

THE NATURALIST.

VIPERS AND THEIR YOUNG.

SOME short time since I declined to continue any further correspondence on the vexed question of vipers swallowing their young until some further information had been received from the best of my enquirers, the subject for myself, with the aid of a brother naturalist and one of the most skilled viper-catchers in the New Forest. I cannot, however, resist publishing an anecdote which I have just heard from a friend who writes to me from the office of the Zoological Gardens. He has just informed me that a gentleman had called his attention to the fact that he had in his possession a particular viper, and stated that he had seen her swallow her young. Mr. Bartlett concluded by stating the phenomenon, which, of course, would have at once settled the question.

He informed me that he had subsequently received a letter from the gentleman, who stated that, as the final result of his observations, he had seen the viper swallow her young. The gentleman, as Mr. Bartlett said, with the intelligent smile which is characteristic of his face, they passed into her stomach, "and stopped there." These seven young never having made their reappearance, except in the form of bones, the conclusion to which Mr. Bartlett came was one which, I presume, will be accepted by many persons, that the viper, being hungry, had, like Saturn, devoured her own offspring. Of course, those who believe in the maternal instinct of carnivorous reptiles and fish will doubt the explanation, but I give it as it received it. I have not the slightest doubt in my own mind that a hungry viper, like a hungry pig, would feed on her own progeny without the slightest demur.

W. B. TROSBERT.

THE CAUCASIAN BLACK GROUSE.

The Caucasian black grouse (*Tetra kiskosioviszki*), known only since 1875, is met with exclusively in the highest part of the chain of the Caucasus mountains, the zone of transition from the conifers to the alpine region. The male birds, like those we know, have a long tail, and the tail is not in the form of a lyre, but somewhat bent downwards.

As to the geographical range of the bird, it is met with throughout the Caucasus, but always at the end of the arborescent growth near the rhododendron zone, about 6000ft. above the level of the sea. Its pairing time is in the month of May, in the alpine glades near the conifers, and the birds are usually six or eight in the evening, the males arriving at these places, where they are to be seen, and remaining during the night. They recommence early in the morning their showing off, and continue till eight o'clock. They perch then on the rocks, and in the morning they are seen to be flying about in the open, the Caucasian bird is always ready to fight vigorously with any rival that is bold enough to encroach upon his preserves.

The characteristic feature in the pairing time, is that the Caucasian black grouse is almost silent, and that it only sings when the hen utters resembles the cheeping of young birds. Sometimes the flutters upwards, but not higher than about two feet. At this time he is not at all shy, so that it is not difficult to approach him within ten or twelve feet, unless there are some lions with him, which fly up immediately on taking alarm.

At the approach of autumn, the black game of the Caucasus unite in flocks, which burrow under the snow in hard winters, and in the new year they are almost entirely absent from the most part upon fine ferns, buds, bilberries, &c., as well as upon insects, chiefly hymenoptera.

Our knowledge of this bird's natural history being as yet very slight, I may direct the attention of English sportsmen to the monograph by a Russian author, the late Maximilian Noska, which is published in the *Ornithologische Jahrbuch*, edited by V. von Reichenow, at Schmiedhofen, and which I am sure will supply a blank in the literature concerning it. R. ZEITLER.

LONDON BIRDS.

A VERY pleasant illustration of the large number of birds whose existence can be noted and whose habits may be studied, even by a Cockney ornithologist, was given at the dinner of the British Ornithologists' Club on Wednesday evening. The B.O.U. (as the ornithologists all over the world may know) has just published the *Ibis*, the thirty-six volumes of which are regarded as among the most valuable series in any ornithological library. But the B.O.U., which I may direct the attention of English sportsmen to, since that it would be desirable to have a meeting once a month during the season, and, after an informal dinner, exhibiting specimens and discussing moot points in ornithology, has been held in London for many years.

the ravages of this pest, rendering four-fifths of the produce unmarketable; while it is no improbable that a most promising industry, for which the soil and climate are in many parts eminently adapted, may have to be abandoned altogether.

In many districts in the north but little fruit in the way of apples can be produced unless handiapped by a considerable expenditure in the way of spraying, bandaging, and other devices to lessen the injury.

