LOST BRITISH BIRDS

BY

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WITH 15 DRAWINGS BY A. D. McCORMICK

1894
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The species described as lost in this paper, are those which were summer residents and breeders, or inhabitants all the year round, of some part of Great Britain, but which no longer breed in this country and visit our shores only as rare stragglers, or, bi-annually, in their migrations to and from their breeding areas on the continent of Europe. In other words, if the British race be extinct the species is here regarded as lost, however abundant it may be elsewhere. Perhaps it would be safer to say if practically extinct; since I have included species of which one or two pairs are still known to breed within the kingdom. In the case of the ruff and reeve, for instance, Professor Newton is inclined to think that I have been a “little premature.” Taking the word “lost” in this restricted sense, I do not think that ornithologists will find that I am very much out in my list, which I have been assisted in making by two friends, both authorities in questions of this kind—Mr. J. E. Harting, and Professor Newton himself. It is certainly difficult to know where to draw the line, and having once determined to include species that are practically extinct, like the hen-harrier and the ruff and reeve, there were others, like the osprey and sea-eagle, which it seemed unreasonable to omit. But it was necessary to draw the line somewhere, and it was thought best to leave out any species represented by at least three or four pairs that have some measure of protection afforded to them when breeding.
The statement is often made that the total disappearance of some species of birds, and the extreme rarity of others, once common in this country, is due to the draining of the marshes, an improved system of cultivation, and kindred causes; and there is no doubt that some aquatic birds that breed in communities would suffer greatly from the breaking up of their ancestral nesting-places. But when we look into the facts relating to the disappearance of the species noticed in this paper, we find that most of them were lost through the direct action of man. Fowlers, gamekeepers, collectors, cockney sportsmen, and louts with guns, pursued them to the death, even as they are now pursuing all our rarer species.

We know that birds are exceedingly tenacious of their breeding-places, and that when not too much persecuted, they rapidly adapt themselves to altered conditions.

In remote, savage and scarcely habitable regions of the earth, the white egrets have been almost exterminated by feather-hunters, to provide suitable ornaments for the ladies of Paris and London. On the other hand, close to our shores, in Holland—a populous and highly-cultivated country—the large white stork is abundant, and so fearless of man, that it builds its nests and rears its young on the roofs of houses. But we need not go so far as Holland, nor indeed out of London, for evidence of the fact that birds will thrive in conditions apparently most unsuited to them so long as man refrains from their persecution. To rooks, magpies, moor-hens, dabchicks, and shy wood-pigeons, all at once grown strangely tame and breeding in parks and squares and gardens, may now be added troops of gulls of three species that spend the winter on our ornamental waters, and grow familiar with the human form.

To come now to the question which most nearly concerns us—namely, what do our losses in bird life really amount to, or, in other words, what proportion does this list of thirteen bear to the whole number of British species?

The number of the lost may not seem large to those who are not ornithologists, and who have on their shelves a costly work on "British Birds," in, say, six or eight splendidly
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illustrated volumes. If any reader, possessing such a work, really wishes to know just how we stand in this matter, and does not mind sacrificing his book in the process of the inquiry, he may get the desired knowledge by adopting the following simple plan:

To begin with, he will find that his work contains life-histories and coloured figures of about 400 species, possibly more—a large number, considering the smallness of the country and its climatic conditions. But alas! he must learn that our island is "an inn for the wayfaring of birds"; that many of these species are nothing but stragglers and waifs, blown, some of them, hundreds, others thousands of miles out of their course; and that they are in no true sense British birds, and are only called so because a few individuals have alighted to rest on our shores, just as a lost bird at sea alights on a ship. Let him then begin by tearing out all the plates of, and the letterpress relating to, these wanderers from the distant parts of Europe, from Africa, Asia and America—the great black woodpecker, cream-coloured courser, flamingo, yellow-billed cuckoo, and many more—about 150 in all. His work will have then lost much of its beauty; it will have an attenuated and rather sorry appearance; but it will require more rough handling yet. On going further into the matter he will find that about twenty of the remaining species are only occasional visitors: the great grey shrike, woodchat, golden oriole, wax-wing, Lapland bunting, rose-coloured pastor, hoopoe, roller, bee-eater, and so on to the end of the list—beautiful birds, large and small. These must be got rid of in the same summary way: one's regret at losing them is all the keener for the knowledge that some of them are summer visitors that have tried to breed and colonize in our country and have not been allowed to do so.

