

## THE NIGHT-JAR.

THE early part of last summer I passed amongst the hills and moors of the West Riding of Yorkshire. Being much addicted to the pursuit of insects, and having some leisure, much of my time was spent in rambling about in the open air, especially about and after sunset.

A pair of night-jars were my constant companions in many a summer's evening campaign with the insects, and proved so interesting that I have ventured to attempt a description of their peculiar habits, in the hope that I may convey to others some part of the pleasure I myself derived from observing them.

As I scrupulously avoided startling them by sudden movements when they were near me, these birds soon became quite accustomed to my presence, and were even undisturbed by the glare of my bull's-eye lantern, which my optics, inferior to theirs, required to aid them in discerning the insects for which I was searching. I grew quite proud of their tameness and confidence, and considered them almost indispensable accompaniments of my nocturnal hunting expeditions; and their strange metallic, jarring cry, like the interminable rolling of an excited Irishman's *r's*, seemed to my ears to have somewhat of music in it.

The manner in which these night-jars captured the different insects on which they fed varied with the power and activity of the prey. The smaller fry—which, by the way, must form by far the greater proportion of their food—they were content to entrap by the simple process of flying hither and thither, swallow-fashion, with their enormous mouths gaping wide open, and quietly ingulfing all insects that crossed their path.

But the larger and more powerful insects demanded for their capture far more energy and art; nor when occasion served were these requisite qualities wanting. In the midst of its apparently careless, free-and-easy, wandering flight, one or other of these birds would every now and then dart off, almost too quickly for the eye to follow, snap up some moth so unfortunate as to have attracted its attention, and again recur

to its former wavering flight as though nothing had occurred.

In consequence of the arrow-like speed with which the dash was made, and the exceeding rapidity of the changes in the manner of flight, I never could contrive to see the insect actually taken. The bird dashed over the spot, and where the moth had been there it was not: that was all the keenest watching on my part could ascertain. Yet, withal, I fancied the bird's after demeanour furnished a clue whereby his good or ill success might be determined. In the generality of cases the resumption of its wonted flight was immediate and apparently unconcerned, unless it be true that I could detect, as I sometimes fancied I could, a slight quickening in the stroke of its wings—an indescribable, but, to my fancy, unmistakable, air of triumph in its movements. Sometimes, but very seldom, the bird, after its pounce, seemed somewhat bewildered and put out, and would flutter about confusedly for some seconds, having all the appearance of disappointment and disgust. Was it that he had missed his intended quarry, and was disconcerted thereat?

How many times have I, under similar circumstances, having made a stroke at a moth and missed it, grown hot, felt myself looking sheepish, and looked into my net, as Mr. Winkle looked at his gun when the wilful thing *would* go off, as though it were the culprit! Have we not all felt the same? Flying bails at cricket, when we particularly wish to show off our batting; a large fish escaping through our clumsiness; unblemished targets at the butts; an unfortunate mistimed but sonorous "Amen!" in church—these, and numberless other casualties to which frail human nature is liable, do they not all awake the quick responsive blush, the averted eye, and the struggle—always, alas! a vain one—to appear unconcerned? And if *we* are subject to such weaknesses, why may not birds be so likewise? 'Tis true we can never *know*, inasmuch as they, unfortunately, do not possess the gift of speech; but, in default of speech, we can judge by their actions; and their actions, to my eyes, say, as plainly as

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largest print, on these occasions, "We are ashamed of and disgusted with our stupidity and clumsiness, and would blush up to the eyes were it not for our feathers." Surely birds have a right to be nervous as well as mankind. Besides, do we not say, especially in the autumn months, the birds are very shy?

But it was for humble-bees that the night-jars reserved their best energies and address, and with good reason. Any one tolerably well acquainted with humble-bees and their ways will understand that the night-jar seeks to catch them, not by a rapid dash, nor yet by the unhurried, easy method in which it catches the smaller insects, but by a method which avoids alarming them till the last moment, and only permits them to know their danger when escape is impossible—a method, as far as my experience goes, reserved only for them. A humble-bee unfurried, and with no immediate incentive to severe exertion, is one of the steadiest-going insects in creation—the very reflection, in the insect world, of a sober, staid, well-to-do citizen; his appearance, his every movement, savour of solid worth and respectability. But just rouse him up, put him in fear of his liberties or his pocket—*i.e.*, his honey-bag—and who so fiery as he? He is here, there, and everywhere, all at once, filling the air with his noise. And it is not all buzz and bluster; he carries a sting, and can wield it, too, when occasion serves. Let our vestry tables, resounding under the blows of some sledge-hammer fist, our corporation contests, or our Volunteers, attest the existence of the same characteristics in our citizens.

