

ARDEA CINEREA, Linn.

Heron.

Ardea cinerea et major, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 236.

— et *Ardea cristata*, Briss. Orn., tom. v. pp. 392, 396, pl. 35.

— *major, cinerea, et cineracea*, Brehm, Handb. der Naturg. Vög. Deutschl., pp. 578, 580.

? — *leucophæa*, Gould, Birds of Australia, vol. vi. pl. 55.

WHAT harsh, sharp shriek is that we hear when walking through the beautiful woods of Cliveden, by the banks of the Thames? It proceeds from a great bird in the air, with rounded wings, contracted neck, and long legs extended straight out behind, which, with a laboured flight, has come from a distant locality, perhaps one of the royal parks at Windsor, to fish in our far-famed river. What is that large bird we see during a railway excursion, flying to and fro from the Kennet and the Lodden to the immediate precincts of the town of Reading during the months of early spring? What is the gaunt-looking object, with outstretched neck, we notice standing motionless in the estuary of the Exe, or wading in the water near Dawlish? It is the Heron—the bird so famous in old times for the exciting sport it afforded to the lovers of falconry, and which formed so conspicuous an item in the feasts of the nobles on great state occasions—the bird so well known to the great bard of all time: “When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a hernshaw.”

When these words were penned by Shakspeare, the Heron was more numerous in the British Islands than it is now; but it is still sufficiently plentiful to be regarded as a common bird.

So much has been written respecting the Heron and the heronries of England, that but little remains to be told by the author of the present work. Macgillivray, Yarrell, Selby, Thompson, and others have each given voluminous accounts of its habits and manners; but perhaps I may have had better opportunities of making myself acquainted with its range over the globe than any of those writers. I may state, then, that, besides the British Islands, it is distributed over the whole of Europe, all parts of India, China, and Japan, and that southward of these countries it probably extends throughout the islands of the Eastern Archipelago to the most southern parts of Australia. This austral position may also be assigned to the bird in the old country of Africa; for it is stated to be there very generally dispersed, and to be an inhabitant of the colony of the Cape of Good Hope.

In the British Islands the Heron is to be met with at all seasons. In the autumn and winter months it is found in the marshes near the sea-coast, on the mud-banks of estuaries, and the borders of rivers, lakes, and large ponds. Early in the year it seeks the usual woodland places of nidification, and commences the reparation of its old nests of sticks among the branches of trees, or, where there are no trees, in the open marsh; the latter situation, however, is a very unusual one. Like the Rook and the Wood-Pigeon, the Heron throws off its customary shyness during the breeding-season, and at that period seeks the protection of man by frequently building close to his mansion, and will even enter the precincts of towns, an instance of which may be seen, any spring, at Reading, in Berkshire. The period when it resorts to such a situation is so regular, that its arrival may be looked for almost to a day. The heronry at Diddington, in Norfolk, Mr. Tyssen Amhurst informs me, is regularly peopled within a day or two of the middle of February. There is then a great clattering of bills and flapping of wings, with other indisputable evidence of their having paired and that the breeding-season is about to commence. Early in the month of March three or four eggs are laid, and by the middle of April the task of incubation has terminated, and the young are hatched. In their first or downy plumage, the young are most grotesque in appearance, and by no means beautiful to look upon; in a short time the downy covering gives place to feathers, which first appear on the wings and tail, then on the body. By the beginning of June they get out on the branches; and soon after this their pinions become sufficiently developed to enable them to take short flights, and gain food for themselves. In the breeding-season, when the Heron has more than usual demands upon his industry, it is somewhat destructive to the tenants of the trout-stream, if other kinds of fish are not to be obtained. The mode of their capture is known to every one who has seen the bird patiently watching knee-deep in the stream, with its bill pointed towards the water ready for the stroke, which is so dexterously dealt that the aim is seldom missed. The fish seized, it is tossed into the bird's capacious gullet; and the process is repeated until its pouch is filled, when it immediately wings its way straight to its nest, where its ravenous young are awaiting the expected and welcome supply. Capturing small trout, I am sorry to say, is not the only mischief the Heron indulges in; for while standing motionless in the stream, fish of a large size occasionally pass him, in pursuit, may be, of their own prey, and are sometimes struck with a well-directed thrust of its pointed mandibles just behind the head, or precisely in that part of the poll in which a weasel seizes a hare. It