

THE OWL.

DESCRIBED AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY
R. B. LODGE.

THE owl, partly perhaps owing to its nocturnal habits and uncanny cries, and partly no doubt to its partiality for churches and churchyards, has always been a victim of ignorance and superstition, and has suffered persecution in all times and in all countries for misdeeds of which it is entirely innocent. If we were only half as clever as we try to make ourselves out to be, the owl would be the most honoured of birds, and anyone rash enough to molest it would be punished as befits one who harms a public benefactor.

Now, it is very easy to make statements like this about birds, but it is not always so easy to prove the truth of them as it is in the case in question. For owls, like all birds of prey, cast up in pellets or "castings" all the indigestible parts of their food, such as bones, fur, and feathers; and these pellets, unlike those of hawks and eagles, which are left scattered about over a wide expanse of country and consequently escape observation, are deposited in the hollow trees which serve most of them as resting-places during the day, and also as nesting-places during the summer months.

A suitable tree is sometimes tenanted by owls for years; and if they are undisturbed, the accumulation of these pellets may sometimes be measured by the bushel, and afford an opportunity to prove, beyond the possibility of dispute, the nature of their food during the whole time.

In the *Zoologist* for May, 1897, Mr. Coward records the result of investigating the pellets, fifty-four in number, found at the foot of two trees in Cheshire. They con-

tained bones of eight sparrows, one blue-tit, one rat, fourteen house-mice, twenty-six long-tailed field-mice, one water-vole, sixty field-voles, three bank-voles, forty-nine shrews, three water-shrews, and one lesser-shrew.

Again, in the *Zoologist* for May, 1898, Mr. Cordeaux describes the bushels of castings taken from a blown-down elm, tenanted by owls for forty-five years. Remains were identified of "a vast number of the common

mouse, and some long-tailed and short-tailed field-mice, the skull of a starling, and hundreds of the skulls and upper mandibles of the house-sparrow. The mice and sparrows had, no doubt, been seized from the stack sides, for I have often seen the owls thus employed, or sitting on the watch hard by on some post of vantage. The tenant could never understand how it was that I was so anxious that the owls should be left unmolested, and this exhibition of the *dissecta membra* of hundreds of mice and sparrows has come like a revelation to him. Farmers here have an absurd idea that owls enter their pigeon-cotes and carry off the

young pigeons, and it appears impossible to persuade them to the contrary."

The owls frequently do enter pigeon-cotes, but only to nest there themselves peaceably, without molesting in any way their neighbours, the original tenants.

Only last week I took some pellets from an immense oak, up whose hollow trunk I had to scramble from inside like a chimney-sweep. Here a Tawny owl was resting, and flew out on being disturbed. The pellets were composed of mouse fur, and outside were the hard and glittering wing-cases of beetles.



THE BARN OWL.

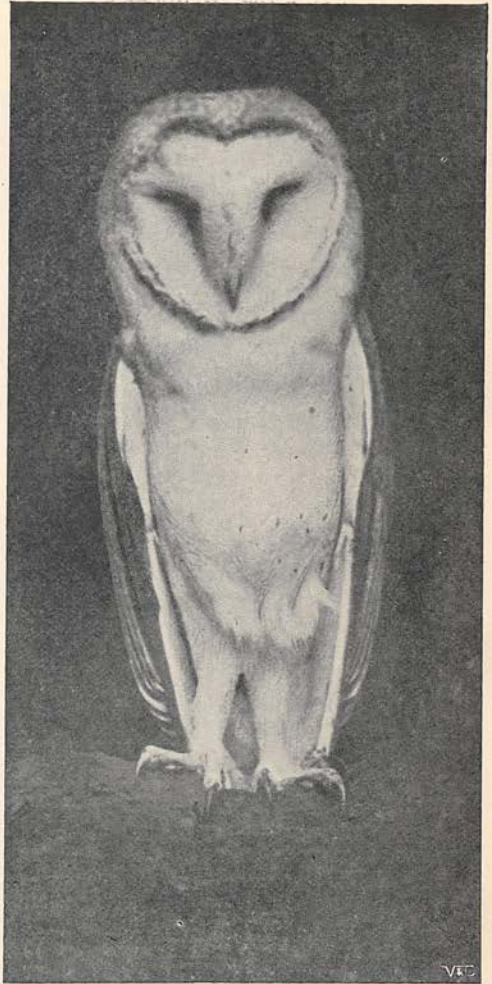
It will be noticed that in the above records there is no mention of the remains of any birds other than sparrows, except one blue-tit and one starling. No remains of a single game bird or animal are included in the list, and yet ninety-nine gamekeepers out of a hundred kill all owls as vermin, and hang them up in their "museums" to testify to their own ignorance and pig-headedness.

