

Wild Life in the Swiss Alps

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WILD LIFE IN THE SWISS ALPS.

By SETON GORDON.

The visitor from Britain to the Alps of Switzerland soon realises that the Swiss, although grand people in many respects, are not bird-minded. As an example of this, I was shown, through a telescope, the eyrie of the only pair of golden eagles inhabiting the Zermatt area of the valley of the Visp — a glacier torrent that pours its icy waters through narrow gorges, spray-filled and rainbow-tinted. It was July of the year 1953, and I was proudly told that the week before, hunters had climbed, very early three mornings in succession, to that eagle's eyrie in order to shoot the parent eagles when they arrived with food for the young. Since the old eagles did not oblige them, the hunters had perforce to be content with shooting the eaglet, which was still in white down, the feather tips just showing.

This dislike of the eagle made me realise that in the Scottish Highlands the golden eagle is treated very differently, for here a reward of £10 is given by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to the shepherd or deer-stalker on whose ground a pair of eagles are successful in bringing up their young. When my wife asked the Swiss hunter why the eagle should be thus persecuted, he replied that it was a bad bird. It killed marmots and hares, both prized by the local hunters. An eagle picked up a hare he was following in thick mist and carried it off. He never forgot, or forgave, that. The eagle, he said, also hunted marmots, and he himself had seen a golden eagle lift and bear off a full-grown marmot. I said that there were marmots in plenty for all the hunters and for the one pair of golden eagles in the valley. No, he said, there cannot be too many marmots for us. The marmot is very good to eat and makes delicious soup. Besides, its fur is valuable. The hunters were paid by furriers in Zürich 350 francs for marmot skins sufficient to make a lady's fur coat, which, they said, was sold in Zürich shops for as much as 1,000 francs. When I reminded him that in certain of the Swiss cantons the golden eagle is protected by law, he said this was the case in the Zermatt area also, yet here the law was apparently broken with impunity.

One interesting thing he told me of the golden eagle. In his own words, "The golden eagle is not a mountaineer." It had never been seen, even in fine weather, as high as the Matterhorn or Monte Rosa,

and had rarely been seen even at 10,000 feet, although in summer the marmot has frequently been seen at this height. All who have wandered on the Alps below the line of perpetual snow have seen that quaint and attractive beaver-like creature, the marmot. In Britain, no marmot is found, but there are few countries throughout the world where one of its races is not seen.

The Swiss marmot hibernates in its burrow in winter, for its home is usually above the tree-line, which is around 7,000 feet, and snow lies deep here for months. The young are born in late spring, and in July I watched for some time a family of marmots beside their burrow in a corrie among the hills at a height of just under 8,000 feet. Both father and mother marmot were outside the burrow, indulging in a playful wrestling bout, swaying together on their hind legs and biting each other about the neck. After a time, one of their half-grown children joined in the game and wrestled fiercely with its mother, who permitted this familiarity for a minute or two, but finally lost patience and sent the youngster flying. Marmots live in scattered colonies and although they are not timid, they are quick to notice the approach of a human intruder. Their alarm-cry is a shrill whistle of astonishing power.

One summer my wife and I watched a marmot feeding near a clear stream in whose cool spray grew viola, gentian and the creeping purple mountain saxifrage. The marmot hurried from one viola or pansy to another, dexterously nipping off the scented flower and masticating it with relish. The gentians, as beautiful in our eyes, were without scent, and not one of them was eaten. The marmot also ate the short green grass and other Alpine plants. Its flattened tail, black-tipped, was sometimes waved in the air. An animal of heavy, rather ungainly appearance, it nevertheless was surprisingly active; leaped nimbly over the stream, and ran as easily uphill as down. No wonder, we thought, that the marmot should be esteemed for soup if its food is the petals of scented flowers.

But I suspect that this animal on occasion makes a more substantial meal off the eggs, or young, of some small ground-nesting bird, such as the water pipit. This bird is not unlike our meadow-pipit and nests in a similar site — beneath a juniper bush or in a grassy tussock on a steep bank where it is safe from the grazing cattle which go up to the mountain pastures

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at the beginning of July. One day I watched a marmot being furiously attacked by a water pipit, the small aerial assailant hovering over the animal's head and making determined stoops close to its face.

