OTIS TARDA, Linn.

J. W. 1871 and H. C. Richter, del. et lith.

OTIS TARDA, Linn.

Great Bustard.

Otis tarda, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 264.

I CONSIDER it would not add to the interest of my account of the Bustard, were I to give a detailed list of the places and times of its capture in this country. In the convenient handbooks of Selby and Yarrell, this kind of information may be found. I shall therefore only mention some of the later occurrences of this noble bird, which I have selected as a vignette for the cover of the present work.

The extensive warrens and open parts of Norfolk and Suffolk, the heaths about Newmarket in Cambridgeshire, the plains around Salisbury and Stonehenge and other parts of Wiltshire, the downs of Berkshire, Hampshire, and Sussex, and the Yorkshire wolds are among the localities where it formerly existed and doubtless bred; but, like the Great Auk, which has not been seen alive since 1844, it is now extirpated from our island. Dr. Fleming observes that it seems to have been found in Scotland in the days of Hector Boethius, but had become rare in the time of Sir Robert Sibbald. In Ireland it appears never to have been more than an accidental visitor.

Gilbert White, in his Diary, mentions, under the date of Nov. 17, 1782, "Being at a lone farm-house on the downs between Whorwell and Winchester, the carter told me that, about twelve years before, he had seen a flock of eighteen Bustards at one time on that farm." In a note lately addressed to the Rev. John Fountaine by Henry Dugmore, Esq., and kindly placed in my hands by that gentleman, he says:—"I cannot remember the year I was riding with Mr. Hamond when I saw a flock of twenty-seven Bustards rise from Westacre field, and wheel round us within 80 or 100 yards; but I should say it was as far back as 1820."

Frederick J. Nash, Esq., of Bishop's Stortford, several times told Mr. Yarrell "that when he was a young man, and then taking the field as a sportsman, he once saw nine flights of Bustards in one day, not far from Thetford, in Norfolk. Some of these were probably seen more than once; but at that time, about the beginning of the present century, the country between Thetford and Brandon, and thence southward to Mildenhall, was considered to be the head-quarters of the Great Bustard in the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk."

It is evident, then, that until within the last fifty years the Bustard was very far from being killed off, and with ordinary care and protection it might have been preserved until the present day. Whatever interest the landed proprietors may have taken, the small farmer and the poacher made quick work of shooting down the remnant of this fine species. The males appear to have been the first to disappear in all parts of the country, a few females lingering behind until they, too, encountered that fate which awaits so many of the larger animals.

Henry Stevenson, Esq., of Norwich, informs me that "in 1833 three nests were found on Massingham Heath, near Swaffham. Together they contained five eggs, all of which were taken under the impression that no cocks were then existing, and that therefore the eggs would not be fertile. From this time until 1838 hen birds continued to drop eggs at random, forming no nest. The last nest found in Suffolk, according to Mr. Newton, was discovered on the borders of Thetford Warren."

I shall now enumerate some instances of the occurrence of the Bustard since our indigenous birds ceased to exist—stragglers which have now and then flown across from the Continent, like other accidental visitors, and which, like the Sandgrouse, received no other welcome than that of being shot that their skins might adorn some public museum or private collection.

A female, killed near the Lizard, in March 1843, is now in the possession of E. H. Rodd, Esq.; another specimen was shot near St. Austell in 1854.

In 1850 a specimen, said to be a female, was killed at Lydd, in Romney Marsh; in December 1851, another was shot in a marshy piece of ground in the parish of Bratton Clovelly, North Devon. Mr. Gatecombe informs me that the stomach of this bird, which he examined, "contained a quantity of turnip-leaves and a number of flat stones, some of which were about the size of a sixpence. The bird is now in the possession of J. G. Newton, Esq., of Millaton Bridestow, North Devon."

In March 1854 a female was killed at Leeshill, in Cumberland.

In January 1856 one was caught by a boy near Hungerford, and now graces the collection of M. H. Marsh, Esq., M.P. for Salisbury.

In 1859 a young male was killed near Romney, in Kent, by Mr. Chittenden; it is now in the possession of George Simmons, Esq., of East Peckham.

In February 1861 a specimen, the sex of which was not stated, was killed near York.

The middle countries of Europe appear to be the centre of the area over which the range of the Great

Bustard extends—the border-line to the westward being the British Islands; to the southward the plains of Northern Africa, Arabia, and Persia; to the eastward, across Mongolia, where it was met with by Mr. Atkinson, as far as China and the river Amoor; and to the northward, Sweden and Russia. The other known species of Bustard are also confined to the Old World, particularly to Africa and Asia, with the exception of the single species found in Australia.

