

NATURE NOTES BY ROBERT DICK DUNCAN

The Zoologist vol 2 (1844) page 447

Note on the Swallow.

It is now some weeks since the swallows assembled on the house-tops in great congregations. They met apparently for the purpose of departing in company to other lands than ours. I have seen none since these meetings took place until yesterday, October 15, when about a dozen chimney-swallows were observed, hawking for flies over our garden. The previous days had been frosty, so much so that the Ochil hills were white with snow. To all appearance the ground here will also be covered, to the depth of a few inches, ere tomorrow dawn. The hour when the swallows were seen was a little after noon. The sun was shining warmly at the time, although the frost, during the preceding night had formed ice, in some places, I am told, about a quarter of an inch in thickness. While the birds were flying, I observed a nettle tortoiseshell butterfly also on the wing.

Robert Dick Duncan

Vale of Almond, Mid Calder, Edinburgh-shire [sic], October 16, 1843

The Phytologist, a popular botanical miscellany vol 1 (1844) page 711

Note on the late flowering of the Fuchsia.

The extraordinary mildness of the closing months of last year has been universally remarked; and the daily and weekly papers, in noticing this peculiarity of the season, have more than once called the attention of their readers to such wonders as "roses blossoming," "young potatoes of the size of marbles," &c. ; in addition, I may mention the following instance of a Fuchsia having renewed its youth, and strangely budded and blossomed about a week ago. The plant is kept in a flowerpot. During last summer it blossomed in its season, like other plants. In autumn its foliage withered and fell, and the plant reminded us of the approach of winter. But winter never came; and the Fuchsia, as if hopeless of his approach, began to bud and finally to blossom. At present it is clothed with leaves, — but leaves, not one of which is a third the size of its summer leaves. Its flowers, too, are curious. The corolla — small in any case, in this unnaturally so — retains its deep purple hue; but the beautifully developed calyx, instead of being bright scarlet, as it ought, is of a pale pink colour — almost white. —

Robert Dick Duncan

Vale of Almond, Mid Calder, Edinburgh-shire, January 6, 1844

The Zoologist vol 2 (1844) pages 556-60

Rhymes relating to Birds. By ROBERT DICK DUNCAN, Esq.

The following rhymes are perhaps a part of the curiosities of literature which should have no place here: but as all popular rhymes may be regarded as evincing the nature and the amount of the knowledge possessed by our predecessors in a far bygone age, or by the common people at the present day, they may not be altogether out of place in a periodical like *The Zoologist*. The verses, with the exception of the first ones, are such as are still sung by the boys of the Lothians, as they go hand-in-hand a bird-nesting through the woods and o'er the moors.

There is scarcely a prejudice more general in this part of the country, not only amongst the young and uneducated, but also amongst those whose experience and education might have taught them otherwise, than the supposition that the cuckoo is a bird of prey — working mischief among the lesser birds whenever it finds opportunity. The following lines would lead us to infer that the same idea is prevalent in England.

*The cuckoo's a fine bird,
She sings as she flies;
She brings us good tidings,
She tells us no lies.
She sucks little birds' eggs
To make her voice clear;
And when she sings 'cuckoo'
The summer is near.*

Probably the circumstance that the eggs and little ones of the foster parent of a young cuckoo are ejected from their own home, and are sometimes found lying around a nest containing one of these creatures, has given rise to the idea that the cuckoo preys on little birds and little birds' eggs.

The following rhymes upon the habits of the cuckoo are generally known.

*In April,
The cuckoo shows his bill:
In May,
He singeth all day
In June,
He alters his tune:
In July,
He prepares to fly:
Come August,
Go he must.*

It has long been a matter of dispute whether or not the swallows migrate from this country to other lands during the severity of winter. The general belief now is that most of them do; but that a few, which, by some cause or other, have been detained behind their congeners, remain with us in a torpid state. The verse which follows tells us plainly what was the opinion of our forefathers on this subject.

