How often do we find that ideas of the ancients are founded upon a semblance to truth! and thus the herdsmen of Greece and Rome seem to have concluded that this wide-mouthed bird could frequent the neighbourhood of goats and cattle solely for the purpose indicated in the name they assigned to it; whereas it seems more reasonable to suppose that it seeks those animals for the sake of the insects disturbed by them in the act of grazing. A similar habit obtains in the Common Yellow Wagtail (Motacilla flava), which may be daily seen tripping round the cattle in our meads, and leaping up beneath them, for flies and other insects. There are hundreds of people in England who to this day believe that the hedgehog also seeks the teats of cows; some even assert that they have seen it in the act. Now the truth is that the animal is utterly incapable of such a feat; and, like the bird, it is doubtless attracted to the haunts of the cattle by the abundance of insect food there found. The Starling leaps on the backs of sheep, the Buphaga on those of the African oxen, and the Zic-zac enters the mouth of the crocodile (so says Herodotus), all with the same object. The ridiculous notions so prevalent with regard to the Nightjar and the hedgehog must therefore be regarded as mere popular errors.

The European Nightjar belongs to a very extensive group of nocturnal birds, to which the family name of Caprimulgidae has been given. With the exception of New Zealand and Polynesia, the Arctic and Antarctic regions, one or other of them inhabit the land portion of the entire globe. Their food, in general, consists of insects, for the capture of which their varied forms show an especial adaptation, however different the insects may be, from the huge Cicadae and Phasmdae to the most delicate moth. In their structure, these Nocturnes are wonderfully diversified, some species being armed with lengthened and very powerful vibrissae, as in Caprimulgus, while in others this character is entirely absent, as in Chordeiles; some have a pectinated middle claw, others have not; some have exceedingly wide gapes and most delicate mandibles, as Nyctidromus; others have stout horny bills, as Batschachatous and Podargus; some have very lengthened wings, especially formed for aerial flight, as in Chordeiles; others have lengthened tarsi, showing that the ground is their natural province, as in Nyctidromus; some are Owl-like, nest in the holes of trees, and lay white eggs, as the Australian genus Aegotheles; while the South-American cave-dweller, Steatornis, which is said to sally forth at night and vary its food with fruits and berries, has a toothed, Falcon-like bill: other genera have extraordinary appendages to the wings, as in the African forms Macronipteryx and Siewiophs; while in the South-American genus Hydroastalis the tail-feathers are so enormously developed that we are lost in wonder how the birds capture their prey. I have merely mentioned a few of the more remarkable genera of the extensive family of which our bird forms a part; and, premising that it is to the birds of this form that the old classical name of Caprimulgus, as a generic appellation, is restricted, we will now turn to the history of this species, for it is that in which we are more particularly interested.

In the British Islands, over the whole of which it is distributed, the Nightjar is strictly a summer visitant, arriving in the month of May, and taking up its abode in woods with open glades, and larch plantations with sandy and rusty bottoms, wide upland open game-covers, low copses in the neighbourhoold of meadows, sterile heaths, and other waste lands. Highly cultivated districts, then, where the farmer and the Rook strive to keep down insect-life, are not in unison with the habits of the bird, and consequently it is seldom seen in such situations. Strictly nocturnal in its habits, the Nightjar lives upon insects of various genera, but especially moths and chafers, which it captures in the air or on the ground. Its flight is buoyant in the extreme, and all its aerial evolutions remarkably graceful. At one moment it may be seen diving round and among the branches of the stately oak, at another hawking over the meadow, performing, in the course of its flight, a thousand turns and dippings, similar to the evening gambols of the great noctule Bat. The air, however, is by no means the only place in which it seeks its food; for it runs over the ground and among the grass with the greatest facility, leaping up and capturing the moths and other insects which there abound, and for securing which its wide gape, beset with strong vibrissae, is admirably adapted. On the ground also it lays its two eggs; in the forest-glande, on the bare earth, are they incubated. Here, after remaining blind for several days, its curiously marked couplets first receive the twilight; and here these little Nightjars are supplied with food until they are able to trip over the surface and catch insects for...
themselves; ultimately they hawk in the air, and, like their parents, perch lengthwise on the rugged branches of the trees. Under the stimulating influence of the abundance of food procurable at midsummer, they quickly attain size and strength, and by the end of August or beginning of September enter on their first travels to the "unknown land" where their parents spent the previous winter, and which is doubtless Morocco.