Now the codlin moth is particularly active towards dusk, and consequently escapes the attention of birds then retiring to roost; but that the bird would be available at that particular period.

It is a pity that the very few birds which are capable of anyone able to speak as to possible or probable injury bats are capable of doing; but the suggestion that they may destroy insects necessary to the fertilisation of plants seems somewhat wild, while to enlarge upon the evils caused by rabbits, pigs, and sparrows is beside the mark in considering the services of bats.

I am glad your correspondent admits the benefits derived from the introduction of trout and humble bees, but I did not know that either of these creatures were so common.

[Fishes and insects, as well as birds, beasts, and reptiles, are animals; but many persons inconsiderately limit the application of the word, and use it erroneously, as though it applied only to quadrupeds.] They appear to overlook the fact that all animated creatures belong to the animal kingdom; they are neither vegetables nor minerals.—Ed.]

THE WHITE RHINOCEROS IN ZULULAND.

Sir,—I presume that Mr. G. R. Vardell hardly expects me to say that he has not seen a white rhinoceros in Zululand, but I do not think rhino in Zululand last year. When a statement of this kind is made, all we can do (unless we are in a position absolutely to deny it) is to hold our peace, in so far, at least, as the mere fact itself is concerned. It is not the person, but to express our astonishment that the fact is so; and this is all I do.

I was in the Zululand country in 1866, 1870, 1874, and 1875, and in the second and third of these years was actually at the very spot where this animal is said to have been killed. I was in the country in 1866, and I am certain there were no white rhinos there then. Later, in 1870, and again in 1872, I was all over the whole country between the Usutu and the Limpopo, in each case many months, backwards and forwards, and I have never seen a white rhinoceros, and I do not think any white rhinoceros was heard of in all that country. In 1870 there were peculiar conditions to prove this; for there was a heavy flood, it having rained for five days and nights, during which time the water was so high that it was impossible to travel (as you say, on account of this experience appeared in your column). The consequence of this flood was that the whole country was made soft and muddy, and every animal in it left its spoor deep and distinct in the mud.

I have written to many men who knew these countries, and without exception they all express the same surprise as myself. Only on Sunday I had staying with me the two men who can speak with greatest authority on the subject, Mr. Selous and Mr. Selous's brother-in-law, whom, of course, Mr. Selous would have to be one. These were Mr. S. H. ("Sam") Edwards, the first white man to cross Africa, the first white man in Nataliland, and, contemporaneously with Livingstone, in Zululand, the first white man to cross the Orange, and Phillips, the discoverer of the Mazoe and of the ruins of Zimbabwe, and they are both as astonished, as I am. It is true that neither of them are in Zululand, but, as everyone who knows them well, and they are both as good as dead, it concerns me nothing whether that has happened in the world of South African travel and sport during the last half century.

I am very glad to have the opinion of Mr. W. C. Baldwin, who, in the fitness known to the game of Zululand better than anyone, not excepting John Dunn. He is still alive in England.

I believe I am correct in saying that there is no record of white rhinos in Zululand for nearly twenty years previous to the present generation, and everyone must wonder why they have escaped observation all these years in a country so thickly populated.

I have no wish to be hypercritical, but there are two points in Mr. Vardell's letter which are worthy of notice. The first is that the animal glistened a faint white. Now the so-called white rhinoceros is not white, and the name is a misnomer. I have seen him as dark as his so-called black brother. The other is that, on the subject of the horns, the horns of the white rhinoceros will occasionally charge, and so will a mouse, but it is a very rare thing. As a rule they are quite gentle and inoffensive—one might almost say tame. London knew a man who vaulted on to the back of one, and rode off on it. GEORGE LACY.

GRAT AUK'S EGG.

been noted before.—HUGH R. BEYON (Union Club, S.W.) [While the Inns of Court Hotel in Lincoln's-inn-fields was in course of erection, and the building operations were temporarily suspended, a pair of plovers nested in the roof of the building, and their nest, in the square, took up their nesting quarters in the deserted building, and were frequently observed passing in and out. It is by no means a common occurrence, however, for this bird to resort to buildings in the present time, though in London they sometimes perch upon them.—Ed.]

