of Old England is not likely to be entirely suppressed or supplanted.

In spite of the coddling with which the modern pheasant is so unduly surrounded, its natural instincts of wildness and suspicion are so deeply implanted that a few days of roaming in woodland and covert suffice to render the hen-reared bird almost as truly feral as its wild-bred congeners. A curious instance of the strange nervousness of the pheasant happened many years ago (1850) in the south of England. When the terrible gunpowder explosion in March of that year occurred at Messrs. Curtis and Harvey's mills at Hounslow, the dull shock and concussion were felt perceptibly in West Sussex, more than fifty miles away. And it was remarked by Mr. A. E. Knox, the naturalist, and by a number of labourers engaged at work among some coverts in that part of the county, that a loud and alarmed crowing proceeded from the pheasants in all parts of the wood for many minutes after the explosion.

The cock pheasant has been described by an old writer as "bold, voracious, and cruel," and one of these birds has been known to seize a tame canary, which had escaped from its cage, and after rending it with its strong bill, to devour it. These birds are certainly not so particular in the choice of their food as might be expected. They have been witnessed feeding on a dead carcase in the evil company of crows, and there is a curious and persistent legend among country folk that they will greedily devour toads and yet will not touch a frog. That they assist farmers materially by eating vast quantities of grubs and insects inimical to agriculture, is quite certain. Mr. Tegetmeier, a well-known authority on these birds, has stated that in the crop of a single pheasant no less than 726 wire-worms were discovered, while the crop of another contained 440 grubs of the crane-fly. On the other hand, pheasants certainly devour at times large quantities of grain. It is upon record that no less than 1606 grains of barley were taken from the crop of one of these birds at Bury, in Suffolk, in the year 1727. The increase of pheasants in these islands during the present century has been enormous. Fourteen years ago it was computed that 335,000 were slain during a single shooting season. That estimate was believed at the time to be below the mark. At the present day it is probable that about 500,000 of these birds are shot each year in the United Kingdom.

The red grouse, inhabiting as it does some of the wildest and most romantic scenery in these islands, is, as a sporting bird, probably productive of more real pleasure to the gunner than any other of our game birds. It is, unlike some others of its family, monogamous, and has further the peculiar distinction of being found in no other part of the world than Great Britain and Ireland. Grouse are, as befit their Highland breeding, desperate fighters during the pairing season. So furiously do they wage their contests for the possession of the hens that severe injuries are often received, and the birds are maimed and even blinded from the effects of these assaults.

The grouse is, like most of the game birds, a most devoted mother, and in protection of her young will brave the assaults of what to her must be appalling foes. A cock grouse has been seen to keep at bay a sparrow-hawk, which was attempting to seize one of the nestlings. While the hen gathered her chicks under her, the cock dodged backwards and forwards, and exposed his breast whenever the hawk attempted to make its strike. "This," says Mr. J. G. Millais, to whom the incident was narrated by a keeper in Strath Beauly, "lasted for some five minutes, till the hawk became disgusted

GROUSE.—By Archibald Thorburn.

and beat a retreat without having effected her purpose."

Red grouse, if taken young, make excellent pets, and are extraordinarily fearless. A tame cock grouse at Lord Tweedmouth's place, Guisachan, in Ross-shire, made great friends with one of the dogs, and used frequently to ride on its back. He was once taken to Oxfordshire, but seemed while there to be depressed and out of spirits, so much so that he was never heard to crow. Sent back to Scotland again, and enlarged from his box at his native home in the Highlands, he instantly ran up a grassy hillock and crowed loudly. This bird once furiously attacked a pointer, which had the temerity, while ranging, to approach him too closely upon the hillside.

In many parts of Scotland and almost everywhere in the north of England grouse now lie far less well to the guns than was formerly the case. Whether this is the result of much driving or of some other cause is hardly yet decided; probably the great increase of shooting and the effects of driving have much to do with the matter. In the west of Ireland grouse lie absurdly close, quite as much so as many of the francolins in Africa. In the mountains of Mayo and Galway the writer has found them exceptionally close-lying, and, right on to the New Year, they afford there excellent shooting over dogs.

