STRIX FLAMMEA, Linn.

Barn-Owl.

Strix flammea, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 133.
— guttata, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 106, tab. 7. fig. 3.

Aluco flammeus, Flem. Hist. of Brit. Anim., p. 57.

The Owls form a large group of birds, of which some are strictly nocturnal, while others seek their prey in the daytime; a few feed exclusively on insects, others on small animals of various kinds. As may be naturally supposed, many generic terms have been proposed for the various forms which occur in this extensive family; the old Linnean name of Strix, however, is retained for the Barn-Owl and its immediate allies. It is the members of this genus that are most universally dispersed over the globe, there being no continent, and scarcely any large island, in which it has not a representative. Some of the species are exceedingly well-defined, while others assimilate to such a degree that it becomes extremely difficult to point out their distinguishing characteristics. The range of the Strix flammea is generally considered to be a very wide one; and although the bird does not go to Australia, where several other species of the same form are found, it certainly extends over all the temperate portions of Europe, and many parts of Africa, and Mr. Gurney is of opinion that it is also found in Madagascar. The American bird, formerly considered identical, has lately been separated, and received a distinct specific appellation, on, I fear, very slender grounds. In India it has not yet been detected, but, as in America, is there represented by a very nearly allied species. On the continent of Europe as in the British Islands, over every part of which the Barn-Owl is spread, barns, towers, churches, hollow trees, and rocks are its habitual places of abode; there, generally in pairs, it snoringly sleeps through the day; on the approach of evening its slumbers terminate, and it sallies forth and wings its way noiselessly in search of food over the parson's glebe, around the park of the nobleman, the grass-field of the farmer, and the open heath, all of which constitute good hunting-grounds; wherever mice are plentiful and insects abundant, there this nocturnal bird may be seen, and its "ill-omened" screech heard.

The enactment which passed through the Houses of Legislature in May 1869, for the protection of our beautiful rock-birds is considered by most persons a laudable one; but ought we to stop here? should the feathered creatures of the ocean solely claim this attention? should not a like protection be accorded to some of our equally interesting land-birds, and, among them, to the Barn-Owl? I fear that few game keepers are real lovers of nature, or take an interest in the beautiful; if they were, they would never injure this highly curious species; for the commonest observation would inform them that it is only during two or three weeks in the spring that it can possibly do harm to the young game, that even then little is effected, and that the remainder of the year is spent in the destruction of insects, reptiles, mice, moles, &c. The short-tailed field-mouse, so destructive to the young trees of our plantations, it often devours by thousands—a fact with which every owner of land ought to be acquainted. The late Mr. Waterton has shown most clearly the enormous number of our small quadrupeds a pair of Barn-Owls will destroy in the course of sixteen months; and many other authors testify to the value of the bird's services in keeping in check the inordinate increase of these mischievous little animals. The Barn-Owl is, in fact, one of the birds whose protection would not only be highly beneficial to us in an economic point of view, but would add much to our pleasure, since we should then doubtless more frequently meet with it during our evening rambles in the districts it frequents.

"The Barn-Owl," says Macgillivray, "chooses for his place of repose some obscure nook in an old building, the steeple of a church, a tower, a dovecot, or a hollow tree. There he remains from sunrise to sunset, in a nearly erect posture, with retracted neck and closed eyelids, dozing away the hours in which, from the structure of his eyes, he is unable to perceive his prey, and waiting for the return of twilight. If approached in this state, instead of flying off, he raises his feathers, hisses like an angry cat, clicks his bill, and thus threatens the intruder. Should he by any accident be driven abroad, he seems dazzled and bewildered. Incapable of distinctly perceiving the objects around him, he flits about with an unsteady flight, and is glad to betake himself to some dark retreat where he may be sheltered from the light as well as from his numerous enemies. The appearance of an Owl in open day is a phenomenon that excites the curiosity as well as hatred of many species of birds, even the smallest of which will gather around, chide and harass him, while the larger will not hesitate to attack him with their bills and wings. The Blue Tit, being among the boldest of our little birds, takes a prominent part in these proceedings; and the Chaffinch, gentle as it is, distinguishes itself by its vociferous animosity. Sometimes this Owl reposes in the upper part of a tree in a dense wood, or even in a thicket; and should it be discovered in the latter situation by any of