The weeding-out process has now brought us down to the species that are actually extinct, and to those whose extinction is imminent—probably thirty in number. It is useless to keep any of these: some are lost, and the others are so reduced in numbers that it is well nigh impossible to get a
sight of them even by travelling long distances and spending many days in waiting and watching. The eagles and buzzards and kite; the raven, chough, grey lag goose, great skua, roseate tern, dotterel, bearded tit, Dartford warbler—what are the lives of such species as these really worth? It would be idle to retain them in a work on British birds which is not intended to be out of date one or two decades hence. This done, a couple of hundreds of species will remain in the work, which, in its sadly mutilated condition, will better deserve its title; and the conviction will by this time have forced itself on its owner, that we have a very magnificent bird population on paper, but a very poor one in reality. It should be added that of this reduced number (200), a large proportion are never seen by those whose life is confined to land: they are pelagic, and only to be met with out at sea, or in the neighbourhood of those "naked melancholy isles" which so few of us, however great our love of birds may be, are ever able to visit.

The saddest feature in the case is that invariably the finest species are the first doomed: they have indeed been and are being selected for slaughter "for the handsomeness of the same." By placing side by side two sets of drawings, representing, in the one case, species that are gone and are going, and, in the other, such as are common, an excellent object-lesson can be had. The greatly reduced black and white drawings in this pamphlet give but a faint idea of the wonderful beauty of the types represented. Let the reader turn rather to the magnificent coloured illustrations in Lord Lilford's work on "British Birds," and look out these thirteen lost types, and as many others representing species on the verge of extinction—twenty-six in all; then compare them with the drawings of twenty-six predominant species, that are in no danger of extirpation. He will realize, as he never realized before, the greatness of the change which is going on in the character of our bird population. He will see that the noblest and most beautiful forms, all those which gave greatest lustre to our wild bird life, were first singled out for destruction; that the next in order of merit
followed; and so on progressively; leaving only the forms that had no distinguishing mark, that attracted less attention on account of their smaller size, and their inferiority in beauty of shape or colour.

I. Crane—*Grus cinerea*. Of birds which have ceased to rank as British species, the common crane comes first in the order of time. In the sixteenth century it was, with other large game birds—heron, bittern, spoonbill, bustard, etc.—protected by act of Parliament. This was a wise law, that
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gave protection to egg as well as to bird; but in the case of this species, it was of no avail. It is not known when the crane ceased to breed in England, but it is certain that it continued to resort to our shores in considerable numbers down to nearly the end of the seventeenth century.

Willoughby, in 1676, says: "They come to us often in England, and in the fen counties, in Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, there are great flocks of them." As to whether or no they bred at that time he says, "I cannot certainly determine, either from my own knowledge or from the relation of any credible person."

At the present day the crane is a rare visitor—a lost wanderer from happier realms. The resonant, far-sounding cry of this noble bird—one of the most fascinating sounds of wild nature, especially when several individuals, as their custom is, unite their voices in a chorus—will probably never be heard again in England, except from captives in an enclosure. With the crane's figure we are perhaps more familiar than with that of any other large species, and will be so as long as we continue to import decorative hangings, screens and pictures by the million from Japan. To that artistic people the crane is pre-eminent among birds for its beauty and stately grace as is the chrysanthemum among flowers.

II. WHITE SPOONBILL—Platalea leucorodia. Of this strikingly handsome species, Sir Thomas Browne has the following notice in his Account of the Birds found in Norfolk: "The Platea, or Shovelard, which build on the tops of high trees. They formerly built in the hernary at Claxton and Reedham, now at Trimley in Suffolk. They come in March, and are shot by fowlers, not for their meat, but for the handsomeness of the same; remarkable in their white colour, copped crown, and spoon or spatule like bill."

The date of this record is 1678, and shows that the passion for killing things, merely because they are beautiful when alive, is not a growth of the present time. Probably
the bird continued to breed a few years longer in England—perhaps to the end of the seventeenth century.

It is possible that some readers of this paper, who are unacquainted with ornithological literature, will be surprised to learn that the spoonbill—this beautiful bird of an unfamiliar and exotic appearance—was ever a veritable member of the British fauna; and it is true that, with the exception of the passage quoted, no mention is made of the spoonbill by any of the old English writers whose works have come down to us. Some naturalists have even expressed the belief that
the "Platea or Shovelard" of Sir Thomas Browne was the shoveller duck. This point has now been cleared up, and Mr. J. E. Harting has found accounts in old records of breeding-places of the spoonbill in other parts of England. In the Zoologist, 1877, p. 425, he tells us of one which existed in the woods at East Dean, near Chichester, in 1570. He made the still more interesting discovery that spoonbills had a breeding-place, or heronry, in the Bishop of London's park, or grounds, at Fulham. It appears that in the 14th year of the reign of Henry VIII., the bishop brought an action of trespass against a grazier for taking herons and spoonbills from the trees, which had been reserved. An account of the trial of the case, in which the grazier was happily worsted, is given in the Zoologist, 1886, p. 81.