Black game, or black grouse, are, it is to be feared, a vanishing race in these islands. In most parts of England, where they once abounded, their haunts know them no more. These birds are peculiarly dependent for their food-supply upon plants and wild fruits, which thrive only in wild, waste, and boggy country. The constant increase of cultivation is, therefore, almost solely answerable for the steady disappearance of this most handsome game bird from localities where it had existed for untold centuries. The blackcock, curiously enough, never seems to have been found in Ireland, and attempts to acclimatise the race there have failed. Even in Scotland, these birds are steadily disappearing, and upon estates where, forty or fifty years ago, a hundred brace were secured in a day's shooting, fifteen brace would now be considered a good bag. There is one peculiarity about blackgame which is not generally known. When fairly under way, these birds have a strong, easy, and rapid flight, but they will never, if they can help it, fly down wind, a direction which their cousins, the red grouse, usually prefer. Often, sooner than endure the discomfort of having their handsome tails blown about by a strong breeze, they will choose to face the gunners and submit to their fate, or will remain upon a wall or tree sooner than go off down wind.

Capercailzie, the most gigantic of all our game birds, were, until past the middle of the last century, indigenous in the north of Scotland. Common as they are in the pine-forests of North and Central Europe, they were probably never very abundant in these islands. By the year 1760, when the last indigenous specimen is stated to have been seen in the woods of Strathglass, they had become almost extinct in Scotland, and they were not again heard of until reintroduced by the Marquis of Breadalbane, at Taymouth, in Perthshire, in 1836. They have spread considerably since that period, and have been reintroduced in other localities, and in several parts of Scotland are now fairly abundant. In 1888 one was killed as far south as Lord Rosebery's place at Dalmeny, near Edinburgh. Capercailzie driving is first-rate sport; the great birds come down wind at astounding speed, and take a good deal of stopping even by expert gunners who know their habits and flight. In spring the male bird displays himself to the hens very much as does the blackcock; his cry at this season has been compared to the noise of the whetting of a scythe. When perched upon a branch, thus uttering his amorous call, the bird seems quite oblivious of what is passing around him, and is often stalked and shot by the gunners of North Europe.

The capercailzie is nothing like so good a table bird as the grouse and blackcock; its habit of feeding upon the young shoots of pine and larch imparts a bitter flavour to its flesh, which is by no means palatable.

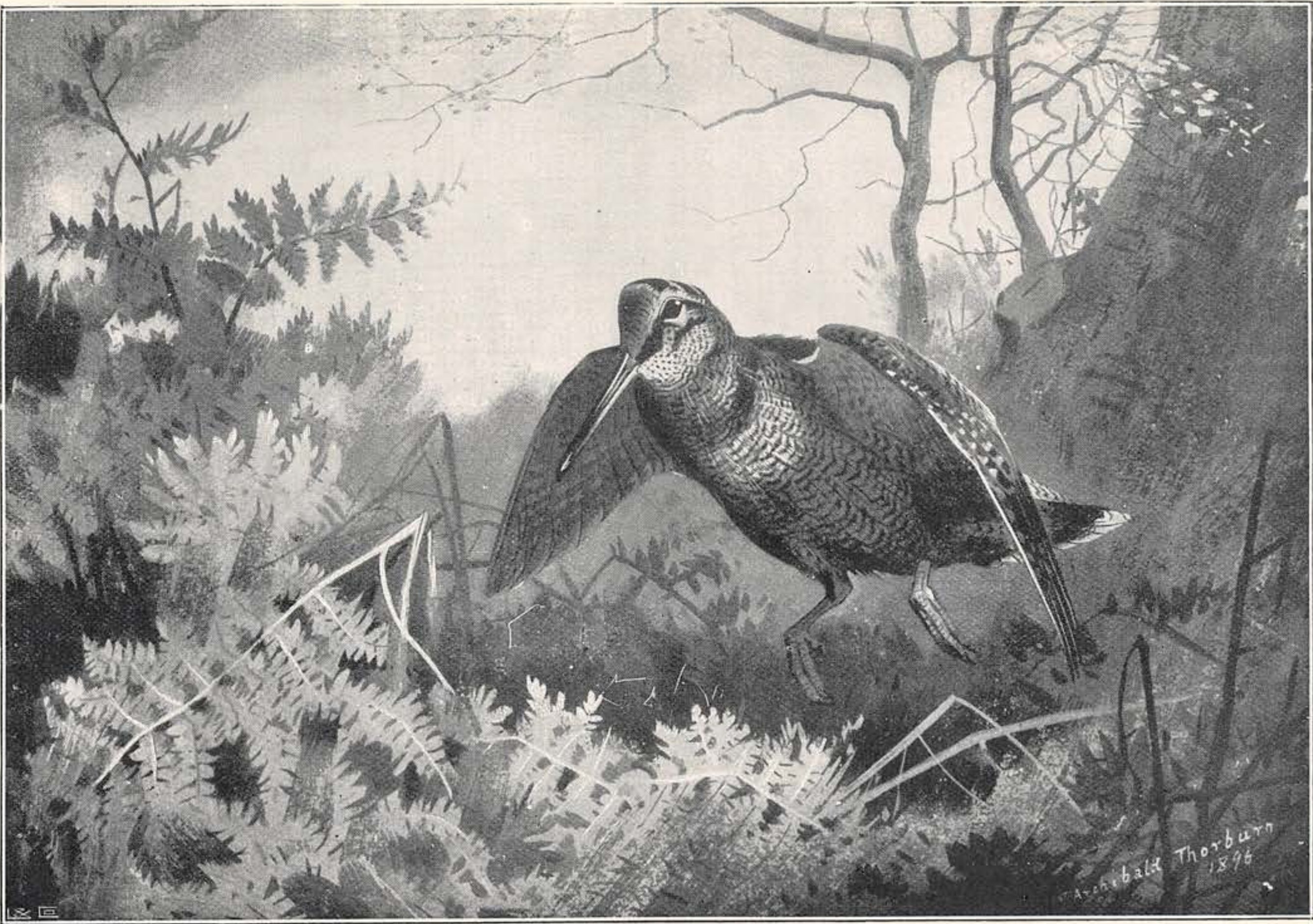
PTARMIGAN.—BY ARCHIBALD THORBURN.