Though owls are commonly classed as birds of the night which nest in hollow trees, there is a migratory species which yearly visits us from Scandinavia, arriving, as a winter migrant, about November. A few remain to breed, in ever-decreasing numbers, in suitable localities, such as the Broads district in Norfolk, where they are known as marsh owls.

But whenever any part of the country is visited by a plague of voles, then these owls, with the wonderful knowledge possessed by birds of any unusual abundance of food, flock to the place in numbers, and remain to nest until the supply of food begins to diminish.



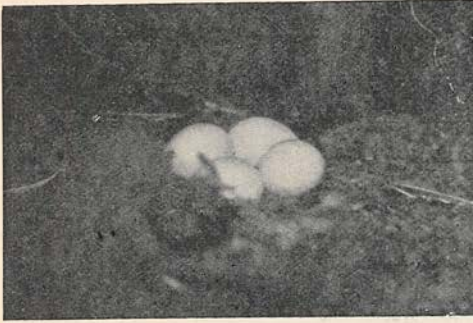
YOUNG BARN OWL.



BARN OWL.

The good done by these birds is clearly set forth in the Report of the Committee appointed by the Board of Agriculture on the vole plague in Scotland in 1893. As a consequence of the vast multiplication of these mischievous little rodents, which had almost devastated many farms over a large district, the Short-eared owls flocked to the infected spot in large numbers, and not only remained to breed, but owing to the abundance of their favourite food, laid an unusual number of eggs and reared more than one brood in the season. Whereas six is the usual clutch, they then laid from eight to thirteen eggs. One shepherd counted fourteen nests on his ground, and a small wood on another farm was described as being densely covered with "castings" composed of the bones and fur of voles.

Most of the witnesses examined by the Committee not only bore witness to the efficiency of the owls in arresting the increase



NEST OF BARN OWL.

of the plague, but ascribed its origin to the killing down by game-preservers of owls, kestrels, and weasels.

The plumage of the Short-eared owl is beautifully assimilated in colour to the dry grass and bracken, and, like the Barn owl, it can alter the whole shape of its face, whereby the expression is modified to a great extent. When alert or alarmed, the ear tufts are depressed and the face is nearly round, and in a strong light the pupils of the eyes are reduced to black points, leaving the rest of the eye a bright clear yellow; while at rest, the ears are erected, and a bristly moustache of coarse hairs round the beak gives the bird a very strange appearance.

The "ears" in this species and the other horned or eared owls are, of course, not ears at all, but

merely tufts of feathers, in no way connected with the organ of hearing, and they can be erected or depressed at the will of the bird. The true ear is an immense and complicated cavity, occupying nearly the whole side of the head, which is very large and is concealed by the edge of the facial disc.

One of our illustrations shows the ear cavity of a Short-eared owl as taken from a dead specimen. By lifting up the movable mask or facial disc and pinning it back, the large extent of the organs of hearing are plainly to be seen, and account for the wondrous faculty whereby owls can detect the slightest rustle of their timid prey as they forage about in the darkness of the night.

This bird seems a very silent one, the only noises I have ever heard being a hissing and



SHORT-EARED OWL.



EAR OF SHORT-EARED OWL.

a clapping or snapping of the beak when disturbed or angry.