Harting adds that Norden, who himself lived at Fulham, tells us in his Speculum Britanniae (1593), that "the name of the place was anciently written Fullenham, or Fullonham, which (as Master Camden taketh it) signifieth volucrum domus, the habitacle of birdes, or the place of fowles, Fullon and Fuglas in the Saxon toong do signifie fowles, and hame or hame as much as home in our toong."

Fulham keeps its name, also its Bishop's Palace, but is no longer the "habitacle of birdes."

III. Capercaillie—Tetrao urogallus. This noble bird of the pines became totally extinct in Scotland as long ago as 1760, and in Ireland its final extinction occurred about the same time. There is, however, evidence to show that for a century and a half before that date the bird was very scarce in Scotland; and that, on account of its rarity and the esteem it was held in for the table, it was very much sought after. The large male bird, in his magnificent black and green glossed plumage, formed indeed a suitable present to princes and nobles in former days. Its departure was thus hastened; but Mr. Harvie-Brown attributes its extinction to the destruction of great forests by fire, the cutting down of the same by man as late as the days of
Cromwell, and the wasting away of the forests from other natural causes. He further says: "If we accept the above as the most probable causes, and come to examine into the details of the testimony, we find that it was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that any large extent of young wood was planted, nor until the end of the eighteenth century that arboriculture became general in Scotland. The latter would appear to have been too late to afford any fresh sustenance to the indigenous Capercaillies, but it yielded an abundant supply by the date of the restoration of the species in 1837-38 for the reintroduced birds."

Here, then, with its evanishment, ends the first part of the Capercaillie's history in Great Britain. Vanished indeed! The historian of the Great Auk has used the seemingly strange expression, "The living Garefowl is extinct!" which might well call up a smile in the uninformed reader, who does not know the value attached to preserved
specimens of a lost species. So long as specimens exist the dead bird is not regarded as wholly and for ever lost; but rather as having a kind of post-mortem existence, highly advantageous to science—a quiet immortality aloof from the perturbations of nature. When the Capercaillie, after a long and gradual decline, had finally gone out, it was found that not one preserved example existed; consequently, we do not know just what the bird was like. Probably it differed somewhat from the Capercaillie of Northern Europe; and we may be certain of this—that the British race had existed apart from the Continental races from exceedingly remote times, that its isolation must have been brought about by geologic changes, which severed this country from the mainland. Consequently, the Capercaillie, which now happily ranks as a member of the British avi-fauna, is not an indigenous bird, but introduced, and, like the red-legged partridge and the pheasant, an exotic.

With the second part of its history—namely, the restoration of the species, I have no business to deal in this paper; but no reader will grudge me the pleasure of saying something on the subject, since this forms the one bright and pleasant chapter in a story which is otherwise altogether dark and disastrous. And here I wish to express my gratitude to Mr. Harvie-Brown for his volume on the Capercaillie in Scotland, which contains a full account of the reintroduction of that fine bird, and its subsequent progress down to the present time.

In 1827, and again in 1829, some attempts to introduce the Capercaillie were made, but were not successful. The late Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton then took the matter up. He had been staying at Taymouth Castle on the Tay, and "influenced by a desire to introduce these noble birds into Scotland, coupled with that of making Lord Breadalbane some return for his recent kindness," he sent out to Sweden and procured some birds—one lot in 1837, a second in 1838, in all forty-eight individuals. From this centre (Taymouth) the birds have spread, and formed numberless fresh colonies during the last half century.
"The area now occupied by them," says Mr. Harvie-Brown, "comprises Perthshire—the head-quarters of the species—Forfar, Fife, Kinross, Clackmannan, Stirling, and Dunbarton; and also the neighbouring portions of Argyle, Inverness, Aberdeen, and Kincardine, in the west and north; and the Lothians and south shore of the Firth of Forth in the south."

The book I quote from contains a map to illustrate the Capercaillie's extension of range in Scotland; it is spotted and blotched with red colour to show the localities where the birds have colonized; and I do not think that anyone who admires a bird, and laments the impoverishment of our wild bird life, can look on a more beautiful map than this, which teaches so hopeful a lesson. It encourages us to think that others will arise in the future to emulate Sir Fowell Buxton and Lord Breadalbane's example. There are wealthy men among us who spend vast sums of money and much time and energy in the pursuit (and extermination) of the big game of Africa. Surely it would be a
nobler task to bring back to their country some of the fine types that have been lost! The Great Bustard, for instance, which is now thriving and even breeding in England in the unnatural conditions of captivity; it would perhaps cost no more to restore this bird to our country than to slaughter a hundred elephants. It is true that the amusement of slaying a century of elephants with explosive bullets would be greater while it lasted; but it should afford a man a more enduring satisfaction to be able to think that he has accomplished, or even only attempted, some task for which posterity will bless rather than execrate his memory.

