

WILD LIFE AT SELSDON.

By A. Beadell.

In these notes Mr. Beadell gives some results of first hand observation of wild life in Selsdon and Court Woods, with which he has a close personal acquaintance.

1.—WILD FLOWERS OF THE WOODS.

No one is more pleased than myself with the acquisition of these glorious woods as a Nature Reserve. I have frequented them all my life, from the days when I was a farm labourer until the present day, and only once have I been caught and turned out by a keeper; and then he would not have caught me only I was tempted to stop and converse with some people who were sheltering from the rain in a woodcutter's temporary hut (built with branches of trees) in Court Wood.

Rain and darkness had no terrors for me; the wetter the day the less chance of being captured by a keeper. Those were the days when I rambled through all the underwood, and I have even been to my special little spot where the herb paris grows to search for its first flowers in bloom for the season at ten o'clock at night. At that hour owls were hooting and the woodland bathed in a suffused light from the old moon which was at the full. I had to crawl on my hands and knees to feel for my first herb paris, as it was impossible to see them, because the lovely old yews growing near cast a deep shadow o'er the spot where they grew.

Court Wood in the past has provided the most wonderful floral treats it has ever been my lot to witness. It is when the underwood is coppiced that this glorious array of wild flowers appears; vegetation for about two years runs riot. I will here describe what occurred the last time the piece of Court Wood was coppiced nearest Long Bottom field; then it was as if some master hand had seeded down in plots whole masses of wonderful flowers, most beautiful and luxuriant in growth.

First we had a huge patch of several yards square with nothing but dyers rocket, that plant like glorified mignonette (and belonging to that order), in this instance seven or eight feet tall; then came masses of deadly nightshade, with their bell-like flowers. After that a huge quantity of water figwort, with its winged stems and rich coloured flowers; an astonishing place for this to occur, as it is a water loving plant. Close up to this last were numbers of the elegant yet deadly flowers of that rare plant, "henbane," and more common plant musk mallow. Dotted about here and there were showy specimens of great and white mulleins. (The first plant is sometimes called the flannel flower; the last is rare in Britain.) Also a few columbines and centaury plants; some of the latter with white flowers. Mingled with these were all the common woodland flowers, such as bluebells, violets, primroses, etc., and last but not least my favourite patch of herb paris.

At one time it was customary to sell the underwood every eight or nine years, and parts of the wood were termed "falls." These falls were usually sold in rotation, consequently we had falls being coppiced every year.

It is at such spots as these that we get our earliest primroses; they begin to flower in September each year and flower continuously, no matter what the weather, till springtime. One usually associates the primrose with the spring, but I have been out rambling many Christmas Days and have seen primroses flowering in hundreds in the coppiced woods. No matter what the weather I ramble every Christmas Day and keep a record of the wild plants I find in flower. I have had records of over seventy different species in flower on that day. I also keep records of first appearances and first flowers.

One thing our friends of the Nature Reserve have got to educate themselves up to is to love and study the flowers without picking them. Also great care should be used in trimming the woodland paths so that the columbines and epipactis orchis—which have a penchant for growing by the sides of these paths—do not get destroyed.

I felt sorry that the whole of Court Wood was not taken over. The part that was lost was very rich in mulleins, St. John's wort, teasels, etc., and in the field adjoining grew a most interesting colony of plants, including the cutleaved annual germander, so rare that it only occurs in one other county in the British Isles. In this field (Long Bottom) it grows each year in profusion, as does also that lovely blue flower of the borage family called vipers bugloss.

Two or three years ago this field was a revelation, being one mass of intense blue, a sight worth going miles to see.

A most lovely feature of the Reserve is its gorse, a floral beauty even in the hardest winter; this is the species *Ulex Europæus*. It is said that the great Linnæus first saw this plant when on a visit to England and was so charmed with its beauty that he fell upon his knees to thank heaven for so glorious a sight. Among the gorse appears each year huge colonies of rosebay willow herb; in America it is called fireweed, as it usually springs up in abundance where fires have burnt the undergrowth; it is a magnificent showy plant, with its masses of purple rose coloured flowers.

I saw this summer in the Reserve two new showy plants, one the nettleleaved campanula, a tall plant with bell-like flowers, and another water loving plant, the meadowsweet.

Of course all this rich array of flowers bring in their train a rich store of insects. It is lovely to see the exotic-like red admiral, peacock and painted lady butterflies disporting themselves on the teasels and thistles; the elephant and humming bird hawk moths on the vipers bugloss; the beautiful angle winged butterfly—the brimstone—flits along in early spring like a bit of wind-tossed paper after awakening from his winter sleep in early February.

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II.—Badgers and Foxes—The Freeze Trick—The Inquiring Stoat—The Fox Cub and the Fowls.

My greatest joy is to see the badgers have a sanctuary here. I know of nine or ten colonies in the district, but they are always being "badgered" from pillar to post. Our local keepers all believe that the badger is a terror to their "game." He eats all the pheasants' eggs and the sitting bird also and grubs out and eats all the stocks of young rabbits.