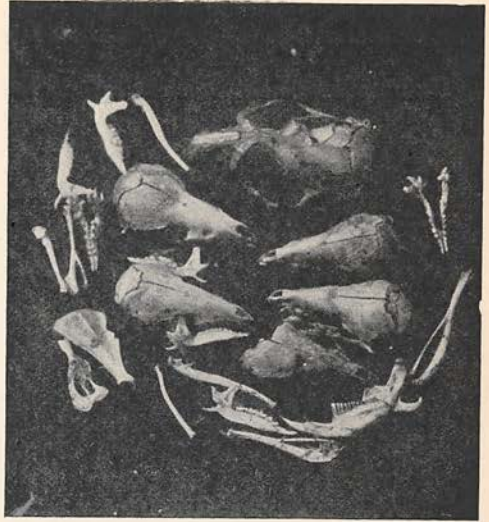
The Tawny owl, whose weird note breaks the silence of the night in so startling a manner, is a frequenter of woods and forests. In some patriarchal oak or hollow ash it sleeps away the hours of daylight, to sally forth on silent wings at the approach of night, dropping noiselessly from time to time upon some unwary mouse. In the nesting season these are carried off to feed the young owlets, either in a hollow tree or in an old wood-pigeon's nest or squirrel's drey.

The Long-eared owl also makes use of old

nests of other birds or squirrels in which to lay its eggs very early in the year, sometimes while snow is still on the ground. The shady recesses and sombre gloom of a fir wood suit the nocturnal habits of this species. It is also very silent, and its presence is often unsuspected ; but the young owls in



TAWNY OWL.



BONES FROM OWL "CASTINGS."

A rat skull and five shrew-mice skulls (the latter all from one pellet) illustrate the real character of the bird's diet.

once saw a Short-eared owl, just arriving on the Lincolnshire coast after his long flight over the German Ocean, mobbed and annoyed by a lot of rooks.

So well known is this habit among Continental bird-catchers, that using a Little owl tethered on a perch to attract small birds is a well-known and recognised method of procedure in Italy, and possibly in other parts.

Though all owls have something odd and

the nest make a noise which much resembles the mewling of a kitten.

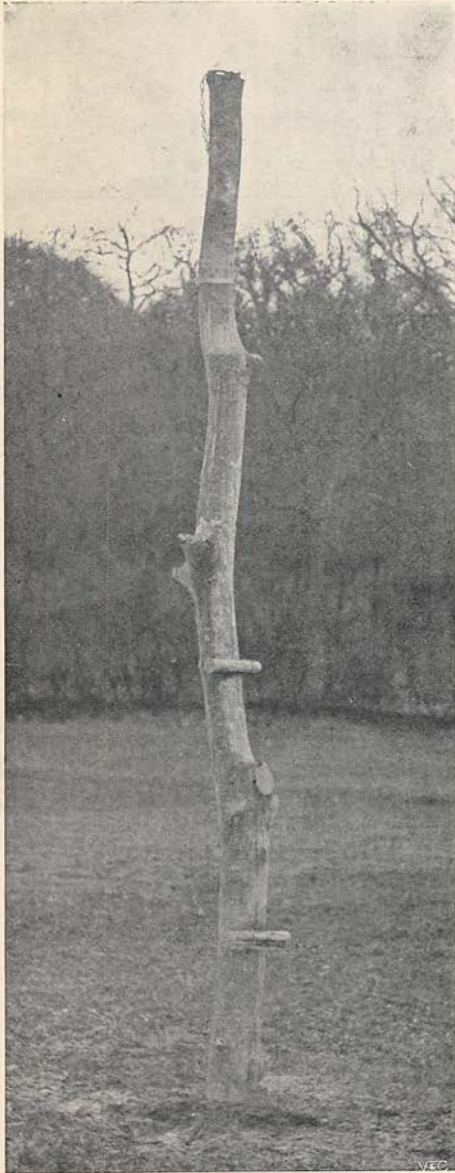
The sight of an owl which has been disturbed from his usual hiding-place during the day, as he flies with uncertain and wavering flight to another shelter, is the signal for universal excitement among all the small birds in the neighbourhood, which mob the unfortunate owl on all sides. Their victim appears too much bewildered to resent their hostile attitude. Tits of all sorts, blackbirds, thrushes, chaffinches, and other common birds congregate, scolding vigorously in their various languages what they consider as their common enemy. Perhaps it is only a similar feeling to that which prompted the collier in *Punch*, at sight of an unoffending stranger: "I say, Bill, 'ere's a stranger! 'Eave 'arf a brick at him!" I



SHORT-EARED OWL'S NEST.

comical in their appearance, no species has such comical and amusing ways as the Little owl.

