



BARN OWL.

The Owl is as undoubtedly the friend of man as he is the enemy of mice and other small vermin. He is the farmer's best friend and every effort should be made to encourage his presence in barn or stack yard.

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NOTES ON THE

# Owls and Hawks of Lincolnshire.

With special reference to the collection in the City  
and County Museum, Lincoln.

By the Rev. F. L. BLATHWAYT, M.A., M.B.O.U.

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Visitors to the County Museum in Lincoln are often attracted by an interesting case of birds containing local specimens of Owls and Hawks. These birds, which belong to the Orders known to Naturalists as "Striges" and "Accipitre" fall under the popular heading of "Birds of Prey." Though commonly regarded as enemies of the game-preserved and poultry-farmer, and accordingly terribly persecuted, most of the birds of these two classes should be looked upon far more as man's friends than his foes. Owls and Kestrels are in reality among the game-keeper's best allies. From time to time, without doubt, examples will develop bad habits and raid the poultry yard or the pheasant run, and we find it hard to blame the keeper who shows no mercy to these "black sheep;" but we have no sympathy with those who ruthlessly trap or shoot down every Owl or Hawk they see, forgetting



the enormous benefit they do to mankind in checking the undue increase of mice, rats and other creatures, which if allowed to multiply too rapidly, become noxious vermin. Even while writing these lines we have noticed in a daily paper the following remark by a correspondent on the food of Owls, which bears testimony to their usefulness to mankind:—"We had some Owls breeding in a barn every year, and I have watched the old birds take as many as twenty or thirty mice in to the young ones in a very short time, and I have taken over forty mice from the nest and have found on the following day quite as many brought by the old birds and put near the young in the nest."

It is well known that Owls throw up the indigestible parts of their food, such as bones, fur, and feathers, in the form of pellets, and these may be found in plenty in the birds' haunts. By carefully examining these pellets it is possible for the expert to discover the nature of the bird's food. The Curator of the Lincoln Museum has examined a number of pellets from a Barn Owl's haunt in the north of the county, and has found them to consist of the remains of the following creatures:—Long-tailed Field Mouse (plenty), House Mouse, Common Field Vole (plenty), Red Bank Vole, Common Bats, Common Shrew, Lesser Shrew, Frog, and an upper mandible of a bird, probably a swallow. Many such examinations have been made by capable naturalists, and all have acquitted the Owls as being practically harmless to "game."

At the beginning of this paper, which is written to encourage an intelligent interest in the Birds of Prey, we would impress upon our readers to do what they can in seeing that the Wild Bird Protection Orders are enforced, and that the cruel "pole-trap," the use of which was made illegal by Act of Parliament in 1904, should be entirely banished from our woodlands. For the benefit of those not acquainted with these Orders, we would say that throughout the greater part of Lincolnshire, Owls of all sorts, together with their eggs, are protected by law all the year round, and also that the

eggs of Buzzards, Hobbies, Kestrels and Merlins may not be taken in the county, and these birds themselves may not be taken or destroyed between March 1st and August 15th, in any year.

Scarcely any birds have suffered more from the cheapness of firearms and the advance of civilization than the subjects of this paper. The reasons for this are not far to seek. In the first place, all Hawks and Owls are, comparatively speaking, large birds, and so easily attract the attention of the prowling hunter; and then secondly, there exists, as we have already mentioned, the well nigh ineradicable conviction, present in the minds of many members of the public, that these birds are hostile to the interests of farmers and game preservers. Their duties as feathered police, set to keep true the balance of Nature, are too often forgotten, and so, ignorant prejudice coupled with cheap powder has gone far towards banishing many an interesting species. But in recent years there has appeared a gleam of hope. Popular opinion has been aroused in favour of these birds; intelligent study of their food and habits has shown conclusively that so-called enemies are really valuable friends, and so even now, before it is quite too late, foolish prejudice may be overcome, and many an interesting species saved, to delight those who are to come after us.

In the lists of British Birds there are included ten species of Owls, and about twenty-five species of Hawks. (In this paper the term "hawk" includes all the Buzzards, Eagles, Hawks and Falcons). Many of these are quite accidental visitors to our Islands, and so have little claim to mention in this paper. Only those species which have been regular visitors to, or inhabitants of, the county will be here treated of at any length, while the casual occurrences will be quite shortly noticed.

Four species of owls occur regularly in Lincolnshire, and of these, local specimens may be seen in the Museum. They are more or less nocturnal in their habits and all lay white eggs.



