ARDEA CINEREA. Linn.

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Heron.

Ardea cinerea et major, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 236.

— *et Ardea cristata*, Briss. Orn., tom. v. pp. 392, 396, pl. 35.

— *major, cinerea, et cineracea*, Brehm, Handb. der Naturg. Vög. Deutschl., pp. 578, 580.

? — *leucophæa*, Gould, Birds of Australia, vol. vi. pl. 55.

WHAT harsh, sharp shriek is that we hear when walking through the beautiful woods of Cliveden, by the banks of the Thames? It proceeds from a great bird in the air, with rounded wings, contracted neck, and long legs extended straight out behind, which, with a laboured flight, has come from a distant locality, perhaps one of the royal parks at Windsor, to fish in our far-famed river. What is that large bird we see during a railway excursion, flying to and fro from the Kennet and the Lodden to the immediate precincts of the town of Reading during the months of early spring? What is the gaunt-looking object, with outstretched neck, we notice standing motionless in the estuary of the Exe, or wading in the water near Dawlish? It is the Heron—the bird so famous in old times for the exciting sport it afforded to the lovers of falconry, and which formed so conspicuous an item in the feasts of the nobles on great state occasions—the bird so well known to the great bard of all time: “When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a hern-shaw.”

When these words were penned by Shakspeare, the Heron was more numerous in the British Islands than it is now; but it is still sufficiently plentiful to be regarded as a common bird.

So much has been written respecting the Heron and the heronries of England, that but little remains to be told by the author of the present work. Macgillivray, Yarrell, Selby, Thompson, and others have each given voluminous accounts of its habits and manners; but perhaps I may have had better opportunities of making myself acquainted with its range over the globe than any of those writers. I may state, then, that, besides the British Islands, it is distributed over the whole of Europe, all parts of India, China, and Japan, and that southward of these countries it probably extends throughout the islands of the Eastern Archipelago to the most southern parts of Australia. This austral position may also be assigned to the bird in the old country of Africa; for it is stated to be there very generally dispersed, and to be an inhabitant of the colony of the Cape of Good Hope.

In the British Islands the Heron is to be met with at all seasons. In the autumn and winter months it is found in the marshes near the sea-coast, on the mud-banks of estuaries, and the borders of rivers, lakes, and large ponds. Early in the year it seeks the usual woodland places of nidification, and commences the reparation of its old nests of sticks among the branches of trees, or, where there are no trees, in the open marsh; the latter situation, however, is a very unusual one. Like the Rook and the Wood-Pigeon, the Heron throws off its customary shyness during the breeding-season, and at that period seeks the protection of man by frequently building close to his mansion, and will even enter the precincts of towns, an instance of which may be seen, any spring, at Reading in Berkshire. The period when it resorts to such a situation is so regular, that its arrival may be looked for almost to a day. The heronry at Didlington, in Norfolk, Mr. Tyssen Amhurst informs me, is regularly peopled within a day or two of the middle of February. There is then a great clattering of bills and flapping of wings, with other indisputable evidence of their having paired and that the breeding-season is about to commence. Early in the month of March three or four eggs are laid, and by the middle of April the task of incubation has terminated, and the young are hatched. In their first or downy plumage, the young are most grotesque in appearance, and by no means beautiful to look upon; in a short time the downy covering gives place to feathers, which first appear on the wings and tail, then on the body. By the beginning of June they get out on the branches; and soon after this their pinions become sufficiently developed to enable them to take short flights, and gain food for themselves. In the breeding-season, when the Heron has more than usual demands upon his industry, it is somewhat destructive to the tenants of the trout-stream, if other kinds of fish are not to be obtained. The mode of their capture is known to every one who has seen the bird patiently watching knee-deep in the stream, with its bill pointed towards the water ready for the stroke, which is so dexterously dealt that the aim is seldom missed. The fish seized, it is tossed into the bird's capacious gullet; and the process is repeated until its pouch is filled, when it immediately wings its way straight to its nest, where its ravenous young are awaiting the expected and welcome supply. Capturing small trout, I am sorry to say, is not the only mischief the Heron indulges in; for while standing motionless in the stream, fish of a large size occasionally pass him, in pursuit, may be, of their own prey, and are sometimes struck with a well-directed thrust of its pointed mandibles just behind the head, or precisely in that part of the poll in which a weasel seizes a hare. It

is not only fish, frogs, and insects that the Heron takes; for a water-rat or the chick of a Moorhen or Rail will not come across him twice. Mr. Henry Shaw, of Shrewsbury, tells me that he once took a fully fledged Moorhen from the gullet of a Heron; and, from the enormous dilatibility of that part of the bird's structure, I can well believe it.

