SYRNIUM ALUCO.

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Tawny or Brown Owl.

Strix aluco, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 132.

— *stridula*, Id. *ibid.* p. 133.

Syrnium ululans, Savig. Desc. de l'Égypt, pt. i. p. 112.

— *stridulum*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xiii. pt. ii. p. 62.

— *aluco*, Cuv. Règn. Anim., 2nd edit. tom. i. p. 343.

Ulula stridula, Selby, Ill. Brit. Orn., vol. i. p. 102.

Aluco stridulus, Macgill. Desc. of Rap. Birds of Gt. Brit., p. 367.

Ulula aluco, Macgill. Hist. of Brit. Birds, vol. iii. p. 438.

THAT the Brown Owl has many persecutors and but few friends is quite certain, his destructive propensities, particularly during the breeding-season, having called down upon him the maledictions of the game-preserver and the keeper; but this one-sided judgment is just the 'Farmer and the Rook' over again, no consideration for the good he effects being taken into the account. Were it possible for a pair of Brown Owls to produce a yearly record of the number of nocturnal moles, Norway rats, and destructive field-mice they have destroyed, against a similar account of what has been done in this way by any five keepers, I question whether the balance would not be in favour of the Owls. Let us remember that the whole face of our country is gradually changing—woodland districts giving place to arable lands; and that the situations favourable to the habits of this bird are becoming more and more circumscribed, and consequently that it is to our interest to protect, rather than to extirpate, the remnant of the species which remains. Let us then cherish the Brown Owl as a bird designed for an especial purpose; let us still hear its hollow, rolling hoot in the twilight, or listen to the challenge-note of the males—the only sound which breaks the stillness of midnight in those woodland parts of the country where it still lingers. For myself, and doubtless for many other persons, the hoo-hoo-hoots of this bird have a great charm, and, in my opinion, amply compensate for the loss of the few leverets it may take home to its craving young during the months of April and May. I believe the brown rat to be far more destructive to leverets and young pheasants than this Owl ever can be. Let the preserver of game, then, bear this in mind, and not raise his gun at every Owl that blindly tumbles out of a tree when the covers are shot over: if he mistake the Owl for a Woodcock, which I have heard offered as an excuse, his destructive propensities and want of judgment are about upon a par. Having said thus much in favour of the Brown Owl, I must now proceed to speak more particularly of its habits and economy, and especially of its varied diet. It not only kills the smaller quadrupeds above enumerated, but its prowling habit leads it to pounce, during the stillness of the night, upon sleeping Black-birds, Thrushes, or any other species it can master; and, strange as it may appear, it also hunts the edges of pools and rivers and captures living fish; in support of which latter assertion, I shall quote some passages which have appeared in works on natural history and in the daily newspapers. I commence with the greater portion of a note on the subject, which appeared in the 'Magazine of Natural History' for the year 1828, p. 179:—"Probably it may not be generally known to naturalists that the Common Brown Owl is in the habit, occasionally at least, of feeding its young with live fish—a fact which I have ascertained beyond doubt. Some years since, several young Owls were taken from the nest, and placed in a yew tree in the rectory-garden here; in this situation the parent birds repeatedly brought them live fish, Bull-heads (*Cottus Gobio*) and Loach (*Cobites barbátula*), which had doubtless been procured from the neighbouring brook, in which these species abound. Since the above period, I have on more than one occasion found the same fish, whole or in fragments, lying under the trees in which I have observed the young Owls to perch after they have left the nest, and where the old birds were accustomed to feed them." (Rev. W. T. Bree, Allesley Rectory, near Coventry.)

"This circumstance," says J. M., on the same page of the Magazine, "is mentioned in Jennings's 'Ornithologia,' and corroborates a declaration made by a labourer who was employed to watch the fish-pond in the flower-garden at Bulstrode about fifty years ago. The gold and silver fish had been missed; the Duchess Margaret of Portland, being a lady of distinguished taste for every curious object of natural history, suspecting the pond had been poached, ordered the gardener, Mr. Agnew, to employ men to watch. The watchmen detected the robbers, when they saw them alight on the edge of the pond, and there waiting the approach of the fish, captured and devoured them! The Common Brown Owls were the robbers; at least, so the men reported, but they were not generally credited."

The following paragraph, copied from the 'Bath Journal,' appeared in the 'Times' of October 29, 1858:—

"*An Owl's Larder.*—A few days since an Owl's nest was taken upon the farm of Mr. Parker, Burnett's

Farm, near this city, with three young ones in it. The luxurious and voracious habits of the Owl may be imagined from the contents of this nest, which consisted of two leverets, one rabbit, three blackbirds, one thrush, and two large trout. They were all fresh, and had been apparently caught during the night."