1. *The Barn or White Owl* (*Strix flammea*), is by no means rare, and frequents the haunts of man more than the other species, usually rearing its young in church towers and old buildings. These birds may often be observed at dusk, flitting with noiseless flight around farm yards on the look out for mice and young rats, which form their principal food. Their cry is a loud, weird shriek which has often struck terror into the heart of the timid and superstitious.

2. *The Long-eared Owl* (*Asio otus*), so-called from the tufts of feathers on its head, is far commoner in our county than many imagine. It is resident in the well-timbered districts, spending most of its time in the thickest and largest woods. The eggs are laid in the deserted nest of a hawk or crow, sometimes even in an old squirrel's 'drey'. The birds rest during the day, and a sharp eye may sometimes detect them on the branch of a tree, standing erect, rigid and motionless. Those who have been near large woods after nightfall and are acquainted with the peculiar deep call of the adults, and the loud mewing cry of the nestlings, can testify that this species is by no means uncommon in the county.

3. Until a quarter of a century ago *The Short-eared Owl* (*Asio accipitrinus*) nested in fair numbers in such localities in Lincolnshire as Scotton and Manton Commons but if any do so at the present day the numbers must be very small. This owl is, however, still a plentiful autumn and winter visitor to the county, arriving in numbers on the coast from the Continent in October, and is often known as the 'Woodcock' Owl as it comes about the same time as that bird. Unlike the long-eared owl, which haunts woods, this species inhabits open country, such as moors and commons, feeding chiefly on voles and field mice, and laying its eggs on the ground among heather or dry grass. Sportsmen often flush this owl from stubble fields, and in January, 1908, a party of "guns" put up about 50 from the heather on Scotton Common, in the N.W. of the county.

4. *The Tawny or Brown Owl* (*Syrnium aluco*) is a resident species in the county, showing a preference for the well-wooded districts. It is the largest of our native owls, and breeds in hollow trees, old crow's nests or even upon the ground in the middle of a wood. We have also seen eggs of this species taken out of a rabbit hole. The food consists chiefly of small animals such as mice, shrews and moles, and when an occasional pheasant chick is taken, it is only paying the penalty of being away from its mother's or foster-mother's wing, after nightfall. The loud clear 'hoot' of this species, uttered at dusk and dawn, is a delightful and still common country sound, and the harsh cry of the young clamouring for food, sounding something like the syllables 'kee-wick,' is also frequently heard during the summer months.

The Museum case also contains an example of the *Little Owl* (*Athene noctua*), shot at Coleby in November, 1899. This is a South European species which from time to time has wandered to our shores. Many examples have also been brought over alive, and turned loose, and some of these have bred in a state of liberty, but the species has no real claim to a place on the list of our wild birds.

*Tengmalms Owl* (*Nyctala Tengmalmi*), a North European species, has also on one occasion at least wandered to Lincolnshire, a specimen being shot near Saltfleet Haven, on October 22nd, 1880.

We turn now to the Order Accipitres, and start with the Harriers which form a sort of link between the Hawks and Owls. Three species are on the British list. The largest, the *Marsh Harrier* (*Circus aeruginosus*), was known to nest in the Isle of Axholme in 1836, and in the old days was no doubt plentiful enough in the unreclaimed marshy wastes and fens in the S.E. of the county. The three Museum specimens were obtained in the Scotton Common district more than half a



century ago, and the species was then probably becoming rare in the county, and ceased to breed here about that time.

*Montagu's Harrier* (*Circus cineraceus*) was at one time a regular spring and summer visitor to England, and nested in several counties, but at the present day it is extremely rare. This species must formerly have been met with in Lincolnshire as it used to nest both in Norfolk and Yorkshire, but it is not likely to occur again except as an occasional straggler.

From a most interesting letter to "The Field" of November 27th, 1886, written by the late Rev. E. Elmhirst, we learn that about the year 1824 the *Hen Harrier* (*Circus cyaneus*) nested commonly in Lincolnshire. Writing of the district around Market Rasen the author of this letter states that "The hen harrier existed here in extraordinary numbers, and in the nesting season formed quite a colony on one of the large moors or commons situated in the parish of Market Rasen. At this distance of time it is almost impossible to determine the exact size of this moor in the year 1824-5, so great has been the change occasioned by the subsequent cultivation of the land. But for the sake of accuracy I have questioned some of the oldest inhabitants and find from reliable sources that there was considerably over 60 acres of gorse. Here and there were small patches of open ground whereon the hen harriers built their nests. . . . To the best of my recollection there were 10 pairs of hen harriers nesting on this moor." "On these great tracts of unproductive land," writes Mr. Elmhirst "were to be found pheasants, partridge, woodcock, snipe, landrails, quail, wild fowl of all kinds, plovers and their eggs at the proper season, foxes, badgers, polecats, stoats, weasels, rats, hedgehogs, carrion crows, magpies, jays, and hawks of all kinds. Kites, buzzards, hen harriers, falcons, sparrow hawks, hobbies, merlins, and kestrels had undisturbed possession. It was a paradise for the No vigilant keeper with gun or trap molested them."

