

Bird-life in London.

Contributors

Miller, W. J. C. 1832-1903.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

Publication/Creation

London : John Bale & Sons, printers, 1894.

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/g58c8qqm>

Provider

Royal College of Surgeons

License and attribution

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by The Royal College of Surgeons of England. The original may be consulted at The Royal College of Surgeons of England. where the originals may be consulted. This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.



Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

18.

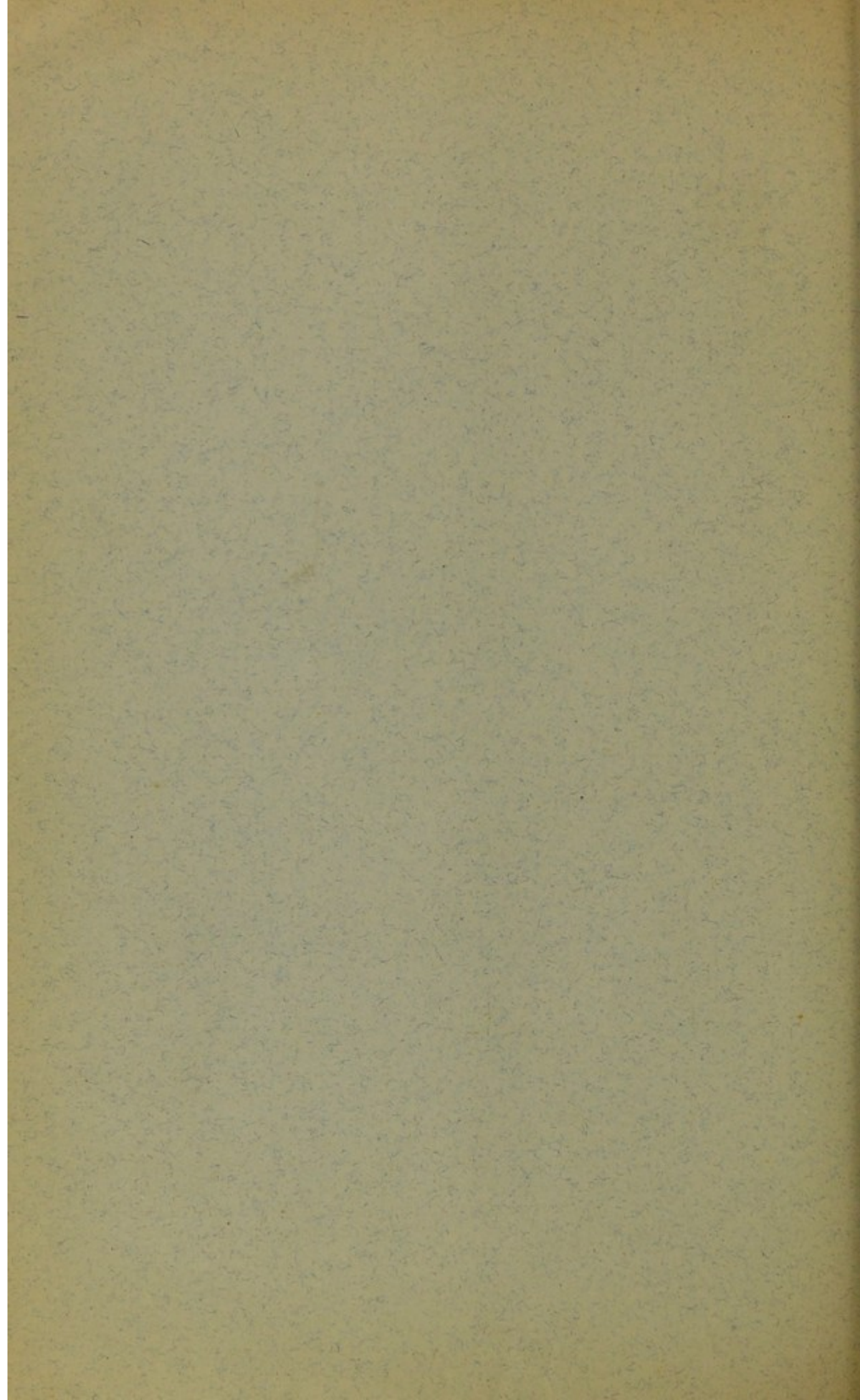
Bird-life in London

by

W. J. L. Miller



1894.



