

THE SACRED BIRD

Phasianus Colchicus

(Times, unfortunately, do not really change very much. In the following article by the late William Henry Hudson, which was first published in 1915 in *"Adventures Among Birds"* and which is reprinted here with the kind permission of the publishers, Hutchinson Publishing Group of London, the great British naturalist describes the practices of the English gamekeepers in guarding their pheasant preserves. While today we may not go to the extremes of protection which Mr. Hudson writes about, it is none the less apparent that in using such devices as polettraps in shepherding their flocks, many of our game farm managers still regard the pheasant and other game birds as "sacred" to the exclusion of all else. I am sure that you will enjoy this article, and I hope that it will serve to bring into focus the need for changing the attitudes of those who operate our game farms, by legislation if necessary. — Edgar M. Reilly, Jr.)

It was hardly necessary to add the scientific name to any British species spoken of as "sacred." Certainly it is not the ibis and no mistake is possible seeing that England is not ancient Egypt, or Hindustan, or Samoa, or any remote barbarous land, where certain of the creatures are regarded with a kind of religious veneration. We call our familiar pheasant the sacred bird to express condemnation of the persons who devote themselves with excessive zeal to pheasant-preserving for the sake of sport.

To shoot a pheasant is undoubtedly the best way to kill it and would still be the best way — certainly better than wringing its neck — even if these semi-domestic birds were wholly domestic, as I am perfectly sure they were in the time of the Romans who first introduced them into these islands. I am sure of it because this Asiatic ground-bird, which in two thousand years has not become wholly native, and, as ornithologists say, is in no sense an English bird, could not have existed and been abundant in the conditions which prevailed in Roman times. The fact that pheasant bones come next in quantity to those of the domestic fowl in the ash and bone pits examined by experts during the excavations at Silchester shows that the bird was a common article of food. The country about Silchester was a vast oak forest at that period, probably very sparsely inhabited; a portion of the forest exists to this day, and is in fact one of my favourite haunts. The fox, stoat, and sparrowhawk were not the only enemies of the pheasant then: the wolf existed, the wild cat, the marten, and the founmart; while the list of rapacious birds included the eagle, goshawk, buzzard, kite, hen-harrier, peregrine falcon, and hobby, as well as all the species which still survive, only in very much larger numbers. Then there were the crows: judging from the number of bones of the raven found at Silchester we can only suppose that this chief and most destructive of the corvidae was a protected species and existed in a semi-domestic state and was extremely abundant in and round Calleva — probably at all the Roman stations. It is probable that a few tame

pheasants escaped from time to time into the woods, also some may have been turned out in the hope that they would become acclimatised, and we may suppose that a few of the most hardy birds survived and continued the species until later times; but for hundreds of years succeeding the Romano-British period the pheasant must have been a rarity in English woods. And a rarity it remains down to this day in all places where it is left to itself, in spite of the extermination of most of its natural enemies. Unhappily for England the fashion or craze for this bird became common among landowners in recent times — the desire to make it artificially abundant so that an estate which yielded a dozen or twenty birds a year to the sportsman would be made to yield a thousand. This necessitated the destruction of all the wild life supposed in any way and in any degree to be inimical to the protected species. Worse still, men to police the woods, armed with guns, traps, and poison, were required. Consider what this means — men who are hired to provide a big head of game, privileged to carry a gun day and night all the year round, to shoot just what they please! For who is to look after them on their own ground to see that they do not destroy scheduled species? They must be always shooting something; that is simply a reflex effect of the liberty they have and of the gun in the hand. Killing becomes a pleasure to them, and with or without reason or excuse they are always doing it — always adding to the list of creatures to be extirpated, and when these fail adding others. “I know perfectly well,” said a keeper to me, “that the nightjar is harmless; I don’t believe a word about its swallowing pheasant’s eggs, though many keepers think they do. I shoot them, it is true, but only for pleasure.” So it has come about that wherever pheasants are strictly preserved, hawks — including those that prey on mice, moles, wasps, and small birds; also the owls, and all the birds of the crow family, saying the rook on account of the landowner’s sentiment in its favour; and after them the nightjar and the woodpeckers and most other species above the size of a chaffinch — are treated as “vermin.” The case of the keeper who shot all the nightingales because their singing kept the pheasants awake at night sounds like a fable. But it is no fable; there are several instances of this having been done, all well authenticated.

