AQUILA CHRYSÆTOS, *Briss*

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Golden Eagle.

Falco chrysaetos, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 125.

— *fulvus*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 125.

Aquila chrysaetos, Briss. Orn., tom. i. p. 431.

— *Barthelemyi*, Jaub.

As civilization advances, this noble bird, the lord of our ancient forests, will either become extirpated or driven to seek an asylum in parts of the country where nature still preserves a savage aspect. High cultivation and its presence are incompatible; the lamb and the Eagle can never dwell together in peace; neither can the fawn or the roebuck live without molestation within the range of its haunts. The Highland shepherd and the keeper therefore do their utmost to destroy it; and the time is probably not far distant when it will no longer have a place in the avifauna of the British Islands: hence a bird so frequently referred to in the Sacred Writings, which has ever been the theme of the poets, which some of the most powerful nations of the earth have employed as an emblem of their majesty and greatness, the flight-feathers of which are worn for the like reason in the bonnet of the Highland chieftain, and whose tail-feathers are employed by the sanguinary Indian to bedeck his head when dressed in battle array, will be entirely lost to us—a loss which would, I am sure, be a source of regret to every one who has a taste for nature; and I therefore hope that our great landed proprietors will exert their influence to preserve the remnant of our Golden Eagles. To effect this, however, without some combined efforts, will, I fear, be impracticable; but as a love for and interest in the welfare of our indigenous animals is now animating the breasts of many among us, I trust that it will, for the future, rather be the object of protection than, as at present, of foolish destruction; if it be, I feel assured that none other than the best results will follow. The Blue Hare, now so numerous, will furnish it with an abundance of food, and thus the numbers of an animal which of late years has increased to such an extent as to have become a pest, will be diminished, and the balance of animal life, which the wanton destruction of our birds of prey has disturbed, will again be in part restored. That the Eagle, the Kestrel, and the Owl are essentially necessary to the equalization of the numbers of our indigenous mammals is certain; and this I shall have constantly to speak of in the course of the present work.

To show the amount of destruction dealt out to this noble bird and the Sea Eagle, the Sutherlandshire Expedition of Naturalists state that the number of Eagles paid for between March 1831 and March 1834 was 171, besides 53 nestlings or eggs; and a gamekeeper in the south-west of that county trapped 15 Eagles in three months of 1847, and almost as many in the winter of 1850–51.

In times past the Golden Eagle was the regular denizen of all the hilly and mountainous districts of England, particularly those of Derbyshire, Cumberland, and Westmoreland, many parts of Wales, the whole of Scotland and Ireland, including their islands; it is now only found in Argyll, Sutherland, and Ross shires in Scotland, the islands of Orkney and Skye, and the counties of Donegal, Kerry, and Mayo in Ireland. Up to the last year (1862), two eyries at least were to be seen on the Black Mount, the property of the late Marquis of Breadalbane, who made it a *sine quâ non* that his foresters should at any time show him an Eagle; were this laudable conduct imitated by other enlightened proprietors, we should not have occasion to lament the gradual disappearance of this noble bird. It is one of these eyries that is represented in the fine drawing made by Mr. Wolf, from which the accompanying Plate was taken. Its more frequent haunts are in such districts as those mentioned; but the bird is often to be met with in rocky situations in the neighbourhood of the sea, wherever it is likely to obtain an abundance of food. Although I have stated that the Golden Eagle is now confined to a limited area, it must not be understood that examples are not occasionally found in many or, indeed, in nearly every English county; these chance visitors are, however, in almost all instances, birds of the year, or not more than two years old; they are probably the offspring of parents resident in Scotland; but they may be migrants from Norway, Sweden, or other distant countries; for it is well known that the young of both our great Eagles, in obedience to a law which appears to influence the whole of the Falconidæ, wander further from their native home than the adults: were these birds allowed to remain unmolested instead of being ruthlessly shot, they would doubtless retire northward at the proper season, and form eyries for themselves.

What are the other countries inhabited by this fine bird? is a question which will naturally be asked by many of my readers; to which I would answer, that it is found throughout the whole of Europe, but is more numerous among the Alps, the Pyrenees, and other mountainous parts of the Continent, from Italy to Norway, than in the lowlands of Holland and many parts of Germany, which latter countries, are, however,

like England, occasionally visited by the young birds. Out of Europe, the Atlas range of mountains in North Africa is one of its places of abode, while in the East it frequents the great ranges of the Himalayas, and doubtless the Steppes of Tartary; for it is probably the "Bear-coot" so frequently spoken of by Atkinson, as standing at the tents of the wandering Kirghises and other tribes of that country. Mr. Gurney has no doubt that it also frequents all the countries of North America that are favourable to its habits, from Labrador to Texas, but believes that it is never found on the Pacific side of that continent.