IV. Avocet—Recurvirostra avocetta. A handsome black and white bird to which the long, slender, upturned bill gives a somewhat singular appearance. On account of this form of bill it was locally called "shoe-awl," and "shoeing-horn;" also it was known as the yelper, barker, clinker, in allusion to its shrill barking note. In habits it is social, lively and playful, and feeds in a curious way, the birds moving on in an even row, swaying their bodies from side to side, with bills immersed in the shallow water; the action reminding one of a row of mowers mowing a field of grass. Stevenson (Birds of Norfolk) says: "At Salthouse, long prior to the drainage of the marshes and the erection of a raised seabank, the avocets had become exterminated by the same wanton destruction of both birds and eggs as is yearly diminishing the numbers of lesser terns and ringed plover on the adjacent bank." It ceased to breed in England between the years 1822 and 1825. Of former times Stevenson writes: "I have conversed with an octogenarian fowler and marshman, named Pigott, who remembered the 'clinkers' (as the avocet was there called) breeding in the marshes by the hundreds, and used constantly to gather their eggs. Mr. Dowell, also, was informed by the late Harry Overton, a well-known gunner in that neighbourhood, that in his young time he used to gather the avocets' eggs, filling his cap, coat-pockets, and even his stockings; and the poor people thereabouts made puddings and pancakes of them. The birds were also as recklessly
destroyed, for the gunners, to unload their punt guns, would sometimes fire at and kill ten or twelve at a shot. No wonder, then, if the avocets, thus constantly persecuted, gradually became scarce."

A straggler occasionally comes to our shores and is immediately shot. Those who take pleasure in the possession of such remains as birds' feathers, bones and egg-shells, are always glad to secure an avocet.

V. GREAT BUSTARD—*Otis tarda*. About the best history we have of the Great Bustard, as a British species, is contained in Stevenson's *Birds of Norfolk*, and occupies the first forty pages of the second volume of that excellent work. About the bustard itself not much is to be learnt from this, or from any other book on British birds. Strange to say, that when this grand bird inhabited our country, it was never discovered whither it betook itself on its annual disappearances from its favourite breeding resorts; whether to Spain or Africa, or only to some other part of Great Britain.
The fact that it punctually reappeared in many of its haunts as early as January each year, shows that it did not go very far afield. Stevenson does not concern himself much about the bird as an individual—its manners and customs; his account is rather like a history of a people, or race, which is apt to be a chronology and record of principal events—stratagems and spoils, manoeuvres, massacres, pursuit of fugitives, etc., etc. His account opens solemnly: "With almost kindred feelings to those with which one contemplates, in the human race, the extinction of some great historic name, the naturalist, at least, regards the extermination amongst us of this noble indigenous species." That so noble a figure was ever indigenous, a member of an avi-fauna now composed of comparatively mean forms, reads almost like a tale of fancy. Yet this grand bird was once quite common in all open localities suited to its habits throughout the country—the moors of Haddingtonshire and Berwickshire; Newmarket and Royston heaths; the downs of Berkshire, Wiltshire, Dorsetshire, Hampshire and Sussex. In all these localities, Stevenson states, it had ceased to exist before the last of the race of British bustards fell victims to the advancement of agriculture in its last haunt in Norfolk and Suffolk. It was, in other words, deliberately extirpated. In Wiltshire it ceased to exist about 1820; in Yorkshire about 1825; in the open parts of Norfolk and Suffolk it lingered on to 1832 and 1833. But for many years before that date it had been pursued in that ruthless manner, which seems to indicate on the part of the persecutors a fixed relentless determination to wipe the species out—the spirit of the gamekeeper with regard to hawks, owls, the magpie, jay, and other species that still exist to give variety and lustre to our wild bird life, and redeem it from that oppressive sameness which is fast becoming its most prominent characteristic. As long back as 1812 one Turner of Wrotham conceived an ingenious plan for the quick dispatch of bustards, which won him the title of otidivicide, and some substantial benefits.

Of the landowners in the district where the last bustards
continued to breed, Stevenson says: "Not a thought of the extermination of the species seems to have passed through their minds. Either they were entirely indifferent about the matter, or else they believed that since, as long as they could remember, there had always been bustards on their brecks, therefore, bustards there would always be."

VI. **Black-tailed Godwit—*Limosa melanura***. This fine game bird, like the avocet that preceded it by a few years in that last sad migration, is an inhabitant of the waste and solitary fens and meres. As Robert Mudie so well says, "They give life to the places which men neglect;" and it is most curious to note that all these waders and denizens of the sandy shore and marshy flats—plover, curlew, whimbrel, godwit, sandpiper, and stilt—which, as Mudie again says, "are associated with wildness and infertility," are of a loquacious disposition, with wild, clear, penetrating voices of such an indescribable quality, that he who hears them is exhilarated and lifted above
himself more than by all the melody and laughter-like cries of woods and groves.