Now I have made an exhaustive study of badgers in the wild. I have visited their home when there was a snowfall of ten inches on the level, a visit that was like fairyland. The beautiful particles of snow glistened like myriads of diamonds under the rays of the brilliant sunshine in the early morning. The snow piled inches deep on the branches of the underwood made them bend over on each side of the woodland paths with the weight that they came down like an archway to within three feet of the ground—a most gorgeous sight to behold when one stooped and looked into this most lovely archway, the floor of which was of the purest white, ere one crept into this wondrous vista of the woodland glade, a sight that filled one with emotion because of its matchless purity.

Under such an archway as this I crept alone to view the better the habits of my beloved badgers as set out by their foot-prints in the snow. I found their entrance holes were tinged with yellow where their bodies passing in and out had sullied the snow. Their tracks led into a meadow adjoining; here they had heaved out the snow at many spots, but it always showed the tunnel of a mouse or mole, proving that their powers of scent were mighty keen, else how could they have scented out the runs without fall through ten inches of snow every time?

I have stayed out all night at their burrows, and I have noticed that they dig up the roots of wild arum and bluebells and eat part of them in springtime. It is then they carry into their burrows heaps of bedding—a fine litter too they make from the meadows (which are always adjoining) along their runs to their burrows! Foxes and rabbits both share the burrows. I have tracked all three in—but not like the lion and fox in the fable, I noticed that the rabbits' tracks did lead out again.

At the foot of badgers' burrows I have found nests or "stocks" of young rabbits!

I have come to the conclusion that a badger's mode of living is akin to that of a pig; it eats roots, chestnuts, beetles, etc., and no doubt did it stumble on a nest of eggs it would eat those also, just as a pig would do. The badger usually comes out at night but I have seen them abroad in daylight.

There have been many foxes in the Reserve in the past and I hope they will again take possession of it. Of course without a doubt these are carnivorous in their habits but not entirely so; they eat anything. I have stood in a meadow watching a fox feeding on a

bit here and there out of the grass, possibly beetles, worms, etc. It was at the time of the Great War and nearly at the end of it.

I was lucky to get the whipland of the fox, for I spotted him before he did me, and he was only about twenty yards away. At once I did the "freeze trick"—that is, stood motionless, rigid. Immediately he saw me he was so astounded that he sat on his haunches and surveyed me critically with lovely pricked-up ears. My face was swarmed with flies and I did not dare move a muscle to brush them off. Thus we stood, man and fox, surveying each other for quite three minutes; then he got up, crept a few yards nearer and began to feed with one eye on me, I remaining motionless; later he turned, then finally ignored me altogether, and went feeding down the field.

I was highly amused about a lady who went over the Reserve with a party, she being very indignant because she expected to see many birds there, having heard of the birds recorded as seen in the Reserve. I remarked she could rest assured that many birds and animals saw her if she did not see them; they both know how to play the "freeze trick" on man and it is amusing to man to see the animals and birds when the "freeze trick" is played on them.

I laughed to see a stoat last year under these conditions. He came out of a tiny faggot stack in an open meadow. I was ready for him "frozen." He looked at me astounded and stood up on his hind legs to peer over the grass; then down he dropped and ran to one faggot lying by itself nearer to me. Up came his head with its beautiful silvery throat, higher and higher it got; he was just lovely with his front feet resting on the faggot surveying me with intense interest in his eye. Now he tried a new move; he returned to the faggot stack, reared up and looked, then dropped and dashed through the stack like a flash of lightning, to rear up again. Then he bounded at full speed out in the meadow, ran a half circle round me to test me, I believe, to see if I was alive or not. I never moved—only my eyes. He turned, dashed back to the stack, through it, and afterwards quietly entered a hedgerow near.

These animals are interesting when they have their young. I have seen them in a low hollow tree and again in an anthill. They soon run to cover when one approaches, unless done stealthily and quietly. Besides rabbits they kill anything. I have seen many with mice in their mouths. Cats leave their holes when stoats or weasels are about. Our stoats here change their coats sometimes in winter to ermine, although the black tip on the tail remains; the weasel has no black tip to its tail. In the woods adjoining the Reserve I saw three ermine stoats two years ago.

All carnivorous animals kill at times for the sheer love of killing. For instance, a keeper friend of mine took a fox cub from an earth and reared it. He used to lead it about on a collar like a dog. One day he slipped his collar and ran up to a fowl, bit its head, killing it, then came back fawning to the keeper, showing great pleasure in what he had done. The keeper tried to grab him, but could not get a hold because of the collar being off. Foxy ran back, killed another hen, then returned to his master, who tried to catch him without avail. He did this seven times; then the keeper got his gun and shot him. His wife told me she would rather the fox killed all the fowls than he should have been shot.

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III.—Sparrowhawks and Kestrels—The Little Owl—A Mother Tawny Owl—Other Birds of the Reserve.

