

REVIEWS.

The Birds of the Island of Bute. By J. McWilliam. 8vo. pp. 128 with map and 9 illustrations.

As we still lack the long-expected work on the Vertebrate Fauna of the Clyde area, it is a matter for congratulation that we now possess a carefully written and reliable account of a small portion of it. Mr. McWilliam's book does not deal with the county of Bute, but only with the island of that name: a somewhat restricted area, as it is only sixteen miles in length, and averages about four miles in width. As might be expected the avifauna is not rich in species, only 168 being recorded, and the rarer stragglers are conspicuous by their absence.

In his distributional notes Mr. McWilliam makes numerous references to the Isle of Arran and Pladda and we think he might also have added a few words on those species which have occurred there, even though they have not been recorded from the island of Bute itself, such as Pallas's Sand-Grouse, the Spotted Crake and the Quail. Many other species which occur in the Clyde area are certain to be met with in Bute sooner or later. At present there is no definite record of any species of Grey Goose, and even such widely distributed species as the Fulmar Petrel, the Lesser and Sandwich Terns, Buffon's Skua, the Phalaropes and the Bittern, are all absent from the list.

Among the breeding species the scarcity of the Corn-Bunting (*Emberiza calandra*) and the Ring-Ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*) is remarkable, for the natural conditions and situation would seem to be favourable to both species. There seems no adequate reason for the Grasshopper-Warbler (*Locustella naevia*) to be common on Arran and decidedly rare in Bute, while the Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla f. rayi*) which is not rare in Ayrshire has only occurred a few times on Bute.

Although the number of breeding forms is small, on the other hand the number of individuals is great, and as Bute enjoys a wonderfully mild and equable climate, the bird population is large. One striking feature is the presence of the Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) in considerable numbers. The number of breeding pairs is estimated at from 175 to 330, showing a remarkable increase on the figures for 1903 when there were only about 40 or 50 nests. In view of the

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diminution of Black-game in other parts of Scotland it is satisfactory to find that here they are at any rate holding their own.

We should like to call attention to two useful features in this work. The varying fertility of a species in different parts of its breeding range is a subject which has been much neglected, and the author has collected some useful data on the average number of eggs laid by certain birds in this area. On the whole the tendency seems to be to lay fewer than the normal number of eggs in the case of those species which show variation in this respect.

There is also some very valuable information as to the bird population and the effect of game preservation on bird life. Without going into details as to the figures on which the results are based, we find that Mr. McWilliam thinks that the total number of birds on the island may reach the surprising figure of 400,000. As Bute is only about sixty square miles in extent, this gives some 6,000 to 7,000 birds to the square mile, or one bird to every twenty-two square yards. There is little doubt that the number of our birds is greatly underestimated by most people, and for comparison with estimates from other districts these figures will be very useful. Another valuable feature is the game list supplied by the Marquess of Bute (p. 123), from which it appears that a total bag of 96,033 head of game was obtained in twenty-eight years. Deducting the 5,013 hares and roedeer, there still remain 91,020 birds, of which the largest items are 50,139 Red Grouse, and 10,993 Snipe, both of which species are still plentiful, though the numbers of Grouse are subject to considerable fluctuations.

Side by side with this may be read the vermin list of the head-keeper in North Bute for one year, which reaches the total of 1,352. After deducting 1,088 mammals we have 264 larger birds left (Hooded Crows, Jackdaws, Hawks of various species and Gulls). This represents roughly about five birds per week all the year round, so that it does not require much calculation to realize the enormous effect of game preservation on the avifauna of a given district. This is of course accentuated in the case of an island, where the influx from outside to fill up the gaps is almost negligible.

The book is carefully prepared, but there are a few points to which attention may be drawn. There is no index of species, but a table of contents on p. 5, in which the Chiff-chaff figures as the "Chaffinch." The identification of birds from colloquial names in old lists is often unsatisfactory, but when Blair, early in the nineteenth century, wrote "Marrets, Ailsa Black Sea Cocks and Sea Parrots," it was the last named which were the Puffins and not the "Ailsa Black Sea Cocks," which were probably Guillemots. In the paragraph on the Brent Goose it is clearly stated that three specimens in the Bute Museum are of the pale breasted "variety." The statement which follows that "at present it is supposed that the two types represent little more than individual variation" is exactly the reverse of the case, as it is now known that the two sub-species (not varieties) have quite different breeding ranges, and do not, as was formerly supposed, breed together in Spitsbergen. The Light-breasted Brent (*B. bernicla hrota*) should be added to the island list.

There is no mention of the Firecrest, but it is said to have occurred in Bute on the authority of Mr. A. R. Reid (*Zool.* 1907, p. 15).