The commonest owl with us is the Barn owl, White owl, or Screech owl. This, while nesting often in hollow trees in parks and woods, does not shun the presence of man, but nests also in barns, churches, pigeon-cotes, and old houses. Here their uncanny hissings and snorings have been known to occasion great alarm to those who have been



POLE-TRAP.



YOUNG LONG-EARED OWL.

ignorant of the cause of these curious nocturnal sounds.

Tennyson, in his song "The Owl," is entirely mistaken in attributing the note "Tu-whit-tu-who" to the White owl.

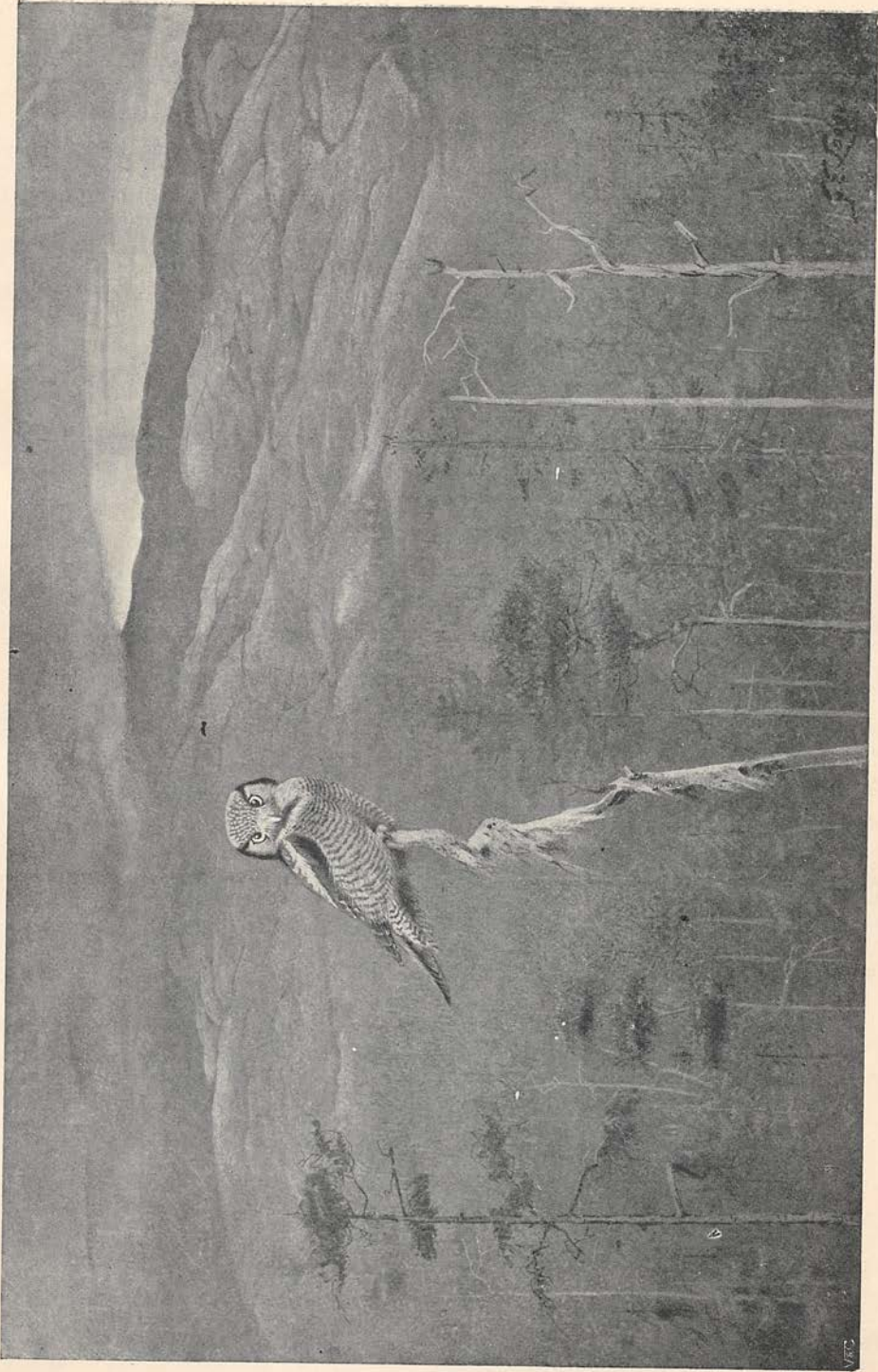
"Alone and warming his five wits
The White owl in the belfry sits.
Thy tu-whits are lulled, I wot
Thy tu-whoos of yesternight," etc.