It is impossible to say when the hen harrier ceased to nest in Lincolnshire, but it was probably quite 50 years ago. The species is still an occasional visitor in spring and autumn. The Museum specimen was secured at Harmston in 1891, and a more recent example was shot at Nocton in December, 1906. The adult male is very different in plumage from the specimen in the Museum, the colour of the upper parts being slate grey, and the under parts white.

The *Buzzard* (*Buteo vulgaris*) was formerly common in the county, but ceased to nest here about the year 1885. In the fine collection of birds' eggs in the possession of W. N. Scotton-Neithorpe, Esq., at Scawby, there are fifteen county specimens of the eggs of this species, collected between the years 1844-1880, chiefly from the large woods a few miles to the N.E. of Lincoln City. Buzzards still nest in Wales and the S.W. of England, but are now only wanderers to Lincolnshire; but should examples attempt to nest again in the county it is hoped that every effort will be made to protect them. The wild mewing cry and graceful soaring flight of the buzzards are sounds and sights far too seldom met with in our large woodlands at the present day. But even in these militaristic times there are people who can enjoy beauty for its own sake, and would gladly welcome back to the country side much of the wild life which we fear has now been banished for ever. The specimen in the Museum case came from the Scotton district about the year 1850.

The *Rough-legged Buzzard* (*Buteo lagopus*) is a resident in the northern parts of Europe, and has never been more than an autumnal visitor to the British Isles, being noticed chiefly in the Eastern Counties. From time to time the species has occurred in Lincolnshire.

The *Honey Buzzard* (*Pernis apivorus*), now a very rare bird in Britain, perhaps nested in former years in the large woods of Lincolnshire, but is at present only an autumn visitor on rare occasions, to the county. Two specimens are in the Museum case, one from the Scotton district, about 1850,



and the other from Market Rasen in 1896, and the most recent record is of two shot near Grantham, autumn 1900. The principal food of this species consists of wasps, wild bees and their larvae, and it should be noticed that the lorose region in front of the eye, of these birds is thickly feathered, no doubt as a protection from the stings of those insects. The bird does not feed on the honey, as the name might seem to imply.

The *Golden Eagle* (*Aquila chrysaetos*) *White-tailed Sea-eagle* (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), *Osprey* (*Pandion haliaetus*) and *Goshawk* (*Astur palumbarius*) have all occurred in Lincolnshire, but can hardly be claimed as local birds, as their visits are very irregular. The home of the Golden Eagle is the Highlands of Scotland, where it is perhaps increasing in number, preying chiefly on the mountain hares; a few pairs of White-tailed Eagles nest on the rock-bound coasts of Northern Britain, but our visitors come probably from Northern Europe. Until recently a pair or two of Ospreys continued to nest on islands in a few secluded Highland lochs. This species is known also as the "Fishing Eagle" from its habits of plunging into the water to secure its prey, has been occasionally seen in Lincolnshire on migration; the Museum specimen was shot on the coast at Mablethorpe in the year 1898, and a female bird, probably on its way to breed in Scotland, was most unfortunately shot by a keeper at Scawby on May 19, 1900. The Goshawk, which much resembles a large sparrowhawk is a native of the northern parts of Europe, and occasionally visits the British Isles.

The *Sparrow-hawk* (*Accipiter nisus*) is still common in the county, but the gamekeeper, perhaps not without some reason, keeps down its numbers. It builds its nest in a tree, usually in a large wood, and its food consists chiefly of small birds, which it snaps up in an instant with its claws, and skims stealthily along some hedgerow. The two Museum specimens are in the immature plumage, the adult birds have the upper parts of a slate-blue colour.

