

# BRITISH BIRDS

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## HOWARD SAUNDERS.

IN the death of Howard Saunders ornithology has lost one of the keenest intellects and most devoted workers—and these number not a few—that have adorned our branch of science; while many of us have lost in him a personal friend of the truest and best. My acquaintance with Howard Saunders dates back to 1872 when, on my return from a year spent in the Spanish Peninsula, he wrote asking for a list of the birds met with therein. Even that first letter illustrated the peculiar faculty he possessed of

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going straight to his point; it was a bare list of names he wanted—no notes. Those might come after, if required to amplify the record.

For five-and-thirty years the friendship so begun grew and ripened, and not a year but carries pleasant memories—memories of his infinite good nature, of sound, clear views, counsel and advice, of self-sacrifice where needed; in a word, of true friendship. Howard Saunders was, before everything, a man of the world in the best sense. He realized the age in which he lived, and, after that, two attributes in him always struck me as remarkable—I refer to method and memory. These qualities are no mere natural inheritance as some may suppose. The aptitude, of course, in greater or less degree, is innate. The finished product, such as his, has been acquired solely by mental and personal effort and no small perseverance; without that, it is not too much to say that his life's work could never have attained that high level we all recognize and admire.

Howard Saunders was a worker: he performed prodigies, yet without "fussiness" or display. In his hundreds of letters to me those stereotyped phrases "in haste" or "written against time" find no place. To possess time enough for all its manifold uses means method. Those who saw in progress the MS. of, say, his "Manual"—those acres of paper covered with pasted slips, dotted with notes, corrections, contradictions and excisions; illegible with transpositions, interpolations, questions and references—a maddening labyrinth of detail—will yet remember how, in the midst of it all, he could always spare an hour for a friend, given ungrudgingly and without a suspicion of interrupted trains of thought.

Again, as to memory: to such perfection had that faculty been brought that his brain became literally a compendium of precise science, a living encyclopædia, and that by no means confined to ornithology. Hardly a subject, scientific or other, but had its allotted pigeon-hole within that spacious storage. Thus, at a recent

meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club the question of the domestication of the African elephant was raised. Authorities ancient and modern were learnedly adduced on either side till Saunders clinched the matter by quoting Polybius, chapter and verse, with the Carthaginian general's report, ascribing his defeat by the Romans to the Indian elephants employed by them and which were larger than his own Lybian elephants. Nowadays there are no Lybian elephants, and those elephants that survive in Africa exceed in size the Indian species. Such instances might be multiplied indefinitely.

It is to such qualities, coupled with a whole-hearted enthusiasm, that we are indebted for that splendid series of works that he has left behind him. To me, who have often had to refer to them, his exposition of the distribution of *Laridæ* and *Larinæ* (*Proceedings Linnæan Society, etc.*) is nothing less than masterly; and no less so his "Catalogue" of the *Gaviæ*. Then, to quote but a few, there is the fourth edition of "Yarrell," his own "Manual" in two editions, and his twice-repeated editorship of the "Ibis," in addition to the time and close attention devoted to the many scientific societies of which he was a member—and always a working member. But it is not for me to recapitulate his manifold activities.

Of field-sports, as such, our late friend was never really enamoured. He enjoyed a ramble on moor or marsh, but always with an eye as keen for any other interesting bird as for the game. In September, 1889, when staying with me for the meetings of the British Association at Newcastle, we had some such days. Once, on coming over a ferny ridge, we surprised a Blackcock that distinctly gave a low "chuckle" as it flew. Saunders, who had just revised my "Bird-life of the Borders," turned on me: "Why, you said that bird never utters a sound except in spring!" Well, I never heard one do so before, and only twice or thrice since, in eighteen years! In 1897, we went to Norway, together with the late Mrs. Saunders and their two daughters, and a pleasanter trip I never enjoyed. We

found a pendent nest of the Long-tailed Tit swinging from a lichen-clad birch. His trained eye at once discriminated the continental form of the sitting owner (the true *Acredula caudata* of Linnæus) by its whiter head, barely visible within the entrance; and also pointed out that the long tail protruded from the hole above the said head. Steaming along the Norsk coast, Saunders, ever keen on the *Laridæ*, surveyed all that passed in view, but the muttered verdict was usually, "*Canus* again." On landing, among the first birds seen was a Green Woodpecker, which he examined with wrapt attention and then excitedly exclaimed, "Certainly, *canus*; distinctly *canus*!" "Oh, father," protested his daughters, "are *all* the birds in Norway *canus*?" Into the sacred precincts of home-life one may not intrude; yet it may be permissible to add that such, in his case, was ideal and a joy to have shared.

Through long practice, both at home and amid the denser jungles of southern lands, he had acquired remarkable quickness in identifying small species in the open, even though but half-seen among foliage or reed-growth. While staying here in spring, I attempted to surprise him by showing him Pied Flycatchers breeding, but long before reaching the place he had already "spotted" the inconspicuous female. Rarely was he mistaken; but one morning he was confident he had recognized (by its darker legs) a Chiffchaff—a species I had not heard here. I should mention that during his later years, Saunders was a little handicapped by deficient hearing—not conversationally so, but in such cases as this. A second observation confirmed the previous opinion, but next day he insisted on the bird being secured, when it proved to be a Willow-Wren with peculiarly dark legs. These are small matters, but may serve to illustrate his ways and methods.

It may be interesting to recall that only a year ago, though already suffering from his fatal malady and also engaged upon the preparation of a third edition of his "Manual" (a work he had set his heart upon completing

but which it was painfully evident would never be accomplished), he undertook to revise a new edition of my "Bird-life." It may surprise those who have not had personal experience of the labour involved in such publications, that this book underwent no less than five revises on "slips" before reaching the final "paged" form. Yet, ill as he was, every one of these six stages my old friend insisted on supervising! Being, moreover, printed in successive sections, it resulted that a single morning's post often brought him three or four different batches of proof from as many different parts of the book, not consecutive—a nice tangle! His criticisms usually came back by return of post—trenchant, perspicuous and delightfully on the spot. He never spared the rod.

Living three hundred miles apart, it was impossible for me to be in such close personal touch as were many of his colleagues and collaborators in London, and a memoir far worthier of its subject might have been penned by one of these. Though utterly unqualified to do it even a measure of justice, yet I cannot refuse the Editors' request to pay this humble tribute to my dear old friend's unrivalled qualities, alike of heart and head.

ABEL CHAPMAN.

[Some prints of the portrait accompanying this Memoir have been specially prepared in a large size suitable for framing. Full particulars will be found on page 3 of the wrapper.]



Vandyk Phot.

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*Howard Saunders*

*Born Sept. 18, 1835—Died Oct. 20, 1907.*