This species, although so highly esteemed for the table, was in one way more favoured by nature than the conspicuous avocet: the russet-brown and mottled plumage of the male, and dun colour of the female, were in a measure protective, while the bird was of a shy, retiring disposition and semi-nocturnal in its feeding habits. According to Stevenson, its extermination in Norfolk may be said to have occurred between the years 1829 and 1835. He adds: “It seems probable, however, that during the next twenty years a pair or two occasionally returned to the old haunts in the spring, though only to be robbed of their eggs or shot down for their rarity.”

VII. Great Auk—Alca impennis. The Great Auk, or Garefowl, as it was called in the Western Islands of Scotland, is the only species in this obituary which has not only ceased to be a British bird, but is altogether extinct. There is a large amount of literature about it, which is not strange considering the great size of the bird, exceeding that of the goose, its wide range in the North Atlantic, and its importance, while it lasted, as an article of food, first to barbarous tribes and afterwards to Europeans, who were also, in a sense, barbarians. On the hither side of the ocean it once inhabited the coast from Finisterre to the North Cape, but in historical times it was most abundant on the other side of the Atlantic. Its fate in that region may be briefly narrated—it is not a pleasant story. As long ago as the middle of the sixteenth century the sailors who visited Newfoundland to fish on the banks there, began the stupid war of destruction. In their breeding-places the birds were quite tame—tamer, in fact, than our tamest domestic animals—and could be slaughtered without trouble by the crews. But eventually it was found to be too troublesome a task to go on shore, knock the birds down with clubs, then carry their carcases to the ships. Cart-
wright, in his *Journal* (1785), says: "The poor inhabitants of Fogo Island make voyages there to load with birds and eggs. When the water is smooth they make their shallops fast by the shore, lay their gangboards from the gunwale of the boat to the rocks, and then drive as many penguins on board as she will hold, for the wings of these birds being remarkably short they cannot fly. But it has been customary for several crews of men to live all summer on that island for the sole purpose of killing birds for the sake of their feathers. The destruction they have made is
incredible. If a stop be not soon put to this practice the whole breed will be diminished to almost nothing, particularly the penguins, for this is now the only island they have left to breed upon."

It was quite time in 1785 to predict the speedy end of that stupendous yearly massacre. As long back as 1540 one of the early voyagers mentions the loading of his two vessels with dead penguins in less than half-an-hour, and states that besides what were eaten fresh there were four or five tons of them to put in salt. At a later period, when they were slaughtered for their feathers, the fat carcases of the birds were used as fuel. These, and other horrible and loathsome details about the manner in which the poor birds were tortured to death by thousands to make sport for the crews when no profit was to be made by killing them, may be found in Mr. Symington Grieve's elaborate quarto monograph, *The Great Auk* (1885).

Here we are mainly concerned with the bird as a British species. Its principal stations in recent times were St. Kilda, Iceland, the Faroe and Orkney Islands. "From similar causes to those which operated elsewhere," writes the historian of this vanished species, "it gradually was killed off, until in 1844, or possibly 1845, the last was heard of the living Garefowl."

With the opening words of Mr. Grieve's work this brief note may fitly end:—"The whole history of the Great Auk is a sad one—the continued slaughter of the helpless victims, culminating in the final destruction of the race in the skerry, named Eldey, off the coast of Iceland, excites to pity. The last of the Great Auks has lived and died. The race was blotted out, before naturalists, when too late, discovered it was gone. Regrets are now useless—the living Garefowl is extinct."

VIII. **Red Night-Reeler**—*Locustella luscinoides*. The English book name of this small bird—Savi's Warbler—was borrowed from the Italian ornithologist who first described
it as a distinct species in 1821. In Norfolk and Lincolnshire, where it bred regularly, it was well known to the marshmen as the "red craking reed-wren," and the "red night-reeler," or "reel-bird," from its peculiar song, which resembles the whirring of the reel used by wool-spinners. It inhabits reed beds, sings much by night, and makes a cup-shaped nest of closely interlaced sedge-blades.

It is curious to find this small obscure warbler figuring among the extinct British birds; and when we consider that

the largest, most beautiful, or conspicuous species are almost invariably first singled out for destruction by man, one is disinclined to blame him for the disappearance of the night-reeler. That its extinction was caused by a system of drainage is scarcely credible. At the best of times it was a rather rare bird, and about forty years ago, when collectors became aware at the same time both of its existence, and rarity, the usual lively scramble for examples of the bird and its eggs took place, but not many specimens were secured. Its extinction may be said to date back to about the year 1849.
IX. **Black Tern**—*Sterna nigra*. This most aerial and elegant bird of the sea and inland waters was once excessively abundant in the fen country, where it bred annually, and has been lost to us as a summer resident almost within the memory of men still living. "Blue dorr” was its local name in the Norfolk Broad district; in Lincolnshire it was called "carr-swallow” and "carr-crow.” Turner (*Historia Avium*, 1548) spoke of its excessive clamour during the breeding season, which was enough to deafen those who lived near the lakes and marshes it frequented. Pennant, describing the East fen, visited by him in 1769, speaks of the Black Tern in great flocks, almost deafening one with their clamour. Richard Lubbock, about 1818, wrote, "it breeds in myriads at Upton,” near Acle, Norfolk. It ceased to breed in that county about 1835, from what cause is not accurately known. In 1832 it was still breeding in immense numbers in Crowland Wash, Lincolnshire. In 1853 some birds returned, and two or three nests were found in Hockwold Fen. In 1858 a solitary pair bred at Sutton, Norfolk, laying two eggs, which were taken and the birds shot.