ALBINO REDSTART.—For the last four years a pair of redstarts have had a nest in an old boot left on the wall plate of a boat-house, at this year's endow Place, Gloucestershire. Amongst the young ones of this year, I have seen one which was entirely white, and I have having fallen in the water in its first endeavour to fly. I have never heard of an albino redstart before, and thought it might be worthy of mention in your column.—FRANK RICARDO (Christchurch, Hants).—Ed.]

SCARCITY OF GREEN WOODPECKER.—Mr. Cordaux mentions the scarcity of the green woodpecker in Herefordshire, and asks whether a similar scarcity has been noticed elsewhere. I am sorry to hear of the scarcity of this bird in Herefordshire, but I have not in Montgomeryshire, where they have hitherto been very plentiful. I have scarcely seen a green woodpecker since January. No doubt the frost, having prevented them getting their usual supply of ants, has killed them off.—GEORGE.

WILD DUCK NESTING IN A TREE.—What a pity Mr. Armitage did not allow the wild duck to which he refers (p. 885) to hatch off her eggs. He would have been more than interested to have seen the mother convey her family safely to the ground. I remember a pair of wild ducks nesting in a tree in the park at the Victoria Park, near Bury St. Edmunds, in 1847, from the ground, in Livermore 160 yards from the mere, and the ducklings were brought to the water, there, almost a month of them to find a living tomb in the jaws of the water.—E. PARRY OGDEN.

WHITE MOLE IN BERKSHIRE.—Mr. George Lovell of Cusumand might write a little recently on the farm at Cusumand. He caught other two in previous years in addition to one at Rothamstead, and two on the Home farm, all on the estate of Freefield. He believes all six to have been of one family, as he has never discovered any other. He has not had the estate of Freefield. They were all females. His grandfather, a successful mole catcher, in the course of sixty-two years caught 105 white moles, chiefly in Daviot, and some about Coleridge in Aberdeenshire.—G. M. (Aberdeen).

HERON PASSING OVER LONDON.—A heron was seen on July 16th, 1895, flying over the city of London, and was seen at Regent's Park. It was about seven o'clock in the evening, and the bird was low down, flying almost due west.—O. L. ADDISON. [Notwithstanding the spread of bricks and mortar, and the increase of the city, the heron still flies over the city of London, and is seen where, at early dawn and at twilight, these birds may be observed fishing. The majority of them probably are visitors from Winstead Park, Essex, where there is a herony, and so it is not remarkable that they should be seen flying over the city of London.—Ed.]

STARLING FEEDING YOUNG TITS.—For the last two years I have had a pair of tom-tits nesting in a hole in an apple tree on my lawn. The hole in the tree is not more than 5ft. 6in. from the ground, and is so shallow that one can count the eggs, and as people are so much in the habit of passing by, I have had to be very careful all day, the birds are very tame. This summer the birds hatched eight young ones, which are now almost fully fledged and very noisy when the old ones are coming with food. For the last three days a starling has been observed to call to the young ones. The starling, the old tits, if near, is very funny to watch, and inasmuch as they feed with small caterpillars, frequently being, while the starling feeds with a longish worm every twenty minutes or so, I am afraid that the starling is not doing the young ones any good. I am sure the starling has either lost its own young or is an unmated bird. The hole in the tree is big enough to allow the old birds to go in and out, but not large enough for the starling, and so it has to cling with its feet to the edge of the hole, and to deposit its food on the edge of the hole, and to pick it up with its beak into the hole; and as the worm is generally too big for the young to take and the foothold gets tired, it generally has to fly down on the lawn and break up the worm and fly up again to the nest before it can get rid of its burden.—WALTER C. HERRINSON (Leatherhead, Surrey).

REARING YOUNG EAGLES.—Early last month I received two young golden eagles in down. After a journey of thirty-eight hours from London, they were in a state of perfect health, and were able to fly. Two days after receiving them I weighed them, and they were 1 lb. 10 oz. and the other 1 lb. 10 oz. The smaller one was very weak when it arrived. From the very first, at times, they pecked savagely at one another.