The powers of flight of this king of British birds are commensurate with its large size and ample wings. It may often be seen in fine weather sailing to a vast height toward the blue vault of heaven, apparently for no other purpose than that of pleasure; and its evolutions are graceful and majestic while thus engaged; at other times it may be observed hunting the hill-side in couples and in concert, one flying directly over their intended prey, and the other following near the ground; and it has been known to stoop and carry off a hare from before the hounds. Such is the alarm its presence creates, that the swift-flying Golden Plover and the fleet Mountain-Hare appear as if spell-bound when overshadowed by the wings of their terrible enemy. It preys alike upon Grouse, black game, Curlews, Partridges, and Plovers among birds, to which may be added the flesh of hares, rabbits, lambs, fawns, moles, and carrion of all kinds, particularly stranded sheep, fatally struck deer, &c.; and I see no reason for doubting the possibility or probability of its occasionally pouncing upon and carrying off a sleeping infant or shepherd's child, if left unprotected on the hill-side: many such occurrences have been recorded, and doubtless some of them are founded in truth. Lord Hill informs me, on the authority of the shepherds on his fine estate in Ross-shire, that the Golden Eagle, while hunting the hill-side, will frequently swoop down upon a lamb, playfully take it up in its talons, and drop it again, and then another and another, apparently trifling with its victim after the manner of a cat with a mouse. The shepherds also assert that it occasionally takes the lambs over to the smaller islands between the mainland and Skye; and as no sheep are kept on those islands, there can be no doubt that the lambs occasionally found there are thus conveyed thither.

The situations selected by the Golden Eagle for the purposes of nidification are very varied: sometimes a bold precipitous overhanging rock is selected; at others merely an escarpment on the hill-side, where, without any great amount of prowess or trouble on the part of the collector, the nest may be robbed of its eggs or young; at other times, and doubtless formerly more frequently than at present, the large stump or forked branch of a towering tree is chosen for the site of its large plateau of sticks, branches of heather, and other materials, the centre being usually formed of finer substances, such as wool, moss, fern-grass, and tufts of *Luzula sylvatica*. If left unmolested, the birds frequently resort to the same eyrie for years, annually adding fresh materials, until at length, like the huge structures of their representative the Wedge-tailed Eagle of Australia, the nests become of gigantic dimensions. The eggs, mostly two and sometimes three in number, vary considerably in their markings, some being of a nearly uniform dull white, while others are most beautifully blotched and clouded with grey and brown over a light stone-coloured ground. To give a minute description of any one egg would answer no good end, they are so variable; the reader will find some splendid varieties figured in Mr. Hewitson's fine work on the eggs of our native birds, and in the 'Ootheca Wolleyana.' Those who take especial interest in British oology should endeavour to gain access to the collection formed by the late Mr. John Wolley, which was bequeathed by him to Alfred Newton, Esq., and contains a very large series of the eggs of this species. Besides varying so much in colour, the eggs also differ considerably in size and shape; Mr. Alfred Newton informs me that the largest egg in his collection measures 3.23 inches by 2.59, and the smallest 2.85 by 2.16.

When first hatched, the eaglets are covered with white down, in which state they remain for a considerable period, day by day increasing in strength and stature; brown stub feathers next begin to appear in their wings and tail; and if the eggs have been hatched about the usual time the end of April, the summer has far advanced before they have gained sufficient power to exercise their pinions.

The young, during the first two years of their existence, present a marked difference from the adult in the colouring of the tail,—the basal three-fourths of its length being white, and the apical fourth of a rich brown, which has obtained for the bird the trivial name of the Ring-tailed Eagle. As they increase in age, the white gradually darkens into the hue of the tip; and when fully adult, the tail is of a uniform dark brown, except at the base, where it is marbled with grey.

The female, as is usual with birds of prey, is by far the largest, often attaining a weight of fourteen pounds.

When adult, the whole of the body and wings are of a dark rich vinous brown; the lanceolate feathers clothing the head and neck rich golden brown; tarsi, which are covered with feathers to the toes, greyish white; tail the same as the body, except at the base, where it is grey marbled with brown; bill horn-colour; cere and toes yellow; irides brown.

The front figure of the Plate represents the bird about one-third of the size of life, taken from an example about three or four years old.

Gould, John. 1873. "Golden Eagle, *Aquila chrysaëtos* [Pl. 2]." *The birds of Great Britain* 1, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323785>.

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