The *Kite* or '*Glead*' (*Milvus icinus*), appears at one time to have been a common resident in Lincolnshire, but at the present day it nests nowhere in England, and only very sparingly in Scotland and Wales. The late John Cordeaux writes that when he was a boy he well remembers seeing Kites soaring over the woodlands near Louth, but they vanished about the middle of last century. He has talked with an old man who when a boy at Louth, about 1820, was often put to mind geese and goslings, and if not careful in his duty, one of his charges was sure to be carried off by a watchful kite of which there were many in the neighbourhood. The Kites used also to carry off as materials for their nests, linen laid out to dry, handkerchiefs, socks and especially children's clothing, and many a time had he climbed the trees in the neighbourhood to recover these articles from the birds' nests. This statement is an interesting comment on Shakspeare's well-known line "When the Kite builds look to lesser linen." (*Winter's Tale*, Act 4, Scene 2). These bad habits no doubt hastened the birds' extinction. Up to the middle of last century, the Kite might often be seen close to the city of Lincoln, and there are people still living who can well remember seeing these grand birds soaring round the Minster Towers. Mr. Adrian, a former bird-stuffer in Lincoln, has stated that he has sometimes seen four or five pairs of Kites together near the river below Lincoln, on the look out to pick up any floating garbage. This would have been about the year 1860. The collection at Scawby already mentioned contains nine eggs of the Kite taken from the large woods around Lincoln between the years 1857 and 1870. The last eggs were obtained in Bullington Wood near Wragby in 1870, and fix in all probability the date of the extinction of this bird as a breeding species in the county. The Kite is now very rarely seen on the Lincolnshire coast, but only as a passing visitor. The local Museum contains no specimens of this bird, but there are several in glass cases about the county, and the authorities would gladly accept one of these to exhibit as an example of a species at one time quite common in Lincolnshire.



We now come to the true Falcons, which differ from the Hawks in their proportionately longer wings and bolder flight. Four species may be seen more or less regularly in the county, but only one of these, the Kestrel, can be called common.

The *Peregrine Falcon* (*Falco peregrinus*) occurs yearly on migration chiefly in September or October, and may be seen sometimes inland, but more frequently on the coast harrying the sea fowl and shore birds. We know of no records of the breeding of this species in Lincolnshire, but as it prefers the ledges of high sea cliffs on which to bring up its young it can find no suitable accommodation in this county. Probably its nearest nesting haunts are the chalk cliffs of Yorkshire between Flamborough Head and Filey. This species was formerly much prized by falconers, being trained to take herons, grouse, partridges and other birds. The male, considerably smaller than his mate was called the 'Tiercel,' and the female the 'Falcon.' The larger Greenland Falcon (*Falco candicans*) has wandered to Lincolnshire, but it is a northern species and probably nests nowhere to the south of the Arctic Circle.

The *Hobby* (*Falco subbuteo*) is a summer visitor to our county arriving in May and leaving in September. It formerly nested fairly commonly in some of the larger woods but at the present time appears to be much rarer. The Scawby collection contains 13 eggs of the Hobby taken from woods near Lincoln about 50 years ago. Insects, such as dragon-flies, and cockchafers form the principal prey of this handsome little falcon in summer, but it will also take small birds. The Museum specimen, was shot in September 1836 at Stainton Wood near Langworth.

The *Merlin* (*Falco aesalon*) is chiefly a winter visitor to our county being seen not very uncommonly along the coast line. It has been known to breed in Lincolnshire as eggs have been taken, laid on the ground among heather on Matton Common, and there are other records. This species preys chiefly on small birds such as larks and thrushes, and is found of wild open moorland country. The Museum specimen which

shows the immature plumage was secured at Metheringham in April, 1907.

The *Kestrel* or Windhover (*Falco tinnunculus*) is a resident species in Lincolnshire, and is fortunately still common. Its shrill chattering cry, hovering flight and habit of hanging poised in the air on the look out for some unwary game below, are familiar sounds and sights of the country. This species is practically harmless to game, its food consisting chiefly of mice, shrews and also grasshoppers and other insects. The birds and their eggs are protected by Act of Parliament, in Lincolnshire, throughout the nesting season, as a recognition of the bird's usefulness to man in destroying mice and the larger insects. This species makes no nest, but deposits its reddish-brown eggs in the deserted home of a crow or magpie, or in a cavity on the face of a cliff or quarry. Until about the year 1893 a pair or two of these birds often nested on the Minster Towers of Lincoln, but they appear to have deserted the Cathedral since that time. The Museum specimens came from Gautby in 1896.

This account closes the list of the "Hawks and Owls" represented in the Lincoln Museum, as well as others which formerly inhabited or have occurred in the county. The species which still exist and rear their young in freedom, in the wilder parts of Lincolnshire are deserving of careful protection. The amount of harm these species do to 'game' has been very much exaggerated by those who have little knowledge of the domestic economy of these birds, and, to lift the question to a higher level, it is very questionable whether the law have a justifiable right to exterminate a beautiful race of birds, for the sake of a possible addition to the 'bag' of partridges and pheasants. For a lover of wild life there can be few sights more sickening than that which is presented by a row of the carcasses of Owls and Kestrels gibbeted on 'the keeper's tree,' and it is much to be hoped that in the future the law of the land in this respect will be both observed and enforced.