

The late Mr. Thompson, after recording in his 'Natural History of Ireland' numerous instances of the birds breeding in that country, remarks, "In the years 1847, 1848, and 1849, Woodcocks bred abundantly in Tollymore Park, not less than thirty nests having been seen each year; and they have now become so common-place as to be comparatively but little noticed."

With all this testimony as to the bird's breeding in various parts of the British Islands, does it not become necessary that we should bestow upon it all the protection in our power? and should not the Legislature lend its aid towards this end? Are we not all alike interested in the preservation of so fine a bird? Would it not be more rational to do so than to pay so much attention to the introduction of foreign species, with a view to their acclimatization, with far less likelihood of any good result? Nay, are we not "killing the goose that lays the golden egg" when every scamp who can borrow a gun is permitted to shoot these birds in their evening flights, or "roadings," during the months of March and April? I sincerely trust that, if this bird be not hereafter reckoned among the species designated game, it may be deemed advisable to pass a law inflicting a heavy penalty for every Woodcock killed between the 1st of February and the 12th of August. Were ordinary protection afforded to the bird, I see no reason why it should not become vastly more numerous than it is at present. Every sportsman is aware that during the last fortnight in January the Woodcocks are found in pairs—mated in fact for the coming task of reproduction—that its skin is then scurfy, its flesh strong, very inferior in flavour, and comparatively unfit for the table.

I now come to a part of the history of the Woodcock, which has been a stumbling block to all sportsmen and ornithologists—whether there be any outward difference in the plumage by which the sexes may with certainty be determined, and why so much variation occurs in their size, weight, and measurements. To these points I have paid much attention during a long life, and with a view to their elucidation have carefully examined hundreds of examples killed by others, as well as those that have fallen to my own gun, which have not been few. Many of these I have dissected, measured, and weighed the moment after they were killed; and I must admit that at the end of a day's shooting I am still unable to say with certainty, from their size or plumage, which are males and which females: this partly arises from the circumstance of there being two distinct races frequently intermingled in the same coverts. Such races occur among many of our birds, but have no specific value. During their vernal migration these races generally keep separate from each other, and some flights will be composed of a small red race, while others will be exclusively large dark-grey birds. In the case of the common Snipe, I have ascertained that the male is undoubtedly the larger bird; and if there be any difference between the sexes of the Woodcock, I believe it will be the same as in that bird; at the same time I must remark that dissection has proved that many of the large and long-billed birds are females. Some sportsmen assert that they can distinguish the sexes by an examination of the outer primary, and affirm that those birds which have the external margin of that feather plain or devoid of tooth-like markings are males, and those in which they exist are females. But they are absent in both sexes of very old birds; for I have wings of females in my collection in which the outer margin of the first primary is totally devoid of the toothed character. When the young Woodcock assumes his first primaries, which he does at the age of two or three weeks, the outer feather is strongly marked; as he grows older this feature gradually disappears; and I have frequently seen specimens with the outer primary toothed for half its length, and the other part plain.

Some English counties are less adapted to the habits of the Woodcock than others; and their continuance in those best suited to them depends greatly upon the non-disturbance of the coverts in which they have settled themselves, from the date of their arrival in November to the end of the shooting-season. Inclement and frosty weather will induce the birds to remove from one locality to another, and even to quit a district; but they will again return at the first favourable opportunity. In the charming park at Chillingham in Northumberland, Woodcocks are sufficiently numerous in the early part of the season to satisfy its noble and excellent owner; I believe, however, the bags are never very extraordinary; still thirty or forty Cocks may sometimes be laid upon the grass at the end of a November day's shooting; at least, so I was told by the Earl of Tankerville during a pleasant visit I paid to his border Castle. The number of Cocks at Hawkstone varies considerably, twenty or thirty being generally the result of a day's sport when the covers are shot. To this beautiful seat I have for the last thirty years been most kindly favoured with an invitation, to shoot over some of the best beats; and I would here express my obligations to Lord Hill for his unvaried kindness. As an evidence that Norfolk, so abundantly supplied with game, is not wanting in coverts favourable to the Woodcock, I shall quote a line from the 'Zoologist,' in which it is stated, that in Lord Hastings's woods at Melton Constable, near Holt, in the first week of December 1852, 30 and 33 were respectively killed on two successive days, and 93 on the third, in the Great Wood in the adjoining parish of Swanton Novers, and at least 110 might have been killed if other game had been disregarded. I believe it will be conceded that from this county, through the eastern and southern portions of England, the Woodcock becomes less numerous, and it is not until we reach the western counties of Devonshire and Cornwall that we again meet with it in any great abundance. In these humid and comparatively warm districts the Woodcocks find a congenial winter home; for there the springs are always