BIRD-LIFE IN LONDON.

IN walking about London, it is well to note, when we come to any open spaces, what various objects of bird-life may be caught by the observing eye. Just as it adds to the interest of the often crowded streets to recall their associations in literature and history—to look up, as we pass, and say, as noted by tablets in the walls, here was born, or here lodged, Byron; here dwelt Sheridan, or Swift, or Turner; here lived and died the illustrious Handel—so is it of equal, if not greater interest, to watch the ever-varying life of the birds. To the lover of London, St. James's Street is a mine of memories, a steady source of never-wearying delight; it recalls to him the time when the street was the centre of everything social, and brilliant, and witty, and wicked, in the whole world of London. And St. James's Park is even more interesting still. There, we have not only the very spots where King Charles the Easy loved to wander, but the descendants of the very ducks which the good-humoured king loved to feed. Rochester's witty epitaph says of him, we know, that

“ Here lies our sovereign Lord the King,
Whose word no one relies on;
Who never said a foolish thing,
And never did a wise one.”

To this I would say that he did one wise thing in bequeathing to us these ducks—I use the word to designate the whole of the feathered swimming-tribe—which have been fed, and petted, and loved, by children of all growths, down to this day. The very sparrows, too, which will now almost come to eat out of your hand, are no doubt lineal descendants of sparrows which have been so fed for ages long gone by.

During the past winter, sea-gulls have been coming in large numbers to the lake in the park. In storms I have seen them often flying high against the wind, while at other times they have been resting quietly on the lake. On January 14th of this year the weather was warm; and as I walked across the park at twelve o'clock, I saw a fine flock of sea-gulls near the bridge. About February 17 there had been some days of frost, and the lake in the park had been frozen over; but on Friday the ice was breaking up, and at one o'clock on Saturday only a slender sheet was left over about half the lake. On this half a fine flock of nearly a hundred sea-gulls was perched, now and then swimming in the water after pieces of bread that had been thrown to the ducks, and seeming quite at home.

One day in early autumn, a beautiful canary had escaped into one of the enclosures, and several gardeners and keepers were after it with a cage, vainly, so long as I saw, trying to catch the bird. At another time I saw a fine merry magpie, enjoying himself, and delighting the visitors, among the trees; and

there I saw him, day by day, for some time, seeming to enjoy the fun of the utterly futile attempts to catch him. This bird, I learnt, had escaped from a caged pair on the lower of the two islands in the lake, and though he visits his wife pretty often, I am told that the keepers have never, even yet, been able to tempt him to share her confinement.

Thrushes of two kinds are numerous; the blackbird often sings gloriously; and linnets and other small birds abound. Now and then one sees and hears some fine parrot, seated on a pleasant tree-perch, escaped from domestic pettings, and here enjoying himself till he is encaged again. On the lower island they have a smallish dove—what it is I do not know—which, I am told, breeds there, but does not fly much about the park. The turtle-dove I do not think I have ever seen in the park. In this early season it has been interesting to watch the sparrows building in the leafless Lombardy poplars by the lake, their many nests soon to be hidden by the fast-springing foliage.

About a month ago, a ring-dove began to build her slender nest in a hawthorn tree, and she has been now for more than a week sitting on her eggs. There she sits, not far from Marlborough House and the Old Palace, close to the broad asphalted walk crossed by thousands during the day; and there nobody, so far as I can see, seems to notice her, though she far oversits the rag of a nest through the sticks of which one can almost see the eggs. One morning I saw a large number of people gathered just under the nest, but all were looking at a regiment of soldiers marching with band past Buckingham Palace across the edge of the park. In a few days the nest will, I hope, be shrouded by the leaves. Up to Saturday, April 7, the bird was sitting with her head towards the east wind and the Horse Guards; but on the Monday, with the change of wind, the bird's head had turned towards Buckingham Palace and the west. This is the bird usually known as the wood-pigeon, which figures in poetry as the cushat dove. Thus it is called, for instance, in the beautiful description of summer-dawn on Loch Katrine in the beginning of the third canto of the "Lady of the Lake." This is an extract from Scott's description:—

" Invisible in flecked sky,
The lark sent down her revelry;
The blackbird and the speckled thrush
Good morrow gave from brake and bush;
In answer coo'd the cushat dove
Her notes of peace and rest and love."