Thus ends the story of the Black Tern as a British resident species; the few that revisit our shores stay not to breed. The "great clamour" is a thing of the past. Many of us would now gladly submit to be deafened by it.

X. **Bittern**—*Botaurus stellaris*. This species, once called the common bittern, and found in all suitable localities in England, Scotland and Ireland, was one of the most fascinating of the British birds on account of its solitary, mysterious habits, its strange richly coloured and beautifully pencilled plumage, and that booming cry, once familiar in our land, that "shakes the sounding marsh.” This “boom,” which was uttered during the love season, is likened by those who have heard it to the deep-toned bellowing of a bull. People wondered how so vast a volume of sound could proceed from a bird of its size; and superstitious persons, who dwelt commonly within hearing of it, attributed the sound
to no bittern, or bird, but to the demon or spirit of the desolate places of the earth. There is, said Robert Mudie, a “sublimity” about the bittern.

In Norfolk and Lincolnshire it was formerly most abundant, and Stevenson tells of marshmen who were not satisfied to sit down to their Sunday dinner without a roasted bittern on the table. The same writer says: “For at least fifteen or sixteen years, prior to 1866, I believe this species had altogether deserted us in the breeding season, but in the summer of 1866, the boom of a bittern was again heard at Hoveton broad.” Two years later, in the summer of 1868, two eggs were found at Upton, and one young bird was taken. No later record of their breeding exists. But as a migrant, or straggler, the bird still comes to our shores, especially in severe winters, but only to perish miserably at the hands of man. For at the present time a bittern is no sooner seen than shot, and the event, together with the name of the local bird-stuffer, who receives the
body to practise his beautiful art on, is chronicled in the newspapers. There the interest ends; since the dead bittern, having lost its "sublimity" with its life, is no longer an object that any rational being can take pleasure in contemplating. It is merely "something pretty in a glass case."

"Can nothing be done to stop the annual slaughter of such visitants as these? of which some few, I feel confident, under a protective system, would still pretty regularly remain to breed with us."

Thus wrote Henry Stevenson, author of the *Birds of Norfolk*, when near the end of his life. In the favoured county where he had always lived, he had witnessed the extermination of some beautiful and interesting species, and had observed that others were annually becoming scarcer; and his soul at length revolted against the senseless and hateful passion for killing every creature distinguished by its beauty, strangeness, or rarity. But he could do no more than ask, as so many others have asked during the last half century, "Can nothing be done?"

**XI. Marsh Harrier—*Circus aeruginosus*.** Once a regular breeder, abundant in the fen district, and not uncommon in suitable localities throughout the country; now regarded as extinct by most authorities. Hancock, in *Birds of Northumberland and Durham* (1873) writes: "A few years ago common on swampy moorlands, where it bred, it has now almost disappeared under the policy of the game-preservation, and is fallen, or is fast falling, from the rank of a resident to that of a mere casual visitant. In 1823 I took a nest of it, with four eggs, on the moors at Wemmergill, near Middleton-on-Tees, the shooting-box of the late Lord Strathmore. Both parent birds had been trapped or shot by the gamekeeper, and formed part of his museum, nailed against the stable-walls. This collection was made up of Hawks, Owls, Daws, Buzzards, and such like 'vermin,' both biped and quadruped, being altogether one of the
largest and most disgusting I have ever seen. It is now quite
impossible in the north of England for any gamekeeper to
form such another museum to bear testimony to his zeal and
ignorance, as the so-called vermin no longer exist." Mr.
Dresser (Birds of Europe) says: "In Wales, Suffolk,
Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Lincolnshire, and the
counties from Yorkshire northward, it has become historical."
In 1889 Mr. Howard Saunders (Manual of British Birds)
 wrote: "The Marsh Harrier is now all but banished from
the number of our indigenous birds. . . At the present day
a pair or two, probably colonists from Holland, almost
annually attempt to rear their broods in the Broad district
of Norfolk, but are rarely if ever allowed to succeed; and I
know of no other county in which this Harrier has recently nested. ... Statements respecting its breeding in Aberdeen-shire, Banffshire, etc., are simply incredible. Ireland offers many more congenial situations, and the bird was formerly common ... but since 1840, the keepers have nearly succeeded in exterminating it by the use of poison."