The note thus described belongs properly to the Tawny owl, though to my mind the real note sounds more like "Hoo-hoo."

It is, however, next to an impossibility to accurately describe in human language the notes of birds. This difficulty is shown in the very dissimilar descriptions given of the same note by competent observers, no two of whom, as a rule, syllable them the same.

Seebohm, in his "British Birds," bears witness to the great usefulness of the Barn owl, in one case recording the fact of twenty dead rats being found at one nest!

And what reward do they receive at our



THE NORWEGIAN HAWK OWL, FROM A DRAWING BY G. E. LODGE.

V. E. C.



LONG-EARED OWL.

hands for the benefit they do and the useful, harmless lives they live?

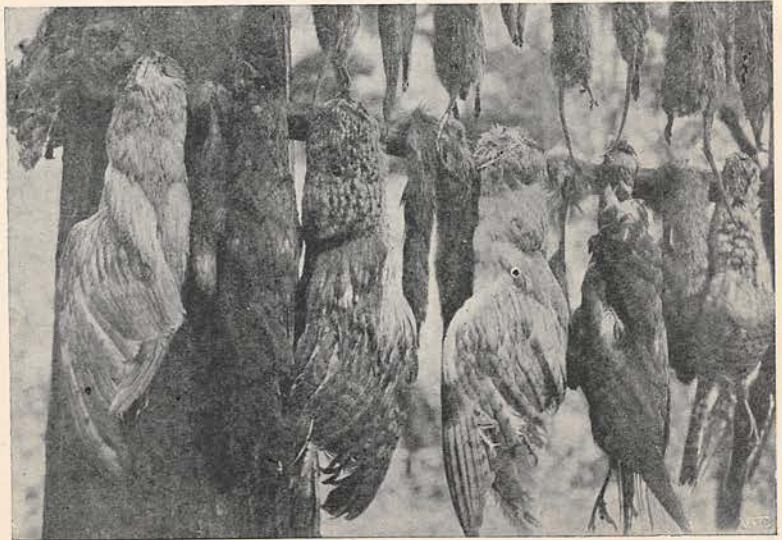
Mr. Cordeaux, in an eloquent protest against the stupid barbarity of the pole-trap, shows the reward of virtue in such moving terms that I shall quote the whole passage, in the hope that possibly one game-preserved or land-owner who may have missed seeing the original passage may see and amend the error of his ways.

Speaking of the Short-eared owl in Lincolnshire, he says:—

“The owls have been exterminated by the keepers with their deadly pole-traps—a cruel form of bird murder which no humane person would tolerate or adopt. The useful

Barn owl, too, has been ruthlessly destroyed, whenever opportunity offered, in the same cruel fashion. Noiselessly across the waste in the twilight, like a flitting phantom, comes the soft-winged owl, and, seeing as if placed ready to his use a post of vantage from which he may mark each stealthy movement of the mischievous field-vole, stays his flight to settle on the treacherous perch; and then during all that long, sad night—and too often, we fear, through the succeeding day—with splintered bone protruding through smashed flesh and torn tendon, hangs suspended in supreme agony, gibbeted head downwards, till death puts an end to his sufferings. Well may we ask, Can all the game-preserving in the world justify this ignorant and needless wrong?”

Many attempts have been made by ornithologists to introduce the Little owl by turning numbers of them out on their estates; and for a time they do well and breed, but no sooner do they wander outside the protected area than they generally come to grief. It is a common bird in Holland, France, Spain, Italy, and Greece. Of the other owls which sometimes appear in England, the fine Snowy owl and the Eagle owl are inhabitants of northern latitudes, as is also the small eared species, Tengmaln's owl, while Scop's owl, also eared, is found in the south of Europe. Then there is also the Hawk owl, a very common bird in Norwegian and Swedish forests, but which is an exceedingly rare straggler in this country.



THE REWARD OF VIRTUE.