

but should the chick of a Fowl or Pheasant or a duckling cross his path, a single stroke of his pointed bill lays the little innocent dead at his feet, almost without a kick or struggle; and many losses to the keeper and the housewife have occurred which are not charged to the Moorhen. I was first made aware of this habit of the bird by one of the keepers of Sir S. Morton Peto, Bart., at Somerleyton; shortly afterwards I read a similar statement in the 'Zoologist'; and in order to determine the truth of these assertions, I inquired of James Hunt, one of the keepers of the Zoological Society, if such a habit in the bird had come under his notice; and I soon found all I had previously heard was true to the very letter. The following is his reply:—

"In answer to your inquiries respecting the Moorhens in the ponds in these Gardens, I beg to say they have always been very annoying and often destructive to young ducks. I have known them to kill several of a hatch, and partly to pull them to pieces. If the old duck attempts to assist them, the Moorhen immediately attacks, and sometimes mounts on her back, and continues tormenting her until she shakes it off by main strength, or dives under water, and so gets clear. The Moorhen often takes possession of the nest-boxes fixed in the ponds, and builds her nest therein, when no bird, not even a Goose, dare approach within some yards of it; in fact, the greater part of the time of the Moorhen during the breeding-season is taken up in annoying and tormenting the other birds in the pond."

The following interesting extract from the 'Zoologist' must close this part of the Moorhen's history. "At the beginning of July," says H. J. Partridge, Esq., of Hockham Hall, near Thetford, in Norfolk, "the keeper having lost several Pheasants about three weeks old, from a copse, and having set traps in vain for winged and four-footed vermin, determined to keep watch for the aggressor, when, after some time, a Moorhen was seen walking about near the copse; the keeper supposing that it only came to eat the young Pheasants' food, did not shoot it until he saw the Moorhen strike a Pheasant, which it killed immediately, and devoured all the young bird, except the leg- and wing-bones. The remains agreed exactly with those of eight found before. Perfect confidence may be placed in the correctness of this statement."

After this, let me say something more pleasing respecting the Moorhen, but before doing so direct the reader's attention to the accompanying Plate, whereon is depicted a newly hatched brood, one of three or four which are annually produced. That they are beautiful and interesting, no one, I think, will gainsay; yet how seldom are they seen, and how little is the colouring of the bird during the first few days of its existence known! This may be attributed to two causes—one the situations in which the nest is placed, the other the very short period (at most four or five days) during which this peculiar colouring is retained. Immediately on emerging from the shell, these infant birds take to the water, and follow their parents through labyrinths of thick and tangled herbage, at one part of the day sunning themselves on the prostrate rushes, at another threading the floating leaves of the water-lilies, both yellow and white; as night approaches, their sensitiveness to cold prompts them to seek shelter under the wings of the careful mother: the clucking male is now assiduously attentive, and protects both her and her progeny from danger, flirts his white tail, and exhibits evident signs of pleasure. These newly-hatched chicks, which a few hours previously were breathlessly imprisoned within the hard shell, have sprung into life with all the active energies of their parents, and, uttering a cheeping note, follow them about, swimming over the glassy pool, scrambling over the floating reeds in pursuit of insects, with the quickness of thought, and avoiding danger by diving beneath the surface with remarkable adroitness. From this period a great change takes place; for as the bird increases in size, feathers take the place of the downy covering, the characteristic colouring being olive-brown above and hoary white beneath, particularly on the throat and under surface; the bill now becomes of a uniform olive-green, a colour which it retains for the first year; after this, or in the second year, the adult livery is assumed, the feathers become more glossy, the bill assumes its brilliant hues of red and yellow, and the gaily coloured garter offers a conspicuous contrast to the yellowish green of the legs; the eye is now more in unison with the red of the bill and the frontal plate, and the Moorhens are in their finest attire—both sexes alike in their colouring, to a shade, even to the red and yellow bill. The average weight of several individuals was from 13 to 15 ounces, the lighter birds always being females. What more can I say respecting this well-known denizen of our marshes, the companion of the Will-o'-the-wisp? perhaps more would be tedious to the reader; with a description of its flight, its food, and its nest and eggs, I shall therefore close the Moorhen's history. Its wing-powers are not great, still they are sufficient to transport the bird from one part of the river to another, and for its nightly sallies, which are made known to all who live on the sides of rivers by the peculiar cry it emits while flying overhead, when darkness shrouds the object that gives utterance to it from our view; this is the voice of the Moorhen. His food consists of aquatic insects and their larvæ, mollusks of various kinds, every species of grain, and the shoots of young wheat or other cereals. The nest is sometimes placed on the flat branch of a tree, at others on stumps near the water's edge, among reeds, or on large floating masses of weeds. It is usually made of rushes, and is somewhat carelessly constructed. The eggs, which are from six to eight or nine in number, are of a reddish white, thinly spotted and speckled with dull orange-brown; they are one inch and eight lines long by one inch three lines broad.

The Plate represents male, female, and brood, about life-size. The plant is the *Nymphaea alba*.