Here is another case which came under my own eyes. It is of an old heronry in a southern county, in the park of a great estate about which there was some litigation a few years back. On my last visit to this heronry at the breeding season I found the nests hanging empty and desolate in the trees near the great house, and was told that the new head keeper had persuaded the great nobleman who had recently come into possession of the estate to allow him to kill the herons because their cries frightened the pheasants. They were shot on the nests after breeding began; yet the great nobleman who allowed this to be done is known to the world as a humane and enlightened man, and, I hear, boasts that he has never shot a bird in his life! He allowed it to be done because he

wanted pheasants for his sporting friends to have their shoot in October, and he supposed that his keeper knew best what should be done.

Another instance, also on a great estate of a great nobleman in southern England. Throughout a long mid-June day I heard the sound of firing in the woods, beginning at about eight o'clock in the morning and lasting until dark. The shooters ranged over the whole woods; I had never, even in October, heard so much firing on an estate in one day. I enquired of several persons, some employed on the estate, as to the meaning of all this firing, and was told that the keeper was ridding the woods of some of the vermin. More than that they refused to say; but by-and-by I found a person to tell me just what had happened. The head keeper had got twenty or thirty persons, the men with guns and a number of lads with long poles with hooks to pull nests down, and had set himself to rid the woods of birds that were not wanted. All the nests found, of whatever species, were pulled down, and all doves, woodpeckers, nut-hatches, blackbirds, missel and song thrushes, shot; also chaffinches and many other small birds. The keeper said he was not going to have the place swarming with birds that were no good for anything, and were always eating the pheasants' food. The odd thing in this case was that the owner of the estate and his son, a distinguished member of the House of Commons, are both great bird-lovers, and at the very time that this hideous massacre in mid-June was going on they were telling their friends in London that a pair of birds of a fine species, long extirpated in southern England, had come to their woods to breed. A little later the head keeper reported that these same fine birds had mysteriously disappeared!

One more case, again from an estate in a southern county, the shooting of which was let to a gentleman who is greatly interested in the preservation of rare birds, especially the hawks. I knew the ground well, having received permission from the owner to go where I liked: I also knew the keepers and (like a fool) believed they would carry out the instructions of their master. I informed them that a pair of hobbyhawks were breeding in a clump of trees on the edge of the park, and asked them to be careful not to mistake them for sparrowhawks. At the same time I told them that a pair of Montagu's harriers were constantly to be seen at a lonely marshy spot in the woods, a mile from the park; I had been watching them for three days at that spot and believed they were nesting. I also told them where a pair of great spotted woodpeckers were breeding in the woods. They promised to "keep an eye" on the hawks, and I daresay they did, seeing that both hobbys and harriers had vanished in the course of the next few days. But they would not promise to save the woodpeckers: one of the under-keepers had been asked by a lady to get her a few pretty birds to put in a glass case, and the head keeper told him he could have these woodpeckers.