The night-jar's plan of procedure is interesting, and to entomologists peculiarly instructive. An insect collector wishing to catch a peculiarly active insect, when in a state of rest, advances his net slowly and quietly till the mouth is so near that a mere turn of the wrist incloses in the bag the insect, awakened too late to its danger. Just so does the night-jar with a humble-bee. The closing of the huge mouth over the fated bee is the first warning the bird allows it to receive of its approaching foe.

My favourite hunting-ground was on a steep slope just below the crown of a hill; some fifty yards on either side were large

fir plantations; beneath was cultivated land; above and beyond, for many a mile, rolled the dark moor. This also was a chosen spot of the night-jars, and here it was chiefly that I gained an insight into their habits. Here, toiling up the ascent from the rich land below, would now and then come a belated humble-bee. Let us watch him up, and see how he fares. Here one comes steadily breasting the hill, in no great hurry, but he is going home straight, and has not the faintest idea of loitering on the way. Here he comes close by us; now he is lost against the dark heather. Ah! there he is again topping the hill, and showing dark and distinct against the clear summer sky. He is nearly past danger now: a few seconds, and he will be safe at his own door. A few seconds? In scarce more than one he will have gone to that bourne whence no humble-bee returns, down that very long lane that has no turning—*i.e.*, the red one. For other eyes than ours have seen him. The night-jars are some thirty yards off, but a stroke or two of the powerful wings soon brings one of them close in the rear of the unconscious bee; one more flap and the bee will take fright, whirl off, and dash hither and thither in such fashion that it must be a very sharp night-jar indeed that can catch him. But the night-jar knows better; besides, it is not necessary: he has already sufficient impetus to overtake the slow-flying insect, so he raises his wings into a V shape, sweeps slightly upwards, and then, with a dip and a rise, glides up *underneath* the hapless bee, and wakes him from his dream of a quick arrival at home by entombing him in his cavernous maw. Just so might an old gentleman from the city, returning to his suburban dwelling in the dusk of the evening, awake from delicious anticipations of the late dinner or early supper awaiting him to writhe impotent under the choking grasp of some stealthy garotter. Alas! poor bee, I could weep and lament, *à la Sterne*, for thy sad fate, only this is a warm spot for moths, and I cannot spare half-an-eye, or a finger to wipe it, just at present. The bee disposed of, the bird resumes his flight, with a wagglo of his tail and a wriggle of the whole body that are irresistibly suggestive of self-satisfaction and triumph.

I often sought for the nest, but I did not

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succeed in finding it till the young birds were nearly fully fledged, partly, perhaps, from want of observation—for I know I passed the nest more than once in pursuit of insects before I discovered its precise locality—but mainly because the moors were full of strictly preserved game, and I was consequently obliged to limit my rambles during the breeding season pretty much to the regulation paths. I found the nest—or rather the breeding-place, for these birds build no nest, but are content with a hollow in the ground—by accident, after all. I was hunting the moors about mid-day for anything in the shape of an insect that should turn up, when suddenly there fluttered and rustled up almost from beneath my feet one of the night-jars, who went stumbling over the heather just like a lapwing, to lead me away from the nest; but, though *not* a young man from the country, she—for I conclude it was the hen bird—did not get over me. I was certain I had hit upon the right spot at last, but a long scrutiny revealing nothing, I was about to step into the bare spot amidst the heather from which she had sprung up, when a slight movement on a piece of grey rock cropping up to the surface arrested my steps, and directed my eyes to what I had before mistaken for protuberances in the rock. These, on closer inspection, resolved themselves into two young night-jars squatted closely into a hollow, and so closely resembling, both in colour and general outline, the

rock on which they were crouched, that could not, when standing erect, distinguish their forms, though I knew the exact spot on which they were sitting. In fact, so complete was the deception, that more than once afterwards, when I came to the nest in the old bird's absence, I was at first deluded into the idea that I had made a mistake and gone to the wrong spot, or else that they were gone; and was only undeceived by a closer view. Now I rather pride myself on my quickness of sight, so it was not my eyes that were in fault.

I watched this family grow up with great interest, but only remained in the neighbourhood long enough to see the rising generation on the wing some two or three times. During the day-time I never had the fortune to see more than one bird; the other could not have been *near* the nest, for I was very close in my search after it, and I think must have put it up had it been within a hundred yards or so.

Books tell us that these birds utter their peculiar cry mostly when on the ground, and only sometimes while on the wing; but my pair of friends reversed this order of proceeding, for as long as they were flying they never seemed to leave off: one or the other was always in full cry. I have great hopes of meeting with another pair next season to scrape acquaintance with, but shall still continue to remember my Yorkshire friends of last summer.



The Humble-Bee, the favourite prey of the Night-Jar.