TETRAO UROGALLUS, Linn.

TETRAO UROGALLUS, *Linn.*

Capercaillie or Cock of the Wood.

Tetrao urogallus et hybridus, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 72.

——— *major, crassirostris et maculatus*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 503, 504.

Urogallus major, Briss. Orn., tom. i. p. 182.

——— *vulgaris*, Flem. Hist. of Brit. Anim., p. 46.

Tetrao medius, Meyer, Mag. der Gesellsch. naturf. Fr. zu Berlin, 1811.

——— *intermedius*, Langed. Mém. de l'Acad. à Pétersb., 1811, tom. iii. p. 286.

TIME was, and that not so very long ago, when the British Islands wore an aspect very different from that which they now present. So recently as the twelfth century England was covered with dense forests of oaks and other trees, and probably the larger portion of Scotland with great pine-woods, the remains of which are to be found in her peat bogs and morasses. At that period the wolf, the wild boar, and the beaver, now extinct, ranged at large just as the badger, the otter, the martin, and the founmart do at the present time, though even their existence, like that of their predecessors, becomes more and more precarious every year. A similar fate has obtained among the more remarkable of the birds which then tenanted our islands. It is comparatively but a short time since the Great Auk was plentiful along our northern coasts, and still less since the Bustard stealthily walked over our extensive downs and plains; but now the occurrence of a straggler flying over from the Continent at indefinite periods are all that we hear about the latter bird. The gradual physical changes effected by time appear to have been the means of extirpating some of the species alluded to from Great Britain; but I fear the hand of man has contributed in no slight degree to that of the Great Auk, the Bustard, and the Capercaillie. This latter splendid Grouse was lost to us nearly a hundred years ago, but has recently been reintroduced through the laudable spirit and liberality of some of our more wealthy highland proprietors, and has again become very numerous on many Scotch estates.

Owing to the absence of the Capercaillie from our islands during the early part of the present century, when a renaissance of the study of natural history took place, none of the writers on our native birds had an opportunity of observing its habits, manners, and economy; and Macgillivray, Yarrell, and Thompson were all obliged to quote largely from Mr. Lloyd's 'Field sports of the north of Europe,' 'The Game Birds and Wild Fowl of Sweden and Norway,' &c.; nor can I do better than follow in their wake, inasmuch as those interesting volumes contain the fullest account of the bird that has yet appeared; I shall therefore take such extracts from the latter book as appear to me of general interest, and refer my readers to the work itself for many curious anecdotes as to the sport it affords, the various modes of shooting and trapping it, &c.

"The Capercali or Capercaillie," says this gentleman, "has a wide geographical range, extending at least from the vicinity of the Frozen Ocean to the Spanish Pyrenees. Temminck says, indeed, it has been met with in some of the islands of the Grecian archipelago, in Siberia, and throughout a large portion of the Russian Empire in Europe, including Poland and Livonia. In the mountainous and wooded districts of Hungary, Germany, and Switzerland it is met with more or less frequently. It is also found in some parts of France, though, perhaps, rather sparingly. Throughout all the wooded parts of Scandinavia, from Altengaard, in Norway, 70° N. lat., where the northernmost pine-forests in Europe exist, to the northern portion of Scania—in short, wherever the pine-tree flourishes, it is pretty common.

"The chosen haunts of the Capercali are mountainous and hilly districts where pine-woods abound, particularly such as are of mature growth, and studded with lakes and morasses. Sometimes, however, it is met with in woods interspersed with deciduous trees, more especially the oak, as it feeds freely on acorns. Excepting in the autumn and when the young are small and follow their mother, these birds are seldom seen in brush-woods or even in the woods of young growth, and then only when in the vicinity of great woods.

"During the summer the food of the Capercali consists chiefly of several kinds of plants, ferns, buds of certain trees and bushes, such as the alder, birch, and hazel—of acorns, where procurable—of almost all sorts of berries found in the northern forests, as, for example, the cranberry (*Vaccinium Oxycoccos*, Linn.), the red whortle-berry or cowberry (*Vaccinium Vitis-idaea*), the common bilberry or bleaberry (*Vaccinium Myrtillus*), the wild strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*), the juniper berry (*Juniperus communis*)—and of insects, &c. It also feeds on the leaves of the Scotch fir (*Pinus sylvestris*, Linn.) and of the spruce-pine (*Pinus Abies*), though of the latter, so far as my observation goes, very sparingly. The larch (*Pinus Larix*, Linn.) is unknown in Sweden, excepting in ornamental plantations; but the late Lord Breadalbane told me that at Taymouth Castle, where that tree abounds, the Capercali feed on its leaves with avidity. In the winter time, when the ground is deeply covered with snow, and berries &c. not readily procurable, the Capercali would seem to subsist almost entirely on the leaves of the trees named. The young feed, at first, on insects, larvæ, ant-eggs, and small worms, but soon learn to eat the several kinds of berries specified, and, by degrees, acorns and pine-leaves.