Writing of the Turnstone (p. 94), the author says: "The egg is so conspicuous that a mistake could hardly be made." Here we are in doubt as to whether the writer means "characteristic," as the eggs are often carefully hidden beneath stones or vegetation and have been found well down in a Puffin's burrow.

F. C. R. JOURDAIN.

Fiskehejren. By Vagn Holstein. (4to. Gads Forlag, Copenhagen, 1927.)

THIS well printed quarto volume of 98 pages is devoted to the life history and status in Denmark of the Common Heron (*Ardea cinerea*). It is illustrated with a map on which the breeding places are shown, four coloured plates to illustrate the plumages from the downy stage to maturity, and other uncoloured plates from photographs. The letterpress is in Danish, and includes a list of heronries with historical notes. There is also a synoptical table showing a comparative census of these colonies in 1912 and 1927, from which we note that the number of breeding pairs has increased from 610-710 pairs in 1912 to 1,362-1,410 in 1927. While in 1912 there were but two colonies of 80 to 100 pairs, there are now no fewer than 7 heronries of 80 to 110 pairs, and one of 175 nests.

These figures may be compared with work on the same lines by Watt in Scotland, and more recently by De Chavigny in France, and Brouwer in Holland.

Among other points of interest, we note that the author estimates the incubation period at 28 days, slightly longer than the result obtained by W. Evans from incubation by a hen (25-26 days). Some of the courtship attitudes are figured in the plate to face p. 44.

By watching at night from 9.30 p.m. on June 30th to 2.30 a.m. on July 1st, 1927, the author ascertained that the young were fed at different nests in a colony on twenty-three occasions. In the case of one nest the nestlings were fed on two occasions, viz., at 9.35 p.m. and 1.20 a.m.

There are also interesting notes on the causes of the mortality among young birds, but we have failed to find any definite evidence on the question of a second brood, and though in some cases the eggs are laid on consecutive days, there are also numerous instances of much longer intervals on record.

The great merit of this work consists in the fact that it is the result of original observation and field work, and though there are still many points which need elucidation, it marks a great advance upon our previous state of knowledge, and suggests fresh lines of research.

F. C. R. JOURDAIN.

The Ramblings of a Bird Lover. By Charles E. Raven, D.D., Canon of Liverpool. Sixty-seven photographs by the author. (Martin Hopkinson & Co., Ltd. 10/6.)

THIS book is well named, for it consists to a considerable extent of the relation of observations and experiences among birds gleaned during brief, and often accidental, interludes in a busy life. Though necessarily disconnected, it is an eminently readable book. Every page glows with the intense enthusiasm of the author for his favourite hobby, and anyone, be he the veriest dabbler in the study of birds, cannot but be infected with the same spirit while reading the descriptions of the first meetings with hitherto unknown species.

It naturally covers a very wide range of species, the localities visited ranging from Handa to north Wales, and from county Cork to Texel, and though much of the ground has been covered many times already and there is little that is actually new in the ascertained facts, they have been so well put together, told so charmingly, and are so ably commented upon, that their relation is never wearisome. The chapter on the early life of a young Cuckoo, though the story is now a well-worn one, is one of the best in the book, and is as graphic and as vivid an account of this avian tragedy as can be found anywhere.

The author not infrequently refers to the value of an amateur's casual observations; few people have the time and opportunities for systematic research on single species, so that it is perfectly true that, to a great extent, our knowledge of life histories and animal psychology must be built up upon such casual observations. One striking example of such is given in the preface and, by his fortune in making it, the author has added a new and significant fact bearing on one of the problems of migration. Of course it is well known that most, if not all, the waders are capable swimmers and will take to the water when hard pressed, but it does not appear to be known, except of course in the case of the Phalaropes, that they will do so from choice and under perfectly normal circumstances. Canon Raven, however, describes how he came, a mile or more from the coast of Cork, and in a broken, lumpy sea, upon a couple of Knots "swimming lightly and high and as to the manner born," where there can be little doubt they had settled voluntarily. After being photographed at ten yards distance "they sprang up and flew easily away." It has frequently been suggested in connection with the visits of trans-atlantic migrants to this country that in many cases their sea passage must have been "assisted" by indirect human agency, but who can doubt after Canon Raven's observation that, at any rate among the waders, the journey can be accomplished without it.

One word must be said about the large number of illustrations from the author's camera. There are some that are strikingly good, but as a whole they do not come up to the standard of those in *In Praise of Birds*. Those of the nestlings particularly are mostly too small to bring out the detail properly, they are too crowded, and consequently too closely cut. With some of the others there seems to have been something wrong with the exposure, or else the method of reproduction does not do justice to the originals. No doubt the difficulty of combining unfavourable lighting with the necessary rapidity of exposure accounts for the lack of depth of focus in others.

N.F.T.