

these birds, their outcries presently bring a band of enemies around it. But although the Barn-Owl is thus so imbecile by day as to suffer itself to be insulted with impunity by the pettiest aggressor, it assumes a very different character when darkness restores to it the faculty of clearly distinguishing objects.

“By watching near its haunts, or taking up a station in the neighbourhood of some farm-steading frequented by it, one may dimly see it advance with silent and gliding flight, skimming over the fields, shooting along the hedge-band, deviating this way and that, and now perhaps sweeping overhead, without causing the slightest sound by the flappings of its downy wings. On perceiving an object, it drops to the ground, secures its prey in a moment, and, uttering a shrill cry, flies off with it in its claws. In a little time it returns, and thus continues prowling about the farmyard for hours. The domestic Mouse, Wood-mouse, common Arvicola, Shrew, Lark, and young birds of different species are the objects which I have found in its stomach. The mice are generally swallowed entire, often without their bones being broken; but the birds are torn to pieces. Young hares and rabbits, as well as lepidopterous and coleopterous insects, are said to form part of its food; and Mr. Waterton informs us that it carries off rats, and occasionally catches fish. ‘Some years ago,’ he says, ‘on a fine evening in July, long before it was dark, as I was standing on the middle of the bridge, and minuting the Owl by my watch, as she brought mice into her nest, all on a sudden she dropt perpendicularly into the water. Thinking she had fallen down in epilepsy, my first thoughts were to go and fetch the boat; but before I had well got to the end of the bridge I saw the Owl rise out of the water, with a fish in her claws, and take it to the nest.’ It has been alleged that it does not prey on Shrews; but I have found four skulls of these animals, along with two of an Arvicola, in the stomach of one. The number it swallows may seem surprising to a person who does not consider how many mice may be squeezed into a sack two inches in diameter. Remains of eight or ten animals may sometimes be found in its stomach, but in various degrees of decomposition, the greater part of some having passed into the intestine before the rest have been procured. The skulls and other bones, enveloped in the hair, are ejected in pellets after the bird has retired to its resting-place. ‘When it has young,’ says Waterton, ‘the Barn-Owl will bring a mouse to its nest about every twelve or fifteen minutes. But in order to have a proper idea of the enormous number of mice which this bird destroys, we must examine the pellets which it ejects from its stomach, in the place of its retreat. Every pellet contains from four to seven skeletons of mice. In sixteen months from the time that the apartment of the Owl on the old gateway was cleaned out, there has been a deposit of above a bushel of pellets.’”

The sexual difference is not very apparent, for externally the male and female are very similar. The young, during the first three or four weeks of their existence, are clothed in an immaculate white down; next come feathers, first in the form of a frill round the face, then the primaries appear; and by the end of six weeks, the brood, which is generally four in number, are very like the adults; sometimes, however, a tawny tint pervades the breast and under surface, while usually these parts are pure white. Mr. Stevenson states, in his ‘Birds of Norfolk,’ that a dark variety, supposed to be migrants from the Danish Islands, sometimes occurs in this country; an example of this variety, if I imagine rightly, was kindly shot for me by the Earl of Ducie, on the 6th of October, 1868, at his seat at Sarsden, in Oxfordshire, and is at once the smallest and most beautifully marked Owl I have ever seen: all the under surface was delicate buff, numerous speckled with grey; it weighed  $8\frac{1}{4}$  ounces; measured 11 inches in length, 27 inches from tip to tip of the wings; the length of the wing from the tarsal joint was  $10\frac{1}{4}$  inches, of the tail  $4\frac{1}{2}$ , and the tarsi  $2\frac{1}{4}$ ; it was apparently a fully adult bird, and dissection proved it to be a female. I have little doubt it was a migrant, as it rose out of a dry ditch at 3 o’clock in the afternoon, and had two freshly caught field-mice in its stomach. To test the verity of this opinion, I asked Lord Ducie to have another Owl shot in the same neighbourhood; and on the 18th of November a female was sent me which proved to be of the ordinary kind. In this specimen all the under surface was snow-white, with a few specks of grey on the flanks and under the shoulders: its weight was  $12\frac{1}{2}$  ounces; the expanse of its wings 29 inches, the length of the wing from the carpal joint 10, of the tail  $4\frac{1}{2}$ , and of the tarsi  $2\frac{3}{4}$ ; this was in every respect a very different bird from the buff-coloured one which preceded it. Mr. Henry Shaw, of Shrewsbury, who has paid great attention to the change of plumage undergone by various birds, writes to me—“From experience and dissection I have found all the young female Owls to be more or less spotted, their wings strongly marked, and the webs of the first quill-feathers broader than when the bird is adult; they are also a trifle longer than the corresponding feathers in the opposite sex. The males have the breast white from the nest, and the markings of the wings and back less numerous. In the adults of both sexes the markings decrease as they advance in years; and very old males entirely lose the markings of the quills.”

The eggs, which are four or five in number, are pure white, and differ considerably in form, some being much more lengthened than others.

The figures, which represent old and young, are of the size of life.