"The Capercali is a polygamist, and in the spring of the year collects the hens about him by means of his *spel* or love-song. The *lek-tid*, or pairing-season, usually commences towards the end of March or beginning of April—the time more or less depending on the mildness or severity of the weather, the state of the snow &c.—and continues until the middle or the end of May. The *lek-stalle*, or locality where affairs matrimonial are carried on, is commonly a wooded eminence near a morass, tarn, or opening in the forest, sometimes, however, 'on a level rock, with fir trees growing in and about it.' The *lek-stalle* is generally of some extent; and the Capercali resort to it year after year, unless the trees have been felled or the forest otherwise disturbed. The oldest or strongest male is the first in the spring at the *lek-stalle*; and in the more northern forests, even when the snow is deep on the ground, he commences his *spel*, either on the surface of the snow—on which the marks of his trailing wings, where he has paraded to and fro, are often visible,—or perched on the upper branch of a pine. At such times his neck is stretched out, his wings droop, and his tail spread out like a fan.

"The *spel* of the Capercali consists of three notes. An attempt has been made to imitate it by the following words:—First note, *Pellep!-Pellep!-Pellep!* Second note, *Klickop!* Third note, *Hede!-Hede!-Hede!-Hede!* The first note is said to resemble two dry sticks struck together; the second has been likened to a sort of gulp in the throat, the noise made when the tongue is sucked against the palate, or when a cork is drawn out of a bottle; the third has been compared to the sucking in of the breath, or the sound caused by sharpening an edged tool on a whetstone. The utterance of these notes may occupy from two to three minutes; and, provided the bird be not in any way disturbed, he immediately repeats them, and continues to do so almost without ceasing. His *spel* is not loud, and, if there be wind stirring at the time, cannot be heard at any considerable distance. In the most favourable weather, indeed, it is not audible at more than one hundred and fifty to two hundred paces.

"On hearing the *spel* of the cock the hens assemble at the *lek-ställe* from all parts of the surrounding district, and alight on the very tree where he is perched, or on others in the immediate vicinity, when they make their presence known by their somewhat melancholy call-note, resembling the words *Gock! Gock! Gock!*, or, rather, perhaps, the croak of the Raven. A little before sunrise the cock usually descends from his perch and alights on some open spot in the forest close by, where the hens collect about him; and here during the intervals of his *spel*, which he still continues, and whilst parading amongst the ladies of his harem, he pairs with each in succession. Immense excitement is then exhibited by both sexes; the female flitting round and round her lord with outstretched neck and hurried movements as if challenging his notice, until at length it nestles close beside him and solicits attentions which his gallantry ultimately accords.

"During the pairing-season the Capercali is very pugnacious; and fierce combats are then common between rival males. These always take place on the ground, and for the most part on some little eminence free from brushwood or other obstruction. The birds when charging each other spring high in the air, in the manner of game-cocks, and while striking with their wings tear one another with their claws. Their bills are also brought into play, and he that succeeds in getting such fast hold of his opponent as to pin him to the ground, in which position he punishes him severely, usually comes off the victor. Whilst the fight lasts, and it is often of long continuance, the combatants not unfrequently snap their bills together with great force, the noise of which, together with that caused by the blows inflicted with their wings, may in clear and calm weather be heard at a considerable distance. During these duels the birds are not unfrequently so blinded by rage as to be entirely forgetful of their own safety, and, if due precaution be used, may then be captured by the hand.

"It is fortunate for the sporting world that the Capercali is once more included in the British fauna; and I feel proud in having been a contributor to so desirable an event. Years ago I volunteered my services to more than one influential proprietor in Scotland; but for a long time no one would move in the matter. In the autumn of 1836, however the late Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, 'influenced by a desire to introduce these noble birds into Scotland, coupled with that of making a return to Lord Breadalbane for some recent kindness,' requested me to procure, at whatever cost, the requisite number; and within a few months twenty-nine, followed shortly afterwards by twenty more, were forwarded to Taymouth Castle, and, with a single exception, arrived in safety. The success of the experiment was fully realized; and it is very satisfactory to add that the Capercali have subsequently flourished in the Highlands in an extraordinary manner. A few years ago, Lord Breadalbane told me he imagined there were fully a thousand on the Taymouth property; and his head keeper estimated them at double the number."

It is hardly necessary for me to speak of the disparity in the size of the sexes, since it is well known to most persons; but I may mention that the male is twice the size and weight of the female, whose remarkably barred markings are well shown in the accompanying Plate. Neither is it necessary to say more than that the bird forms an important article of commerce, every poulterer's shop in London and other large towns being amply supplied with it during the months of winter and spring; they are principally imported from Norway, and frequently in a frozen state.

The Plate represents both sexes, about two-thirds the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Capercaillie or Cock of the Wood, Tetrao urogallus [Pl. 5]."
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