CORVUS FRUGILECUS, Linn.
Wann it desirable to collect all that has been written respecting the Rook, the accumulated material would be sufficient to form a goodly-sized volume. Pennant and Yarrell refer to Virgil as the earliest of its commentators, thereby showing that the bird had attracted the attention of that careful observer of nature, prior to the Christian era. In more recent times, our own Gilbert White, Macgillivray, and Thompson have each published extensive memoirs respecting it; and thus but little opportunity is left to say anything original on the subject; it is, in fact, "used up," for these and other authors have published every necessary detail as to its history. With such a mass of information on record, it has never been explained why the bird, in spite of the persecutions of the farmer, and the extensive destruction of the young which is annually dealt forth in every rookery, has not, if it had the powers of reasoning usually assigned to it, betaken itself to some other country, where it would receive a more friendly treatment. On the contrary, it appears never to be so happy, never so cheerful, as when it is in the immediate vicinity of man; for, its daily occupation over, the Rook regularly wings his way from enormous distances to spend the last hours of the day on the trees which surround the homestead, the baronial hall, and ancient mansion—the very trees beneath which the child trundles his hoop, the labourer slowly wends his way to his cottage, and the sportsman returns with his dog and gun without exciting the slightest alarm. Such places appear, in fact, to be considered as sanctuaries, wherein they may abide free from molestation and in safety; and unfeeling and destitute of a taste for nature must be the man who does not reciprocate this friendly confidence. Of how many pleasures would the country gentleman he deprived, were his old hall to be deserted by the Rook, whose constant cawing and busy actions give such life, and add so many charms to its stately domain? Why does the Rook seek our protection and court our presence at the time of breeding? Why does the skitest of all birds, the Wood-pigeon, do the same—coming into our gardens, even nearer to our houses, than the Rook, if they contain a silver fir or other tree upon the branches of which it can lay a few cross sticks to form a nest? Why does the Thrush build in the trailing branches of the rose-trees which surround our windows? or the Blackbird in our arbours? Why, I ask, is this the case? Is it that at this particular season (the period of reproduction) their natures are entirely changed, and their suspicions overcome by the importance of their paternal duties, and that they instinctively know that man will or should then afford them shelter and protection?

Those who have not seen the vast assemblages of Rooks which occur during winter in some parts of the British Islands can form but a slight conception of the sight—a sight which almost amounts to a phenomenon. It is one which may be observed in Richmond and Windsor Parks, but in a degree which is comparatively insignificant to that which may be seen in Cornwall, particularly at Tregothnan. These assemblages are only equalled by those of the Starlings at their roosting-places near the Land's End, and in some parts of Norfolk and Suffolk. Whence have the birds forming these immense Cornish gatherings come? Are they made up by vast accessions to our indigenous birds from the continent of Europe, instinctively directed across the Channel from France and Spain? The early flights of Woodcocks which visit the Scilly Islands and the contiguous parts of Cornwall in November are supposed to have migrated from Albania, or some other eastern country, and not direct from Norway; for they always appear when the wind is favourable for such a transit; that is, when it blows from the south-east. In like manner the Black Redstart (Acanthiza tephia) is only found in Devonshire at the same period, and under similar circumstances.