*The bat, the bee, the butterfly,
The cuckoo and the swallow;
The carncraik and the wheatie-bird,
They a' sleep in the hallow.*

The last word of the third line varies in different parts of the country. In England, for instance, the line runs thus :—
"The corncraik and the nightingale."

The redbreast, in ancient times, was regarded by the people of Britain as a sacred bird, — a creature under the peculiar protection of heaven. And even to this day, boys are afraid to destroy the nest of the robin, thinking that if they do so, some evil will assuredly befall them. In this immunity enjoyed by the redbreast the wren partially shares, for it has ever been a popular idea that the wren is the robin's wife. Hence the old rhyme :—

*Malisons, malisons mair than ten,
That herry the Ladie o' Heeven's hen;
The robin and the wren
Are God's bird and hen.*

Owing to the universal acquaintance of the people of Scotland with the beautiful story of the 'Babes in the Wood,' the feeling of sanctity with which the redbreast was wont to be regarded, has gradually given place to a kindred emotion — that of love. The entire confidence with which this bird makes man his friend during the wild days of winter, and the idea, as Isaac Walton expresses it, that the "honest robin loves mankind both alive and dead," impressed upon the minds of our youth by the tale already referred to, has awakened a feeling of affection towards it in the human breast. Accordingly the Hobinet is a universal favourite: for who could find it in his heart to hurt the pretty creature which cheers our homes by his sweet winter song, and which, our fathers told us, took compassion on the poor little babes who were persecuted by their cruel relative. I know not why the lark and the linnet should share, more than others, in the privileges of the redbreast. But such seems to be the case, for we often hear sung :—

*The laverock and the lintie;
The robin and the wren;
If ye hurry their nests,
Ye'll ne'er thrive again.*

In a preceding paragraph it was stated that the redbreast and the wren are understood by the common people to be husband and wife. This is evident from the following ridiculous verse :—

*The robin redbreast and the wren
Coost out about the supper pan ;
And or the robin gat a spune,
Kitty had the supper dune.*

A prejudice, the very opposite to that spoken of above, is prevalent respecting the gold-ring or yellow-hammer. The idea that it is in league with the devil is very general in Scotland. Boys here almost invariably stone the poor creature when they see it; and should a yellow bunting's nest with young in it fall in their way, woe be to the luckless birds! I have only heard part of the rhyme which speaks of this prejudice. It is as follows :—

*Haif a paddock, half a taid.
Half a drap o' deil's blude,
On a May morning.*

The nests of the stone-chat and lapwing are seldom destroyed by nesting boys. The cries of these birds, when their nests are approached, prevent the destruction. The former is supposed to say:

*Stane chack!
Deil tak!
They wha berry my nest
Will never rest,
Will meet the pest!
Deil break their back
Wha iny eggs wad tak, tak!*

This terrifies the bird-nesters. The cry of the lapwing, on the other hand, is an appeal to their compassion, and it is generally successful.

*Peese-weep, peese-weep,
Herry my nest and gar me greet.*

The following is a rhyme well known amongst the Lammermoor peasants. It is very characteristic. Two birds of the crow tribe, sitting together, thus confabulate in harsh tones :—

A hoggie (sheep) dead, a hoggie dead!
 O, where? O, where? O, where?
 Doon i' the park, doon i' the park, doon i' the park!
 Is'tfat? Is'tfat? Is'tfat?
 Come try, come try, come try!

Sometimes the rhyme varies a little; thus: —
 Sekyto says there's a hog dead!
 Where? Where?
 Up the burn, up the burn! — &c.

The verses about the magpie are familiar to everybody. Even our sagest philosophers have adverted to them. In England, if a magpie be seen flying alone, it is thought a sign of ill luck; two forebode something fortunate; three, a funeral; four, a wedding. Here quite a different tale is told. One rhyme runs thus: —

Ane's joy;
 Two's grief;
 Three's a wedding;
 Four's a death.