The sparrowhawk is the most destructive of our birds of prey here in the Reserve. He is mighty business-like in his actions, especially so when after a bird. His short wings and long legs allow of a rapid dash and seizure under the trees. At their nests I have seen skinned jays and partridges provided for their young. The young are lovely little mites the first week of their lives being just like little balls of swansdown, pure white. The nest—usually in oak or fir trees—is built with sticks and has just a few tiny tufts of down placed here and there on the top of it. The eggs usually number six.

Our other hawk, the kestrel, is not nearly so rapacious. He is a bird of the open, and has a wide expanse of wing for soaring with short legs. Mice, beetles and such like are his chief food, although I have seen them capture starlings. They seize their prey with their talons. A relative of mine brought one up from the nest. It had its freedom to roam the wild and it was an imposing sight to see the grand sweep of this bird when called to take a mouse hung by the tail from the fingers it swept by at a terrific speed, taking the mouse as it passed.

I have seen nests of these birds on the platform of a pollard ash. Usually six eggs are laid and by the nest was a second depression where the male bird sat. The young were greyer in colour than the sparrowhawks.

Our latest addition to the Reserve is the Little Owl. He is a pest. I loved him first off when I made his acquaintance here eleven or twelve years ago. I then watched him and her feed their young. They came to the nest every four minutes and worked from opposite directions. They brought moths, beetles, etc.; then after a shower they came with long worms hanging from their beaks. Later, at another nest, I saw the remains of a half eaten young rabbit and at yet another nest it was a perfect shambles, with the legs, etc., of blackbirds. It took me three years to find this out, for all I could find in their pellets was the remains of dor beetles.

Of course everyone who studies birds knows these owls are continually being mobbed by blackbirds. One can always locate little owls by the metallic call note of alarm which the blackbirds indulge in when mobbing this bird.

The other two owls—barn and tawny—never do anything but good. A few notes about the latter, as this is the more plentiful of the two in the Reserve.

The tawny owl nests early in the year and during the period of incubation if one but touches the hollow tree the owl leaves immediately. I had one under observation like this and near the end of incubation I climbed the tree as before to find this time two field voles laid side by side untouched near the eggs. I could hear a faint squeak, so I lifted one vole by its tail—dead; the second likewise dead also. Then I picked up an egg, and to my great joy heard the owlet squeaking in the egg. Wasn't it

wonderful of the owls to anticipate the birth of the owlets and provide food at night ready for them next day? A few days later I visited the nest again. This time no owl flew off. Well, thought I, someone has found this out and destroyed it in spite of my carefulness in hiding all marks of approach. I climbed the tree (which had the top broken off and was hollow for about two feet down; the hole was about eighteen inches in diameter). Years before owls had nested there, but suddenly the hole began to hold water and stood full for a long time. One day I went to remedy this; after climbing the tree I measured down inside, took the same measurement outside, and with a gimlet bored two small holes which let all the water out, and after a year had passed this nest was the result of my efforts.

On reaching the top of this tall elm I looked in and there to my great joy sat the devoted mother on the nest. Her eye was turned towards me covered with a micifitating membrane so that no eye was visible; from under her poked some dear little heads of white swansdown which snapped their beaks at me. I could have jumped for joy at this sight. It is such sights as these that make nature study a pleasure. This time there were several mice and voles in the nest, some partly consumed. The brave mother never moved at all, so I climbed down slowly and left her in peace.

It is with great pleasure I hear from my friend, Mr. Malcolm Sharpe, that the forty-two acres between Selsdon Wood and the Farleigh-road are to be added to the Reserve. This at once brought a new bird for this year into the picture—the brambling. These are already in attendance under the beeches, feeding with a large number of chaffinches. The brambling is a winter visitor and generally feeds in company with chaffinches. He is about the same size but a far more handsome bird. He can easily be identified by the uninitiated and without field glasses by the white rump as he flies away in company with the chaffinches. They all have a great liking for beech nuts. Their call is harsh and the male bird is most elegant in the spring when he adopts his breeding plumage.

The nightingale you all know too well to need a description from me. We also have two more elegant songsters in our summer migrants; these are the blackcap and garden warbler. It is hard at times to distinguish between the two in their song and they are both close sitters; the male of the former plays a good part in the incubating of the eggs.

My favourite songster in our resident birds is the blackbird. His mellow flute-like notes are to me a pleasure untold to listen to, but the song I love best in winter migrants is the "charming" of the redwings. I have seen in the Reserve on a frosty morning when the birches in Court Wood were like fairyland with the rime and on these birches have been a flock of about fifty redwings, all singing together in a song so very low and sweet.

I should like to see more water provided for the birds in summer, as it can easily be done and at no cost. Any old piece of flat tin and an old crock or bowl would do in this way. You all know that Nature provides for everything; even the trees are shaped to catch all the water which runs down the branches, thence to the trunks down to the roots, otherwise such trees as beeches, which have dense and widespreading foliage and a narrow root spread, would never get any water in summer. Look at