No country can be more favourable for the Rook to winter in than the humid and comparatively warm climate of Cornwall, where frost and snow seldom occur; but that only a small number of those that winter there remain and breed seems certain, since the nests observed in summer are comparatively few in number to those which may be seen in the central parts of England, Scotland, and Ireland. If the Rooks were less numerous in these latter countries during the winter months, the difficulty would be solved; for we might naturally suppose that they had removed from one part of England to another. Great evening flocks of Rooks may be seen in Richmond Park in November and December, and consequently they could not have augmented the masses observable at the same time in Cornwall. A London Rook flies over the tops of the houses to seek his breakfast just as frequently at Christmas as at any other period of the year. But to return to Tregothnan, the seat of Viscount Falmouth, through whose kindness and hospitality I have been
enabled, during three successive Januaries, to spend as many happy months. Here, among numerous other objects of interest, multitudes of Rooks may be nightly seen assembling for the purpose of roosting. Those who have not had an opportunity of visiting the woods which form so conspicuous a feature of this domain can form no just conception of their extent; yet it is only on the trees immediately surrounding the mansion that the Rooks congregate before retiring to rest. Here at the decline of every January day, when the hand of the clock reaches four, small flights may be seen coming in from various points of the compass; and as the day departs, fresh flights arrive in quick succession. They usually assemble to the westward of the house, and afterwards move a few hundred yards to the great trees skirting the principal drive; here mass above mass may be seen perched on the topmost branches, where they sit contented for a short time, hold a social converse among themselves, and greet each small flight as it arrives from a distant part of the country. From this second station the multitude usually remove to some high trees in the shrubbery, where they hold another converse, in which Daws take a lively part. By this time the shadows of night are fast approaching; still small companies continue to arrive, and augment the already numerous assemblage. Those who are not acquainted with the ways of the bird might suppose that they would now remain stationary until the coming day, but such is not the case; for, just when it has become so dark that most objects are indiscriminable, the Rooks simultaneously leave the trees, and, with a rushing whirlwind-like sound, fly off to a wood known by the name of the “Gonvvoer.” Into this they descend like a shower of hail, each bird precipitating himself on to the part of the tree where he will spend the night, without any bickering or squabbling for places: all is at once quiet; the wood, with its living mass, is wrapped in slumber. The Brown Owl now sends forth its hoot from Penkivel, and the piping note of the Corlew may perhaps be heard from the waters of Leman. Save these, no earthly sound breaks the stillness of these great woods. As the Rooks are late in seeking repose, so are they early in leaving their resting-place in the morning; and before the sun has gilded the horizon, small flights may be observed wending their way to their feeding-grounds, some to the neighbouring fields, some to the sides of the river, others to the Land’s End, and others, again, to even still greater distances in different directions. Their daily routine accomplished, when the hour of four arrives, they again rendezvous around the house.

After the above account, to say that the Rook is a gregarious bird would be superfluous, were it not to show how different all its actions and economy are from those of the Crow and its little cheerful cackling associate the Jackdaw. The solitary Crow is a very early breeder, and constructs its nest near the bole of a large tree; the gregarious Rooks heap nest upon nest on the branches; while the aristocratic Jackdaw betakes itself for the purpose of breeding to the walls of old castles, church-steeples, and precipitous rocks: it is also much later in its nidification than either of the others. The Crow is a robber in every sense of the word; the Rook pilfers also, and is doubtless very troublesome to the farmer and the husbandman, and no unprotected garden that has trees with fruit and berries is safe from its attacks. A goodly tree of walnuts is soon stripped, should a flock of Rooks once pay it a visit. Some salutary chastisement is therefore often necessary to protect ourselves from its ravages; but the wholesale poisoning so much resorted to by the farmer, particularly when the bird has young, is both cowardly and cruel. Far more manly would it be to make an example by now and then shooting a depredator, than to send the poor birds home to die by the side of their nests of craving young ones. Painful, indeed, have been the scenes of this kind that I have witnessed. Four, five, or six poor victims to poison have I found at one time beneath the trees in the small rookery of Charles Pascoe Grenfell, Esq., at Taplow, while their young were starving above; a pocketful of Partridges, and it is probable that many persons may have suffered from eating game thus destroyed; it is time, therefore, that we bestir ourselves in the matter.

On the Continent the Rook is a migratory bird, is nowhere so numerous as in England, and becomes gradually more scarce as we approach the Arctic circle. It is found in North Africa, Egypt, Asia Minor, and Persia, and is said to extend its range as far east as Afghanistan. The Rook of China and Japan, though very nearly allied, has certain specific differences, and, in my opinion, should be regarded as distinct. The term “black as a Crow” does not apply to the Rook; for the bird is clothed in beautiful tints of purple and green. There is but little difference in the outward appearance of the sexes; both have the demure face after the bird has attained the age of maturity, while the young, during the first year of their existence, have the nostrils covered with feathers, as in other members of the genus Corvus. The eggs, which are laid in March, are four or five in number, and of a pale green, blotched all over with dark greenish brown.

The figure on the accompanying Plate is nearly as large as life.

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