It is not easy to imagine how these ideas became associated with the appearance of certain numbers of magpies. Perhaps it may be as follows. *Ane's joy*: during the season of nesting, when we see a solitary magpie, we may presume that its nest is built and is still uninjured, and that its mate is seated there in all the bliss of maternal anxiety. With that family, then, all is well. *Two's grief*: suppose the nest of the happy pair destroyed by some evil-worker, the poor birds would be seen together, lamenting to each other their ruined prospects. *Three's a wedding*: in the pairing season, how often do we see three birds together. As amongst men, two individuals are often found seeking the hand of some fair lady, so amongst the birds, two suitors frequently present themselves to some amiable and dashing belle, and she is called on to say which she prefers. After her choice is made, the wedding takes place. *Four's a death*: when the young of the magpie have left the nest, and are seen hopping about to the number of four or more, well may the housekeeper or hen-wife beware lest there be a death in her poultry-yard. Perhaps the origin of the last line — *Four's a death* — may be traced to the circumstance of magpies holding assize-courts, similar to those said to be held by sparrows, crows, storks, &c. Speaking of these kinds of assemblies, Pliny says, *There is in the open and champaign country of Asia Pithonas-Comes a place, where the storks assemble together, and being met keep up a jangling one with another: but, in the end, look which of them lagged behind and came tardy, — him they tear in pieces, and then depart.* We can scarcely avoid believing that there is some truth in the preceding extract, for credible authors of a modern age affirm that they have witnessed similar assemblies and proceedings in the case of crows. At these meetings, it is said, *there is a regular trial of a delinquent, who, upon being found guilty, receives a severe drubbing from the whole court, and is even sometimes killed outright.* Now, probably, magpies sometimes thus meet, try, chastise and put to death! Perhaps a few of the readers of *The Zoologist* will consider some of the preceding notes as out of place; but others, I am sure, will regard them with a more favourable eye. Amazing commentaries have been written on the rhymes of the people on various subjects: why not, then, a few words upon those which speak of the studies of the naturalist.

Robert Dick Duncan

Vale of Almond, Mid Calder, Edinburgh-shire, April 15, 1844

Charles Alexander Young *Birds' Nests* (1854) page 68

SAND MARTIN - *Hirundo riparia*

The Sand or Bank Martin derives its name from the place which it selects for building its nest. Many interesting accounts have been written of its skill as an excavator, the most pleasing of which, perhaps, is that of Mr. Robert Dick Duncan. He says, *It is extremely pleasant to observe the process of burrowing; and it is by no means difficult to enjoy a view of their operations. Taking with me a small telescope, I seated myself at a little distance, on the opposite bank of the river, early on a warm morning in May. The swallows, no way molested by my presence, continued at intervals to excavate their nests. Grasping the perpendicular surface of the bank with their claws, and steadying themselves by means of their tails, they commenced working by picking a small hole with their bills. This hole they gradually enlarged by moving round and round, and edging off the sand with the side of their bills, which they kept shut. Their progress at first was slow, but after they had obtained room to stand in the excavation, they proceeded very rapidly, working within with their bills, and carefully pushing out the loosened sand with their feet. At one time the male, at another the female, was the excavator. When their burrowing was impeded by the resistance of a stone, or any other obstruction, if unsuccessful in their efforts to remove it, they left the cell, and commenced digging a new one. They engaged in these exercises only for a short time each morning, as they abandoned themselves to enjoyment throughout the day. The nests were deposited at the ends of the cells, the depth and direction of which varied much. Some extended three feet, others not more than six inches; some were horizontal, some descended nearly perpendicularly for a little, and then rose again; while others turned in many directions. In all, however, the nest was a little elevated above the entrance of the cell, no doubt to get rid of moisture. The materials of the nest were uniformly a few straws of hay, and many whitish feathers. The number of eggs usually found in each nest was six. They are small, of a snow white colour, tinged with a sulphureous yellow when newly laid. This tinge disappears when the eggs are blown, and arises from the yolk shining through the shell, which is of a very fine, thin texture. Of all our swallows, these seem to be the most social, nestling in numerous communities, and often within a few inches of each other.*