This statement interested me so much, that I requested a friend then living in Bath to ascertain who was its author; and the following is an extract from a letter of the writer, which was immediately transmitted to me:—"You may rely upon it that the article entitled 'An Owl's Larder' is strictly true: when I sent it to the 'Bath Journal,' I felt convinced that most persons would doubt its being so. The pair of birds alluded to built their nest and fostered their young in the spring of this year at Burnett's Farm, near Saltford. It was the great quantity of fresh-killed food which attracted my attention and induced me to make a note of it."

Were I to enumerate all the localities in England and Scotland which are inhabited by the Brown Owl, I might fill many pages to no purpose; I may mention, however, the great woods of Tregothnan, the seat of Viscount Falmouth, in Cornwall, where, if it be not strictly preserved, it at all times enjoys the friendship of the noble proprietor. Keepers will, however, often retain their own opinions, in spite of advice and remonstrance, and I fear the poor bird finds but little favour in that quarter. In the romantic and beautiful woods on the banks of the Thames, at Cliveden in Buckinghamshire, the Brown Owl lives in comparative safety, breeding yearly in the deserted fox-holes and hollow trees; and it gives me great pleasure to say that the Duchess of Sutherland extends to it the most friendly protection. Within a week of the time I am writing (April 8, 1864), at the close of the most wonderful evening carols of Thrushes and Blackbirds I ever heard, the Brown Owl commenced his nightly serenade, his hollow *hoo-hoo-hoo* resounding over the water until it was lost in the distance. At Elveden, in Norfolk, the bird has always been befriended by those excellent ornithologists Alfred and Edward Newton, Esqrs., as will be seen from a note given below from the 'Ootheca Wolleyana.' I might go on particularizing many other friends whose estates the bird frequents, and who favour it with their protection. If allowed to do so, the Brown Owl would contentedly live in any of the wooded districts of England and Wales and the southern parts of Scotland. In the far north of the latter country it becomes more scarce; and I believe we have no authentic account of its having been killed in Ireland. On the Continent the Brown Owl enjoys a wide range, for it is found everywhere except in the extreme north; it also occurs in Northern Africa, and doubtless in Asia Minor and Persia; while the Himalayas are frequented by an Owl so closely resembling it, that it can scarcely be regarded as distinct.

"From 1844, and probably for a much longer time," says Mr. A. Newton, "a pair of Brown Owls had frequented some clumps of old elms near the house at Elveden. There were three of these clumps, in one or the other of which they invariably laid their eggs. The trees were of considerable age, and mostly quite hollow, with an abundance of convenient nesting-places. By waiting quietly about an hour after sunset, my brother Edward or myself could generally discover whereabouts the Owls had taken up their quarters for the season; but it sometimes happened that we did not find the nest until the young were hatched. Throughout the winter the Owls kept pretty much in company; but towards the middle of February they used to separate, the cock often passing the day in a tree at some distance from the hen. As soon as he came out in the evening to hunt, he announced the fact by a vigorous hoot. Upon this the hen would emerge silently, and, after a short flight, reply to her mate's summons by a gentle note. He then generally joined her, and they would fly off together to procure their food. The eggs were commonly laid about the second week in March, and the nests were almost always easily accessible. I never knew these birds occupy the same hole for two successive years; but, after an interval of two or three years, they would return to the same spot. There were never any materials collected to form a nest, the large white eggs being always placed on the rotten wood, which in most cases formed a sufficient bedding. We never found more than four eggs in the nest. These often, but not always, proved to have been incubated for different lengths of time, showing that the hen bird sometimes began to sit as soon as the first egg was laid; but we could never divine what might be the cause of this irregularity of habit. After the young birds had left the nest, it was some time before they began to shift for themselves; and they used to sit in the shadiest trees for the best part of the summer, uttering a plaintive note, like "keewick," night and day, almost without cessation, to attract the attention of their parents, who assiduously brought them the spoils of the chase."

Every ornithologist who has directed his attention to our native birds must have noticed the great variation which occurs in the colouring of different examples of the Brown Owl—differences so great as to have induced even Linnæus to regard them as specific, and to characterize them as such under the terms *aluco* and *stridula*; and I must admit that I was for a long time sadly puzzled respecting them; the generally received opinion, however, is that the rich russet-coloured birds are the young of the year, and that this colour gradually disappears as the bird attains maturity, when it gives place in both sexes to a greyish brown: the former state has given rise to the trivial name of Tawny Owl, the latter to that of Brown Owl. When first hatched, the young birds are clothed with a grey down, upon which, as they progress in stature, crescentic and circular markings of reddish brown gradually appear, until they assume the colouring which has obtained for them the former appellation.

The front figure in the accompanying Plate is somewhat less than the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Tawny or Brown Owl, *Syrnium aluco* [Pl. 29]." *The birds of Great Britain* 1, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323808>.

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