Did I in these cases inform the owner and the shooting-tenant of what

had happened? No, and for a very good reason. Nothing ever comes of such telling except a burst of rage on the part of the owner against all keepers and all interfering persons, which lasts for an hour or so, and then all goes on as before. I have never known a keeper to be discharged except for the one offence of dealing in game and eggs on his own account. In everything else he has a free hand; if it is not given him he takes it, and there is nothing he resents so much as being interfered with or advised or instructed as to what species he is to spare. Tell him to spare an owl or a kestrel and he instantly resolves to kill it; and if you are such a faddist as to want to preserve everything he will go so far as to summon his little crowd of humble followers and parasites and set them to make a clean sweep of all the wild life in the woods, as in the instance I have described. No, it is mere waste of energy to inform individual owners of such abuses. The craze exists for a big head of game, or rather of this exotic bird of the woods, called in scorn and disgust the "sacred bird" by one who was himself a naturalist and sportsman; the owners are themselves responsible for the system and have created the class of men necessary to enable them to follow this degraded form of sport. I use the word advisedly: Mr. A. Stuart-Wortley, the best authority I know on the subject, an enthusiast himself, mournfully acknowledges in his book on the pheasant that pheasant shooting as now almost universally conducted in England is not sport at all.

One odd result of this over-protection of an exotic species and consequent degradation of the woodlands is that the bird itself becomes a thing disliked by the lover of nature. No doubt it is an irrational feeling, but a very natural one nevertheless, seeing that whatsoever is prized and cherished by our enemy, or the being who injures us, must come in for something of the feeling he inspires. There is always an overflow. Personally I detest the sight of semi-domestic pheasants in the preserves; the bird itself is hateful, and is the one species I devoutly wish to see exterminated in the land.

But when I find this same bird where he exists comparatively in a state of nature, and takes his chance with the other wild creatures, the sight of him affords me keen pleasure: especially in October and November when the change in the colour of the leaf all at once makes this familiar world seem like an enchanted region. We look each year for the change and know it is near, yet when it comes it will be as though we now first witnessed that marvellous transformation—the glory in the high beechen woods on downs and hillsides, of innumerable oaks on the wide level weald, and elms and maples and birches and ancient gnarled thorns, with tangle of vari-coloured brambles and ivy with leaves like dark malachite, and light green and silvery grey of old-man's-beard. In that aspect of nature the pheasant no longer seems an importation from some brighter land, a stranger to our woods, startling unlike our wild native ground-birds in their sober protective colouring, and out of har-

mony with the surroundings. The most brilliant plumage seen in the tropics would not appear excessive then, when the thin dry leaves on the trees, rendered translucent by the sunbeams, shine like coloured glass, and when the bird is seen in some glade or opening on a woodland floor strewn with yellow gold and burnished red, copper and brightest russet leaves. He is one with it all, a part of that splendour, and a beautifully decorative figure as he moves slowly with deliberate jetting gait or stands at attention, the eared head and shining neck raised and one foot lifted. Many a writer has tried to paint him in words; perhaps Ruskin alone succeeds, in a passage which was intended to be descriptive of the colouring of the pheasants generally. "Their plumage," he said, "is for the most part warm brown, delicately and even beautifully spotty; and in the goodliest species the spots become variegated, or inlaid as in a Byzantine pavement, deepening into imperial purple and azure, and lighting into lustre of innumerable eyes."

But alas! not infrequently when I have seen the pheasant in that way in the coloured woods in October, when after the annual moult his own colouring is richest and he is seen at his best, my delight has vanished when I have lifted my eyes to look through the thinned foliage at the distant prospect of earth and the blue overarching sky. For who that has ever looked at nature in other regions, where this perpetual hideous war of extermination against all noble feathered life is not carried on, does not miss the great soaring bird in the scene — eagle, or vulture, or buzzard, or kite, or harrier — floating at ease on broad vans, or rising heavenwards in vast and evervaster circles? That is the one object in nature which has the effect of widening the prospect just as if the spectator had himself been miraculously raised to a greater altitude, while at the same time the blue dome of the sky appears to be lifted to an immeasurable height above him. The soaring figure reveals to sight and mind the immensity and glory of the visible world. Without it the blue sky can never seem sublime.

But the great soaring bird is nowhere in our lonely skies, and missing it we remember the reason of its absence and realise what the modern craze for the artificially reared pheasant has cost us.