

PALUMBUS TORQUATUS.

Wood-Pigeon or Cushat.

Columba palumbus, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 75.

——— *torquata*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 26.

Palumbus ———, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 107.

If the draining of our marshes and the reclaiming of our estuaries have been the means of destroying or driving away many native birds, the progress of agricultural science and the increase in our plantations have tended to the multiplication of others, and none of more than the Wood-Pigeon. No one, I imagine, who knew England and Scotland fifty years ago, but must admit that the entire face of those countries has been greatly altered—high cultivation and the planting of ornamental belts of firs and other trees having effected a remarkable difference in its appearance. If this great change had resulted in the increase of a more useful bird, we might consider ourselves fortunate; but in the case of the Wood-Pigeon this is very questionable, and I therefore take up my pen to write its history with less pleasure than when similarly engaged on the other members of our avifauna. To quote more than a few of the numerous articles which have from time to time appeared in the public papers respecting its destructive propensities would be futile, since they must be well known to all my readers; but I shall attempt to place before them both the sunny and the shady side of the bird's history, and allow them to draw their own conclusions as to whether the pleasing traits in its character do or do not counterbalance the injuries it inflicts. With regard to its distribution a few words will suffice. During winter the Wood-Pigeon is spread over every part of the British Islands, either in small companies or in immense flocks, which betake themselves to the open fields in the daytime, and at sundown retire to roost in woods, and plantations of fir and other trees. At this season it is shy, wild, and distrustful; and few birds know better how to keep out of harm's way. It now feeds on cereals, the seeds of wild plants, acorns, beech-mast, and berries, particularly those of the ivy, on the leaves and roots of turnips, their ravages upon which plant often occasion a very great diminution in the value of the crop. In the spring the flocks are broken up, and their members retire in pairs to woods, plantations, shaws, hedgerows, and shrubberies for the purpose of reproduction. A wonderful change in the disposition of the Wood-Pigeon now takes place; for it becomes as tame and confiding as it was formerly shy and distrustful. It no longer fears the approach of man, but, on the contrary, seeks his protection, and courts his intimacy, frequently constructing its nest in his garden, perhaps in the ornamental cedar that overshadows his house, and solacing him with its pleasing *coo-coo-roo* in the morning, and its beautiful aerial evolutions during the other portions of the day. Such is its conduct during the season of reproduction, and all right-minded persons will not, I am sure, allow its confidence to be misplaced, but will permit it to remain unmolested until the period arrives when it will return to the fields and open country, and at once resume its usual craftiness. While writing the above passage, a letter has reached me, from the Rev. Edwin Sidney, of Cornard, near Sudbury, in Suffolk, in which he says:—"I have two or three pairs of Wood-Pigeons and Turtle Doves which breed in the trees round this house. They are never disturbed; and the former have become very saucy and mischievous, plucking up the young peas in the face of the gardener, and provoking him greatly. How well these creatures know that they are safe!"

I now proceed to the cloudy side of the Cushat's character, by giving some further details of the immense injuries it inflicts upon our crops, and the baneful effects produced by these birds to any district in which they may take up their abode.

To show in what vast numbers the bird is sometimes seen, I extract the following passage from a letter sent to me by Mr. J. Illsey, dated Daylingworth, in Gloucestershire, February 2, 1866:—"What has astonished me more than anything else is the vast flocks of Wood-Pigeons we have here this winter. I have seen several, of fully a mile in length, pass overhead to the beech-woods, early in the morning. The people call them 'foresters.'"

Now, if the country be suddenly covered with snow, and the favourite beech-mast, acorns, and wild seeds are not to be obtained, the havoc such a flight would make among a field of turnips, to which they would certainly descend, must be immense: on this head, a writer in 'Land and Water' says:—"They settle on the turnip-fields in hundreds. They begin by eating the young tender leaves from the centre of the turnip; the water lodges, the frost gets in, and it rots. If you shoot a Wood-Pigeon in the winter when returning to roost, his crop generally bursts with the fall, so full is it. Sometimes, if he has been gleaning, there may be some corn or beans; but far oftener there is nothing but a 'gowpen' (a double handful) of turnip-leaves. I have seen part of a turnip-field so punished by Wood-Pigeons that I can compare it to nothing but a gooseberry-