As spring advances, the beautiful occipital plumes common to both sexes, but finest in the male, are assumed; and the entire plumage becomes finer than in winter. The young of the first autumn differ greatly from the adults, being clothed in a dingy grey dress, without any lengthened feathers on the breast or occipital plumes. It is at this age that it is best for the table: for a history of the bird would be incomplete without an allusion to its being an "*oiseau de luxe*" of our continental neighbours; and to the excellence of its flesh, when the bird is young and in good condition, I can myself bear testimony.

Macgillivray has given so graphic a description of the places of resort and the habits of the Heron, as seen in the North, that I must be excused for reproducing it here.

"The cold blasts of the north sweep along the ruffled surface of the lake, over whose deep waters frown the rugged crags of rusty gneiss, having their crevices sprinkled with tufts of withered herbage, and their summits crowned with stunted birches and alders. The desolate hills around are partially covered with snow; the pastures are drenched with the rains; the brown torrents seam the heathy slopes; and the little birds have long ceased to enliven those deserted thickets with their gentle songs. Margining the waters extends a long muddy beach, over which are scattered blocks of stone, partially clothed with dusky and olivaceous weeds. Here and there a Gull floats buoyantly in the shallows; some Oyster-catchers repose on a gravel-bank, their bills buried among their plumage; and there, on that low shelf, is perched a solitary Heron, like a monument of listless indolence—a bird petrified in its slumber. At another time, when the tide has retired, you may find it wandering with slow and careful tread among the little pools and by the sides of the rocks in search of fishes and crabs; but, unless you are bent on watching it, you will find more amusement in observing the lively Tringas and Turnstones, ever in rapid motion; for the Heron is, or seems to be, a dull and lazy bird; and even if you draw near, he rises in so listless a manner that you think it must be a hard task for him to unfold his large wings and heavily beat the air until he has fairly raised himself; but now he floats away lightly, though with slow flappings, screams his harsh cry, and flies to some distant place, where he may remain unmolested.

"About the middle of March numerous individuals assemble in certain places, and soon after resort to their breeding-stations, which are not in the rushy marshes or on unfrequented islands, but on tall trees, sometimes in large woods, but more frequently in places near some old family mansion. The nests, which are very large, nearly flat, and constructed of sticks, with a lining of grass, wool, and similar materials, are sometimes crowded together in great numbers, generally on the highest trees, but occasionally on those which would seem not well selected for security, or even on an isolated tree of no great height. The eggs are light bluish green, broadly elliptical, or having both ends nearly equally rounded, $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches in length, by $1\frac{1}{8}$ inch in breadth. Incubation continues about twenty days; and the young, at first sparsely covered with tufts of down, remain about six weeks in the nest. Mr. Yarrell states that sometimes Herons build on precipitous rocks near the coast, as at South Stack Lighthouse, near Holyhead, and at Great Orme's Head; they are said also to build occasionally on the ground, among reeds and rushes."

Mr. Yarrell has given a lengthened list of the heronries still existing in England, but has omitted to mention that belonging to Sir George Musgrave, Bart., at Eden Hall, in Cumberland, which his son, R. C. Musgrave, Esq., informs me is one of the largest, as it comprises nearly two hundred Herons.

The front bird in the accompanying Plate is about half the size of life; the young are represented in the state in which they appear when two or three days old, and are figured from examples kindly sent to me by Mr. W. A. Tyssen Amburst, of Diddington Park, Norfolk.

Gould, John. 1873. "Heron, *Ardea cinerea* [Pl. 20]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, –. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323979>.

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