Few years have elapsed since this was written, and the keepers have now wholly succeeded; guns, traps, and poison have given this graceful and interesting hawk his quietus.

XII. RUFF AND REEVE—*Machetes pugnax*. The ruff with his developed ear-tufts and neck frill, looking like an immense Elizabethan collar, or a shield with the quaint head for a centre, presents a very singular appearance, as the accompanying drawing will serve to show. These were its nuptial ornaments, assumed in May and shed in June or July. To make themselves still more conspicuous during the season of courtship, the birds have the curious custom of uniting in what are called "Hills of Ruffs." The "hill" is a small hillock on a marshy flat, which the birds select as a meeting place; every morning this spot is resorted to by a number of individuals, who come together to display their feather ornaments and to fight with each other, probably for possession of the females. In the districts frequented by the birds, it was the custom of the fowlers to find the "hills" and set small horse-hair snares on them to capture the birds; and to the annual persecution of the birds in this way during the breeding season, we must attribute the extermination of the ruff and reeve in England. Down to 1834, the species was described as "common" in Norfolk, especially at Reedham and Acle. In north Lincolnshire, eggs were taken in 1866, and one nest with two eggs as recently as 1882. "This last probably marks the extinction of the species in this country," says Mr. Cordeaux. Lubbock, in his *Fauna of Norfolk*, attributes the great decrease in its numbers of late years to the beauty of the bird having caused it to be more than ever sought after. A ruff "with his show on," which is the
provincial phrase by which the fen-men designate one of these birds in the breeding plumage, is exactly the creature which all bird preservers eagerly snatch up, being purchased not only by the naturalist but by anyone desiring a "pretty object in a glass case."

In this, its favourite county, it lingered on, as a breeder, long after Lubbock's time. Stevenson, in the second volume of his *Birds of Norfolk* (1870) laments the loss within recent times of the avocet, black tern, and black-tailed godwit, and adds: "The Ruff and the Reeve, represented by only a few pairs and in but one locality, must shortly be added to the list if the timely protection of the law be not invoked to protect it." He also says: "So strong, I believe, is the attachment of certain birds to the place of their birth, and so unerring the instinct which directs them, though absent in winter, to return year after year to the
same spot, that, provided only a single pair survives to represent the indigenous race, the ancestral haunt will not be deserted; but if that last native pair be destroyed, their place is rarely, if ever, again filled, even though many representatives of the species on their migratory course may visit our shores in spring; for these too are seeking some far-off home, and the local race may thus pass away for ever.” Practically the Ruff and Reeve have so passed away. We have already seen in Stevenson’s account of the black-tailed godwit’s extermination, that for twenty years after that mournful event one or two pairs annually returned to the old haunts and attempted to breed. That is the case with the ruff and reeve at present. Professor Newton believes that one pair still annually nest at Hickling, Norfolk, but only to have their eggs “poached.”

Mr. John Cordeaux writes (Zoologist, 1890), “The occasional appearance of Ruffs and Reeves in the future on our coast district, during the periods of their double passage, may reasonably be expected, but, unless England becomes dispeopled and uncultivated, nothing can ever bring back in numbers or variety the wealth of the ancient avi-fauna.”

XIII. HEN HARRIER—Circus cyaneus. Marsh Harrier, Ruff and Reeve, and Hen Harrier, have come to the end of their existence as British species almost if not quite simultaneously. Harriers are birds of the open—moorland and marsh—and nest on the ground; it follows that in a country where no interval of mercy, or Close Time, is extended to birds of prey, they are less able to escape destruction than the species which nest in cliffs and trees—falcons, kites, and buzzards. Of Harriers we possessed three species; of these the ash-coloured or Montagu’s Harrier still remains, but in fast diminishing numbers; and it may now be set down among those birds whose extinction is merely a question of time. Of the three British species the Hen Harrier (the adult male) is undoubtedly the handsomest. From the soft blue grey colour of its plumage
it has been called Blue Hawk and Dove Hawk; in figure it is more slender and airy than the other raptors, and it has a singularly buoyant and graceful flight, not unlike that of a gull, as it beats over the ground in quest of prey, often riding so low as almost to touch the surface.

That this bird is now wholly extinct in Great Britain it would scarcely be safe to affirm; one can only say, that, like the preceding species (ruff and reeve), it is practically extinct. Mr. Howard Saunders, in his Manual of British Birds, writes: "Of late years its numbers have been so far thinned by game-preservers that it is now only to be found
nesting in a few of the wildest and most extensive moorlands in England and Wales." This was written some six or seven years ago; if a few pairs of Hen Harriers have survived to the present time I shall be glad to know it.