During late summer and autumn, however, when the birds feed much upon the berries and wild fruits of the forest, the flesh is much more palatable, and a young capercailzie is then really good eating. As a rule, these birds roost in trees, but when moulting, they are compelled, ignominiously enough, from lack of flying power, to take refuge on the ground. In Austria, capercailzie are shot only in the spring, and then the cocks alone are slain. They are very abundant in the forests there, as may be gathered from the fact that in April of 1892 not less than 5143 capercailzie cocks were shot in that country alone, without reckoning Hungary. The gigantic "Cock of the Wood," as it is sometimes called, attains to the size of a turkey, and is certainly one of the noblest and handsomest birds of the forests of the north of Europe.

Ptarmigan, or white grouse, true lovers of the mist - enshrouded hillsides and snowy mountain - tops, are seldom met with at a lower elevation than 1500 ft. The colouring of the plumage, which varies from pale brown and white in summer to pure snow-white in winter, is singularly protective, and the bird is, upon its own ground, most difficult to pick out. In fact, the scheme of plumage-colour, varying as it does from month to month with the changing effects of the mountain-side, and affording a marvellous protective resemblance, is one of the most remarkable and beautiful things in nature. Ptarmigan are, like the red grouse, monogamous. They assemble in considerable packs or coveys, and in fine weather are the easiest of all game birds to approach, the gunner often being astonished to find himself within a few yards of the very birds he is in search of. From the nature of the high ground they frequent and the hard climbing involved, ptarmigan are not, however, very popular game with any but the most active and vigorous pedestrians. These birds were formerly found in Wales and Cumberland, but have been for some time extinct there. Twenty brace of ptarmigan may be reckoned a good day's bag in the British Isles, but if the gunner should happen to be on the Lofoten Islands in a severe winter, when the ptarmigan (fjeld-rypa) migrate in immense numbers from the mainland of Norway, he may have the chance of amassing a huge bag.

