

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1907.

HIGHLAND SPORT.

The Wild Sports and Natural History of the Highlands. By Charles St. John. Pp. xx+314. (London: John Murray, 1907.) Price 2s. 6d. net.

THE appearance of a reprint of the ninth edition of "The Wild Sports of the Highlands," first published sixty-one years ago, is sufficient proof of the permanent merit of that delectable book, but hardly affords a pretext for a set review of one so well and widely known. More to the point, perhaps, to recall the personality of the author, with which his many readers are less familiar than they are with his writings. A great-grandson of Lord Bolingbroke, the Tory Minister of Queen Anne and Secretary of State to the Old Pretender, Charles St. John became a clerk in the Treasury in 1828, where he proved a distinct failure. His heart was in the open air; his uncle, the second Lord Bolingbroke, lent him a lodge in Sutherland, where he had the good fortune to win the affections of Miss Ann Gibson, a Newcastle banker, whom he married in 1834. His wife not only brought him some money, but hearty sympathy in his devotion to sport and natural history.

In these pursuits the St. Johns might have passed their placid lives known to few except shepherds, gillies, and such venturesome sportsmen as had discovered the splendid resources of the moors of Moray and Sutherland, had not Cosmo Innes, Sheriff of Moray, made acquaintance with the recluse and become impressed with his knowledge of woodcraft and wild animals. Why, he asked, did not St. John turn his abundant leisure to account by writing on his favourite subjects? St. John laughed at the notion, saying he was quite pleased if he could manage to reply intelligibly to his few correspondents; but in the end Innes persuaded him to try his hand, so that, during the winter of 1844-5, St. John composed a few little essays on sport and natural history. One of these, entitled "The Muckle Hart of Benmore," Innes shaped into an article for the *Quarterly Review*, which so much delighted the editor, Lockhart, that St. John, stimulated by an unexpected honorarium, set to work in earnest, and before his early death in 1853, at the age of forty-four, he had completed the work presently under notice, "A Tour in Sutherlandshire," two volumes, published in 1849, and "Natural History and Sport in Moray," published ten years after the author's death. Death is the crowning act of all field sports, and St. John was an adept in pursuit; but it was from the by-products, so to speak, of a day's fishing, shooting, or stalking that he drew keenest delight—the behaviour, the attitudes, the natural traits of beast and bird. He found out for himself many secrets which are now well known to every field-naturalist. Here is one, for instance, with which all gamekeepers are familiar, but the cause of which remains still to be elucidated.

"It is a curious fact, but one which I have often observed, that dogs frequently pass close to the nest

of grouse, partridge, or other game, without scenting the hen bird as she sits upon her nest. I knew this year of a partridge's nest which was placed close to a narrow footpath near my house; and although not only my people, but all my dogs, were constantly passing within a foot and a half of the bird, they never found her out, and she hatched her brood in safety."

Here, again, is a note the truth whereof is slowly gaining ground, although it has had to fight its way to acceptance through half a century of incredulity.

"With regard to the mischief done by owls, all the harm they do is amply repaid by their utility in destroying a much more serious nuisance in the shape not only of the various kinds of mice, but of rats also; these animals being their principal food and the prey which they are most adapted for catching."

There has been a controversy in the *Scotsman* lately about the food of the water-ousel or dipper, opinion appearing to be equally divided upon the question whether that bird devours the spawn of fish. The late Prof. Newton, Frank Buckland, and other good observers stoutly defend the dipper against the accusation, but St. John entertained no doubt about its truth. It is certainly difficult to understand how a carnivorous bird, searching for food at the bottom of the water, should be so discriminating as to reject the ova of trout and salmon and feed only on aquatic insects and their larvæ. Prof. Newton, however, wrote with much confidence on this subject.

"By the careless and ignorant it is accused of feeding on the spawn of fishes, and it has been on that account subjected to much persecution. Innumerable examinations of the contents of its stomach have not only proved that the charge is baseless, but that the bird clears off many of the worst enemies of the precious product."—"Dictionary of Birds," p. 668.)

On the other hand, St. John's adverse verdict does not seem to have been based on actual observation.

"The water-ousel is supposed to commit great havoc in the spawning beds of salmon and trout, uncovering the ova and leaving what it does not eat open to the attacks of eels and other fish, or liable to be washed away by the current; and, notwithstanding my regard for this little bird, I am afraid I must admit that he is guilty of no small destruction amongst the spawn. . . . Notwithstanding the bad name he has acquired with fishermen, I never could make up my mind to shoot him."

It is a pity that grave charges like this should be laid upon such slight evidence. It must be a very feeble or poor-spirited eel that cannot help itself to as much spawn as is good for it without employing the dipper as pioneer. The question ought to be settled once for all by examining the contents of the stomach of a water-ousel shot among spawning salmon.

St. John's pages well bear re-perusal. They are charged with the free air of the moor and the loch, and, greatly as nature students have multiplied since his day, none of them gives more direct insight than he does into the *vie intime* of wild animals.