

BOTAURUS STELLARIS.

Bittern.

Ardea stellaris, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 239.

Botaurus, Briss. Orn., tom. v. p. 444, tab. 37. fig. 1.

——— *stellaris*, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xi. p. 593, pl. 45.

———, *lacustris*, et *arundinaceus*, Brehm, Handb. der Naturg. Vög. Deutschl. pp. 595, 596.

Butor stellaris, Swains. Class. of Birds, vol. ii. p. 354.

Ardea (Botaurus) stellaris, Schrenck, Vög. des Amurlandes, p. 453.

THAT our planet has undergone great physical changes, and that these changes are still progressing, is certain ; but they are not all due to natural agencies, for the minor operations of man have played their part in effecting them. The clearing of forests, the draining of marshes, and the damming back of encroaching seas have a tendency to alter the condition of every country where such operations are carried on ; and in a little island like England these tendencies are perhaps more marked than elsewhere, the result being a great disturbance of our natural productions, both animal and vegetable. Seven hundred years ago, when Robin Hood bent his bow, and sent his bolt after the stag, the physical condition of England was very different to what it is at the present moment : the forests of Nottinghamshire have become arable land, the barren chaces fields of waving corn, and the great meres of Cambridge and Huntingdonshire luxuriant with cereals ; where so lately as fifty years ago the boatman threaded his way, roads leading to farmsteads and stately mansions are now to be found, and the fire-king speeds on his course through districts which were formerly a waste of waters. Before these changes took place, the greater part of our country was in a state of nature, and the Bittern was common ; and no bird was more secure from molestation, for it dwelt in fastnesses which few enemies could approach, situated as they were in the midst of many square miles of waving reeds or forests of tangled herbage. Time was when the falconer made it an object of pursuit ; but he could only assail those individuals which had taken up their quarters in the neighbourhood of sedgy ponds and brooks and in the moist part of open moors, such as were then more or less numerous in every county. Few of such situations were then without the Bittern. Now the bird is so scarce that a whole summer may pass away without one being seen ; if any still remain, the reedy broads of Norfolk and the unreclaimed parts of Lincolnshire are the only localities in which they may be found. There, if undisturbed, they would continue to breed ; and were the proprietors of such districts to forbid the destruction of the Bittern and others of our indigenous marsh-birds, they would effect far more good than by attempting the introduction of exotic animals, which, in my opinion, will never be rewarded with much success. Pray, then, let us still see this weird bird in some part of England ; let there still be a marsh left where the " will-o'-the-wisp " may exercise his delusive powers, and the boom of the Bittern be heard ; for both fever and ague would the ornithologist risk to see the bird in a state of nature. What are the habits and economy of this dweller among reedy and sloppy places, this inhabitant of misty and aguish marshes ? They are strictly nocturnal ; for, disliking the sunshine, the Bittern passes whole days in a secure nook among the rushes, or beside some sheltered pool, and at nightfall stealthily stalks about in search of frogs and insects, or patiently stands motionless in the shallows, watching for a fish, for the passing of a water-rail, a rat, or a shrew, all of which it captures by a dexterous, quiet, indescribable movement of its neck, followed by a sudden and unerring dart of its lengthened bill.

To give a *résumé* of the numerous instances recorded in which this bird has been observed or shot, even during the last few years, would fill a volume. Selby, Macgillivray, Thompson, and Yarrell, have all given copious details on this point, the sum and substance of which is, that the Bittern has, at one time or other, been found in every county during the last twenty years ; that in one winter numbers have been obtained, while, on the other hand, a succession of years have elapsed during which it has scarcely been seen ; and that when it is numerous we may infer that the individuals are not native-bred birds, but have come hither from the neighbouring continent, in search of a more genial climate. That some of them would remain here and breed, there can be no doubt, were it not for the unfriendly reception all such visitants now meet with. The winter of 1863-64 was a happy one for the gunner, and an equally unfortunate one for the Bittern ; for examples were then killed in every part of the country, from the extreme west of Cornwall to the northernmost part of Scotland. Years may elapse before such numbers will appear again ; for the slaughter of so many individuals must tend to diminish the race ; and although great nurseries still exist in Belgium and Holland, the time is not far distant when in those countries, as in our own, the Bittern will be a comparatively rare bird. But there are many large districts in Eastern Europe where it reigns paramount among the reed-loving birds ; and until these are brought under cultivation, it will still be abundant.