



"ASNAPPER": THE BROWN OWL.

By Mrs. BRIGHTWEN.

notes of anger and fear, and I gather from this that the owl is apt to prey upon small birds and possibly robs their nests of eggs or young fledgelings.

Several writers assert that this bird also feeds on fish, being able to catch those swimming near the surface.

There can be no doubt of the extreme value of owls in reducing the number of rats and mice, and it is to be hoped that landowners in their own interests, if for no better motive, will take pains to in-

WHILST enjoying the fresh beauty of my garden in the month of May, with its wealth of flowers and rich variety of leafage, my eyes happened to light upon a greyish tuft of feathers in a rhododendron bush.

Curiosity led me to examine this tuft more closely, when, to my surprise, I found it was a young brown owl—alive, indeed, but in a very exhausted condition. It appeared to be only a few weeks old, fully feathered, yet unable to feed itself; I suppose it had fallen out of the nest and was dying for lack of food. I need hardly say I carried it indoors and did my best to feed and restore the poor orphan, and right well did he second my efforts.

A juicy uncooked mutton chop was cut up and mixed with feathers, and with resounding snaps of his great beak, the morsels were received and swallowed. A second chop was disposed of before my friend seemed satisfied, and with such a mighty appetite I felt there would be no difficulty in rearing him. Next morning we happened to find two dead sparrows and a mouse; these soon disappeared and had to be supplemented by a piece of raw meat; and if this is the daily diet of a very young owl, we may form some idea of the way in which full-grown birds must reduce the hordes of mice and rats which would otherwise overrun the country.

Whenever we passed the owl's cage, he gave a resounding snap with his beak, not viciously, but as a friendly recognition, and somehow this habit suggested the name of the Assyrian king, the "noble Asnapper," until this, familiarly contracted to "Snap" for everyday use, became the recognised title of our new pet.

Asnapper lived quietly enough during the day in a large cage well covered from the light, but towards evening, when he had enjoyed his second repast of raw meat, he began to wake up and long for exercise. He was allowed his liberty in the house, and made full use of this privilege by going about from room to room, either running along the floor like a grey rabbit, or taking short flights with his noiseless wings. He would gravely pursue his way up the stairs a step at a time, and seemed to enjoy watching cattle in the fields whilst sitting motionless on a window-sill.

Until the bird could feed itself, it would have been no kindness to let it go out of doors and starve, so I resolved to make the creature's life as happy as possible, whilst I had thus a good opportunity of learning the habits of this interesting species of bird. I could not help being somewhat afraid of his formidable curved beak, which looked as if it could inflict a severe wound, but I soon learned how gently Asnapper could use it; he would play with my fingers and hold them with such care that we had merry games of play at evening recreation time, when he looked to be let out of his cage and go where he pleased for an hour or two.

If allowed to be in the drawing-room, the sociable bird made himself quite one of the party. Perched on the back of a chair he would watch all that went on with a grave air of consideration, or else he would amuse himself by chasing a ball, or cotton reel, upon the floor as if he tried to make believe it was a mouse.

I could not have thought there was so much latent fun in a solemn-looking owl, but then we are never out at night perched up in the tree-branches to see what goes on there amongst young owlets, so this afforded us a rather unusual glimpse into the habits and manners of the bird of wisdom in his merry days of youth.

This species, called the brown or tawny owl (*Syrnium stridula*), is found in most of the counties of England; it is rare in Scotland, and has not, I believe, been found in Ireland. It generally retires to thick woods during the day, coming out at night to feed upon rabbits, moles, rats, mice, frogs, and insects.

When Asnapper had more food than he could consume at one meal, he would hide the rest, taking pains to secrete his choice morsels in some dark corner where he thought we could not see them.

His soft blue eyes used to look very roguish as he peered round to see if we were watching him; those eyes, by the way, changed to a rich dark brown as he grew older, and would be, I fancy, quite black when full grown.

I have several times observed a brown owl flying quite late in the evening closely pursued by enraged blackbirds screaming their loudest

struct their gamekeepers to protect such useful allies to the farmer and gardener.

I met with an amusing instance of the value of the owl as a mouser when staying at a farmhouse in Surrey.

The farmer's daughter told me her brother had just discovered "a 'howl's' nest in a pigeon coo," and going up a ladder to examine it more closely had found two eggs in the nest, and ranged around it were fourteen dead mice. If that was the result of one evening's foraging, we need no other proof that owls are worthy of encouragement and protection. This anecdote relates to a barn owl which may well be called the "farmer's friend," for it delights to roost in barns and out-buildings where it can find plenty of mice, its favourite food, and on that account it should meet with a kind welcome instead of being trapped and shot and hung up to decorate the end of some out-house, where I often grieve to see it, in company with the equally useful little kestrel and other hawks.

The brown owl has very different tastes as to its home, preferring a hollow tree in some secluded wood far away from human dwellings, although from Mr. Waterton's experience it will sometimes fly into houses in the dusk of evening. He says, "This pretty aerial wanderer of the night often comes into my room; and after fitting to and fro on wing so soft and silent that he is scarcely heard, he takes his departure from the same window at which he entered."

Mr. Waterton suggests that these birds may be encouraged to settle in our woods, if holes are made in old trees that are already slightly decayed, the brown owls will then readily adopt them as nesting-places.

I have not as yet heard Asnapper make any sound except the characteristic snap of his beak, and a low whining cry of eager pleasure at sight of his accustomed food.

We are very familiar with the loud melancholy hoot of his kith and kin, which we frequently hear at intervals during the night in the gardens and woods around the house, and Asnapper will join in the chorus, for as soon as he can feed himself we shall bid him an affectionate farewell, and have the pleasure of seeing him spread his broad wings and sail away to his native woods.