The loss of these extinct hawks, and of others that are threatened with extinction, is greatly to be deplored. To say nothing of their value to us because they are what they are—parts of that harmonious and infinitely complex system which the mind contemplates with inexhaustible delight—they are necessary to the health of the system. They are, as Canon Tristram has aptly said, the "sanitary police of nature"; and their action in removing the weaklings and the infected, and in keeping all creatures that are liable to be preyed on by them perpetually on the alert, is wholly beneficial, and the chief cause of that undimmed health, boundless vigour, and bright intelligence characteristic of wild animal life.

These are familiar truths, but unhappily they have been, and continue to be, disregarded by our landowners—the one class that had it in their power to preserve the bird population to the country in something like its original varied character. The desire for a large head of game, a big autumnal "shoot"—the ignoble ambition to transform a great estate into a kind of glorified poultry-farm, where you shoot your birds, instead of catching them in the usual way and wringing their necks—has overbalanced all other considerations. Hence the partridge and pheasant coddling policy, and the pitiless persecution of all birds whose presence is, or is ignorantly supposed to be, a check on the excessive multiplication of the one or two species chosen for preservation.

On the other side it may be said that the careful preservation of partridges, and still more of pheasants, affords protection to incalculable numbers of small birds; not only from "vermin," but also from human beings who kill birds and pull their nests down, merely for the pleasure of so doing. To those, then, who are satisfied so long as we possess an abundance of bird life, however few the species
and insignificant the forms may be, the game-preserver's action may be regarded as on the whole more beneficial than harmful. To all others this accidental benefit will not appear a thing to be grateful for, but, on the contrary, a very poor exchange. When the trees have shed their foliage we are best able to take stock of our remaining resident land species; and, excepting only the comparatively large omnipresent rook and wood-pigeon, and the couple of artificially-protected and semi-domestic game birds, what species do we find in the cultivated and preserved country? The cloud of sparrows in the rickyard; the congregations of larks and starlings in the fields and meadows; the swarm of mixed finches in the stubbles and along the hedge-rows; blackbirds and thrushes in the woods and copses; and, over-
head, the usual company of small wandering titmice, with here and there a robin, wren, or creeper—a day of terribly small things for the ornithologist! If, by chance, a buzzard or heron should appear, the unexpectedness of the sight, the great size by contrast of such a bird, the instant relief and change it affords from the almost hateful monotony which English bird life usually presents, excites the beholder with astonishment and delight, as if some lordly giant among the avians had been seen—an ostrich or a condor.

For this condition of things we have to thank the game-preserver.
CONCLUSION.

It will perhaps be thought by some that I have strained a point in order to make things look a little worse than they are. Unfortunately they are really worse than I have made them appear, both with regard to the number of lost species, and to the falling off in the character of the bird population, owing to the rapid decrease of the most attractive forms, and a corresponding increase in those that are least attractive. With regard to the former point, there is reason to believe that at least four species not included in the list were once summer residents and breeders in Great Britain. These are the gos-hawk, night heron, little bittern, and Baillon's crake. There is a fifth to be mentioned—the very small bird perched on the skull of a great bird figured on the cover of this pamphlet. In the little bird the ornithologist will at once recognize the St. Kilda wren; and when he considers that this small feathered creature is a dweller among the rocks near the sea, and frequently nests in crevices and holes just above high-water mark on the shores of that "habitacle of birdes" which the Great Auk once haunted, he will not regard the drawing as a representation of something purely fanciful. It will be remembered that about nine or ten years ago Mr. Charles Dixon found this wren quite common at St. Kilda, where it was the only small bird resident all the year. It differed from the common wren in its habits, and more powerful song; its paler ground colour and more distinct markings, and in its stouter legs and feet. On account of these distinguishing characters it was described as a new species—Troglodytes hirtensis. It is now believed by ornithologists that the St. Kilda wren is not specifically distinct from the wren of the mainland; that it is a variety,
a race, which has diverged from the parent form during the long centuries of its isolated life on that wintry island where not a tree or shrub exists. Species, sub-species, or variety, it matters little; what concerns us just now is the following fact. No sooner had the news gone abroad that "lone St. Kilda's isle" possessed one little song-bird of her own—a wren that differed somewhat from the familiar wren—than it was invaded by the noble army of collectors, who did not mind its loneliness and distance from the mainland so long as they secured something for their cabinets; and the result of their invasion is that the St. Kilda wren no longer exists.

It is after all very difficult to determine which of the following three inveterate bird-destroyers have done and are doing the most to alter, and, from the nature-lover's point of view, to degrade, the character of our bird population:—The Cockney sportsman, who kills for killing's sake; the gamekeeper who has set down the five-and-twenty most interesting indigenous species as "vermin" to be extirpated; or, third and last, the greedy collector, whose methods are as discreditable as his action is injurious?
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