Independently of the British Islands, the Nightjar inhabits all the warmer and temperate portions of Europe; I believe it also frequents the whole of Africa, and ranges as far east as Afghanistan.

From the above remarks it will be seen that the Nightjar is plentifully diffused over nearly every part of Great Britain; yet I venture to affirm that there is not one in a thousand persons who has ever observed it in a state of nature: they may have seen a skin or a mounted specimen in some museum; and this is all the evidence they have of its being one of the birds of our island; of its history, habits, and economy they are totally ignorant. It is the ornithologist, inspired by a love for nature and her works, who seeks out its whereabouts, silently watches its movements, and lends an earnest ear to its spinning, vibrating, or chirring notes, which, commencing precisely at the setting of the sun, are poured forth at intervals during the whole night. The pastor who rests him on yonder stile while returning from his visit to some sick parishioner, the village lad and lass whose evening walk has thoughtlessly led them far away, the cottager who takes a turn round his garden before retiring to his early rest, the watcher who seats himself under the hedge or in the shade of a copse, the stealthy poacher of the eggs of the Pheasant and other game birds, these are the persons who are acquainted with the Nightjar and its habits in a state of nature.

May be the horse of the farmer, who is sleepily returning from the market-town, suddenly starts backward and throws his rider; the cause is probably unknown, but it most likely was the Nightjar, which has abruptly risen from the road under the horse's nose. Let not this trait in the habits of the bird be doubted; for we know that it frequently squats in the road and pathway, and it is asserted that both rider and mule are in like manner often tumbled over the precipices in some of the more dangerous mountain-passes of South America by the sudden rising of the Hydroptila pastora, with its long whip-like tail. Superstitions of various kinds attach to most nocturnal birds, and our Nightjar forms no exception to the rule; for Mr. Smither informs me that the labours classes round Churt, in Surrey, believe that it has the power of rendering any person annoying it "puckeridge-struck," and hence they have an objection to disturb either the bird or its eggs for fear of the consequences. Gilbert White mentions a similar superstition; but in this case cattle, and not human beings, were supposed to be the objects of their malevolence.

The male may always be recognized by the presence of a series of white spots on the wings and tail; in all other respects the two sexes are alike in colour.

The peculiar use of the pectinated claw of the middle toe has not yet been satisfactorily stated; it has been supposed that it was intended as a means of clearing the vibrissae from any matters that might attach to them during the act of feeding; but this cannot be the case, for the pecinations are so close to each other that the stout vibrissae could not possibly pass between them. The actual use of this pectinated claw must, I fear, remain for the present involved in obscurity. It is believed by some persons to be a means by which the bird rides itself of certain parasites.

The usual resting-place of the Nightjar during the day is on the ground, where it sleeps like other nocturnal birds, but from which it is easily disturbed, when it flies off to some other part of the wood, and either settles again on the earth or lengthwise on some large branch of a tree. During the intervals of feeding, it perches on the tops of trees, on the summit of a heap of turf, a large stone, rail, or gate-post, where its chirring note, resembling the sound of a spinning-wheel, is constantly uttered from sundown until the shades of night are lost in the early dawn. While flying, it frequently claps its wings together over its head, thereby producing a sound very similar to the first flushing of a Woodcock.

The throat of one of these birds which I examined was crammed with Xylophasia polyodon and one specimen of the cream-coloured Tiger Moth (Arctia eilectra), most of which were still alive, notwithstanding the bird had been dead two days.

The eggs are oval in form, and always two in number, beautifully clouded and veined with bluish grey on a white ground; they are 1 inch and 2 lines long, by 10 lines in breadth.

The young are very easily reared, if taken at an early stage of their existence, by first cramming them with scraped beef, and afterwards supplying them with hard-boiled eggs, chopped fine, and insects; they soon become very tame, run over the room with facility, and evince no desire to escape, unless a window be suddenly opened, when they are off in an instant. In this way a fine specimen was lost by my friend Dr. Günther, after he had carefully reared it to the size of the mature bird.

The Plate represents a male, a female, and two young ones a few days old, of the size of life.

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