Quail visit Britain in far smaller migrations than of old, although in exceptionally dry seasons fair numbers of these charming little game birds still wing their flight to these shores. In 1893, after a particularly droughty summer, they were shot in nearly every county in England. The fact remains, however, that their appearance is far less common than it used to be. Quail are not fond of high cultivation, and the inevitable changes in agriculture have, no doubt, had something to do with their scarcity. But the capture of immense quantities of these birds during the migratory periods of spring and autumn in the south of Europe has had probably a good deal to do with the gradual lessening of their numbers. For ages the island of Capri has been famous for the enormous numbers of quail caught there. The principal revenues of the bishop and some of the convents largely depended, and, I believe, still depend, upon the capture of these birds, which are sent thence to Naples. The birds are taken in nets set upon high poles. A good season lasts about three weeks, and sixty or eighty years ago as many as 150,000 were taken at Capri in a good season. At the present time from 40,000 to 60,000 is considered an average catch, so that it is clear that the supply is gradually but very perceptibly falling off. During the spring migration the little creatures are thin and in poor condition. In the autumn passage, however, after the high feeding of Europe, they are plump and delicious eating, as experienced gourmets well know. Quail are the most pugnacious little creatures imaginable. They were used by the Greeks and Romans, and are still used by the Chinese and Italians, as we English formerly employed fighting cocks, and desperate battles are waged over a few grains of seed thrown between the little game birds.

It has been well said that "Here to-day, gone to-morrow" may fairly be called



WOODCOCK.—By Archibald Thorburn.

the motto of the delicious woodcock. A certain number of cock, it is true, breed in the British islands, but the vast majority of the birds found within our borders are shifty migrants, of whose presence you can never be secure. To-day they may be seen in numbers in a favourite covert, yet to-morrow not a cock may be found within a score of miles. If you know that woodcock are about, lose not an hour if you are wise, but take your gun and go in search of them. They are, in truth, the most evanescent of birds. They arrive upon our coasts often so lean and storm-tossed that they lie utterly exhausted for some hours, scarcely able to move. They have been known to drop in considerable numbers in the churchyard—nay, in the very streets of Rye, in Sussex. A pair took refuge, in 1799, during a gale of wind, on the *Glory* man-of-war, then cruising in the Channel. They migrate from the North of Europe to Britain, usually towards the end of October, and remain with us until March, when they seek their accustomed breeding grounds in Scandinavia, Russia, and elsewhere. Their southerly migration extends to the Mediterranean and North Africa, while eastward they are to be found as far distant as Japan. The flight of this bird during migration must be enormously swift. A well-fed woodcock seldom weighs much more than twelve ounces; yet, in the year 1796, the keeper of the lighthouse upon the Hill of Howth, in Ireland, found a pane of glass, more than three-eighths of an inch thick, broken by one of these birds, which, attracted by the strong light, had flown against the pane. The unfortunate bird struck with such violence that its bill, head, breast-bone, and both wings were all found to be completely smashed. Woodcock feed almost solely at night, and by consequence lie up closely during the day in those snug harbourages, in warm and sheltered woodlands, to which they are so partial. Their food consists almost entirely of worms, larvæ, small water and mud insects, beetles, and the like. They have inordinate appetites, and with their long bills bore countless holes in search of food in the soft places to which they repair. The digestive process of this bird is extraordinarily rapid. A tame woodcock, which had breakfasted in the morning upon half a flower-pot full of worms, was found the same afternoon with its stomach perfectly empty, while the viscera contained no perceptible trace of its ample breakfast. What would not the confirmed diner-out give for such digestive organs? Only one other bird, the Locust Bird, of South Africa, that I am aware of, equals the woodcock in this respect. The Locust Bird, sometimes called Nordmann's Pratincole, one of the plover family, preys in enormous numbers on the mighty swarms of locusts which devastate South Africa, and is provided by nature with astonishing digestive powers.

The woodcock is a most tender mother, and has the curious habit of carrying its young, one at a time, from its nesting-place to and from some chosen feeding-ground. The baby woodcocks are held suspended between the claws, and pressed closely against the mother bird's breast and stomach.

The West of Ireland, with its soft, moist climate and freedom from frost, is, and has always been, a favourite winter resort of woodcock. Great bags are still frequently made there in good seasons. At Lord Ardilaun's place, Ashford, in County Galway, for instance, as many as 365 of these birds have been secured by six guns in four days' shooting; while 173 cock have fallen to the same number of guns in a single January day. After all, however, these bags, made with the finest of modern breech-loading weapons, are scarcely equal to the score of the Earl of Clermont, in County Cavan, in 1802, with a pair of flint-lock guns. For a wager of 300 guineas that nobleman shot, without difficulty, in the course of the morning, fifty couple of woodcock, and easily won his money. At that time, it is to be remembered, cock were extraordinarily plentiful in Ireland, and were sold for the price of one penny a-piece, plus the expense of powder and shot.