The following notes respecting the Bustard were communicated to the late Mr. Yarrell by C. A. Nicholson, Esq., of Balrath Kells, in the county of Meath, and were published by him in the twenty-first volume of the 'Transactions of the Linnean Society':—

"You will perhaps be interested by a few remarks on the habits of the Great Bustard as observed by me in the neighbourhood of Seville, where it exists in large numbers. The males begin to arrive in the cultivated part of the country at the beginning of February; they come in flocks, varying from seven to fifty-three, the smallest and largest numbers I have seen together at that season of the year. The old birds always keep together; and those of a year old, which are much smaller and have no beard, never mix with them. The females, which do not arrive until the beginning of April, come singly or at most in pairs; as soon as they arrive, the flocks of males begin to disperse, and you seldom meet more than three or four males together, and very frequently only one. At this time, on a fine day, they turn their tails over their backs, droop their wings, and expand their pouches. While in this attitude, from the whiteness of the under tail-coverts, they may be seen at a great distance. As I have never seen a female near a cock, the sexes appear to live quite separate. During the month of May the males entirely disappear from the cultivated lands, and, I believe, go down to the extensive grass-marshes which stretch along the Guadalquivir, leaving the females behind them. The young Bustards are hatched in the large corn-plains about Seville, and are able to take care of themselves by July. At the end of that month, when, the corn being all cut, no cover remains, the hens and the young birds follow the cocks to the *marisma*, as they call the great marshes in Spain. The heaviest bird I shot weighed 28 lbs.; this was before the hens came, which may perhaps account for its being two pounds heavier than any I shot afterwards. It measured, from tip to tip of the wings, 7 feet 1 inch; while another, which weighed 26 lbs., measured 7 feet 3 inches. The birds of a year old weigh from 8 to 10 lbs., and are much the best to eat. All the birds I shot had their stomachs perfectly crammed with stalks and ears of barley, the leaves of a large-leaved green weed, and a kind of black beetle. When flushed, the birds generally fly a distance of two miles or more, and occasionally at an altitude of at least a hundred yards."

Captain Blakiston, of the Royal Artillery, informs me that, while in the Crimea; during the late war,

"The Great Bustard was first observed on the 19th of December, 1855, and continued flying over in great numbers for three days. The country at the time was covered with snow. Many were killed with bullets while flying, and after they had alighted on the hills. They did not fly in flocks, but somewhat widely dispersed, and generally at a considerable altitude; they appeared to come from the north, and to proceed south-east—perhaps to the coast of Asia Minor, where they would find a comparatively warm temperature. A break of the weather soon after occurred, and then only a few were occasionally seen. I noticed a small number proceeding north in April; but as their appearance was not remarked upon, there could not have been numbers together. It is most likely that the bird breeds in the steppes of the Crimea, as some were seen near the Alma in May 1856; but to account for the enormous numbers which migrated in the winter, we must suppose that the greater part are driven by stress of weather from the mainland of Southern Russia, and that, if some remain on the south coast during the cold season, most of them must cross the Black Sea to Asia Minor."

I do not usually enter into anatomical details, but a passing word is necessary respecting the supposed existence of a pouch or sac in the throat of the Bustard. On this subject many pages of considerable interest have been written by the late Mr. Yarrell in the 'Transactions of the Linnean Society,' by Professor Owen, and more recently by Mr. Alfred Newton in 'The Ibis' for 1862. That there is no true sac or pouch in the throat of the Great Bustard, capable of holding water, there can be, I think, no doubt. The enormous distention of the neck in the old males, which occurs during the pairing-season, is doubtless due to sexual excitement, and, in my opinion, is precisely analogous to what occurs at the same period in the American Prairie-hen (*Cupidonia cupido*), the Great Cock of the Plains (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), and many other birds. At this period the entire neck of the Bustard becomes highly vascular, and the vast network of air-cells with which it is provided inflated to an enormous extent. The attitudes and contortions assumed by the bird are very strange during these paroxysms of pleasure, or when he becomes maddened with rage, should another male dispute with him for the affections of the female. The accompanying illustration by Mr. Wolf gives a good idea of the bird in this state of excitement, which might have been daily seen, a short while ago, in the Gardens of the Zoological Society.

The difference in the sexes is very marked, the female being about half the size of her mate, and wanting, except in some very old birds, the lengthened hair-like appendages which adorn the cheeks.

The Bustard is omnivorous, its food consisting of the tops of vegetables, trefoil, grasses, worms, insects, snails, frogs and other reptiles, mice, and, it is said, young birds. The eggs, which are deposited in a depression on the bare ground, are two in number, of a sandy olive, stained and blotched with purple and reddish brown.

The Plate represents a female and two young birds nearly the size of life, with reduced figures of the male in the distance.

Gould, John. 1873. "Great Bustard, *Otis tarda* [Pl. 17]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323976>.

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