It is strange that, in this beautiful passage, Scott, a careful observer, has made the *female* bird the singer. The same thing is done, too, by the peasant-poet, Clare, who, having been in early life a plough-boy, should have known all about the bird-life of the fields. This, besides in other places, he does in that lovely Shakespearian sonnet on the thrush's nest, of which these are a few lines:—

"I heard from morn to morn a merry thrush
Sing hymns of rapture, while I drank the sound
With joy ; and oft, an unintended guest
I watched her secret toils from day to day :
How true she warped the moss to form her nest,
And modelled it within with wood and clay."

But I believe I am right in saying that in the bird-world, save, perhaps, in the case where (like the domestic hen) the female almost entirely undertakes the bringing up of the young, the male is the talkative member of the family, and the silent one is the female ! Poetasters seem to like to depict the female bird as the rapturous singer ; but if, as I think is the case, I am right in my contention that, among birds, the female sex is deficient in song, and the males alone are gifted with singing powers, it is rather strange to find such errors in poets like Clare and Scott.

From my earliest childhood, I have been quite familiar with bird-life. My father was a lover of birds ; and I was born and spent my early years in a sea-side and woodland district of Devonshire which, being then quite out of the world, was a perfect paradise of feathered songsters : where, save the nightingale—at whose absence from the region I have often wondered—we had, I think, nearly every bird that comes to our shores. One of my earliest boyish feats, in which I was proud to be told I was very skilful, was that "hooting to the owls," such as Wordsworth describes in these lines :—

"At evening, when the earliest stars began
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone
Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake.
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Pressed closely palm to palm and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
That they might answer him : and they would shout
Across the watery vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his peal, with quivering peals,
And long halloos and screams and echoes loud
Redoubled and redoubled ; concourse wild
Of jocund mirth and din."

More interesting than this, and even more certain of response, were the mimic cooings to the ring-doves, made by putting my hands in a different way. To these cooings the doves would answer, higher and still higher, till they became quite excited over the mimic contest. As bearing on the sense of fun in birds, to which references have been made in this Magazine, I used sometimes to think the birds enjoyed the contest, just as two boys would do in cooing to each other. Often, when the cushat doves have been cooing over my head in St. James's Park, I have been sorely tempted to try my boyish feats, and see whether the doves would coo to me still.

Several times have I seen summer dawn on Loch Katrine; and many a time should I like to see this lovely sight again. That lake, however, is at a distance; to see it I should have to travel far; but St. James's lake is close at hand, in the very heart of London; beside this lake, or around it, I walk every day, sometimes near summer's dawn, sometimes so late at night, or in so thick a darkness, that I think it well to keep a sharp look out on the bridge, where the hero of a modern novel, who was fond of looking over the lake, was waylaid and almost murdered by an assassin.

About other parts of London I might say much, but this single part in its very centre may well stand alone: in my view, it is quite worthy so to do. And if we went on to what is soon, we are told, to be an integral part of London, I might tell how, one fine summer's afternoon, in a remote part of Kew Gardens, I saw a fine young cuckoo perch on a branch near my head, followed and tended by two little foster-parents of hedge-warblers, who fussed about in apparent perplexity, at their large and hungry offspring, and seemed half-starved by their exertions; and how I called the attention of two ladies sitting near, to a sight which, they said, they had never heard of, and might, I thought, never see again.

To that I might add my yearly rambles in Richmond Park, to watch the first return of the spring migrants; how that Sheen Common, now, it is hoped, to be preserved by the exertions of the Selborne Society, used to be the earliest place to find some of them; how that last year, I first heard, on April 16, what Wordsworth calls that "thrice welcome darling of the spring," the cuckoo, and how that this year, on April 8, I first *saw* one cuckoo flying from tree to tree, but not singing—if the voice may be so called—but that later the same day, I saw two cuckoos on the same tree, one speaking and the other silent.

But the dwellers in royal Richmond, official Kew, and pleasant Petersham, now united in one well-governed borough, hardly like yet to allow themselves to be ranked as dwellers in London; so I forbear. Enough has, however, been brought forward, I trust, to show that London is really a city to be proud of, and that enough in abundance to justify this may be found, if we will but look around for it.

W. J. C. MILLER.

The Paragon, Richmond.

[Reprinted from NATURE NOTES for June, 1894.]