If the golden eagle is not a mountaineer, the Alpine chough is certainly one. The British chough, a jackdaw-like bird but with red bill and red legs, nests in sea cliffs, and also in caves high on the hills of North Wales. It is a skilled flier, but nothing like so skilled a flier as the Alpine chough, which has a pale lemon-tinted bill that is almost white. This bird probably flies higher than any bird of the Alps, yet is so confiding that it alights in the snow beside the mountaineer lunching on the narrow summit of the great and fearsome Matterhorn, or on the even higher snowy dome of Monte Rosa, and shares its frugal lunch amid the eternal snows, where the stillness is complete except for the rumble of avalanches, which pour like great waterfalls over the cliffs. On Everest, too, the climbers saw the chough higher than any other bird. The 1953 expedition saw it at 26,000 feet, near the summit of the South Col.

In the Zermatt area the chief haunt of the Alpine chough is the neighbourhood of the Kulm Hotel, perched on the Gornergrat at a height of 10,200 feet. The Gornergrat railway climbs to this height from Zermatt in the valley 5,000 feet below, and on fine days a considerable number of tourists eat their lunch on the ridge a few hundred yards from the hotel. Choughs are passing almost continuously across the ridge, using the air currents in their soaring with the skill of eagles, and suddenly alighting and gobbling up the remnants of somebody's lunch.

One day I saw a flock of choughs rise from the flower-decked Staffalp below the mountain inn at Schwarze. Rising higher and higher, they wheeled in the lee of the great snowy cone of the Matterhorn. When they were almost level with its summit, at 14,000 feet altitude, the uprising wind-stream no longer helped them; they then swung off and slanted down to the Gornergrat feeding-ground, accomplishing in little more than a minute the journey which would take a trained mountaineer a hard day's walking, and most climbers two days. It is believed by the men of Zermatt that the chough is very long-lived. An old man who for most of his life was in charge of the telescope on the terrace of the Kulm Hotel claims that he knew one chough by reason of its peculiar markings for fifty summers.

When soaring, the chough has its wing primaries upturned like the eagle. Like the eagle, too, the primary wing-feathers are held well apart, so that the sky may be seen through the spaces; this wide-spacing of the feathers is evidently a soaring technique. The chough when sailing along a ridge is constantly opening and closing its tail as though it were a fan; this also helps it to maintain poise when traversing the constantly changing wind currents and eddies which play upon a rocky hillside.

Perhaps the most attractive bird of the Swiss Alps is the snowfinch. This bird, rather larger than a greenfinch, is conspicuous in flight because of its white wings and white lateral tail-feathers. For a small bird it is a strong flier, and flies up a steep hill-face with no apparent effort and almost as fast as it flies down it. Snowfinches nest in rocky crannies and,

although they are shy birds, they often nest in some cranny in a building high amid the hills. One summer at least two pairs of snowfinches had young in July on the hotel at Gornergrat where, at 10,200 feet, the snow was almost unbroken and in places many feet deep. Because of the snow, the birds were obliged to fly down to lower slopes for food for the young, which could be heard calling loudly in their hidden nests.

There was one amusing incident in connection with this arduous feeding of the young. One of the tourists had eaten an orange and scattered the remains on the ground beneath the hotel. The snowfinch's keen eye saw the yellow discoloration on the snow and, instead of making a long flight for food as was her custom, fluttered to the ground, crammed her bill full of the discarded and sucked orange residue, then returned to the hole above the window, where she fed the unappetising mass to her hungry young. She was evidently not received with enthusiasm on this visit, because she did not again visit the abandoned orange, but flew out of sight down the hill.

The food flights of the snowfinch during the long hours of a July day must be at least 50 miles — perhaps considerably more. One thousand feet below Gornergrat, there were large snowfields but much bare ground on the hill, and here several pairs of snowfinches were courting. The cock bird rose high on his white wings, then swooped at speed to the edge of the snowfield, where his mate was standing. Sometimes two cocks would chase one another, backwards and forwards, twisting and swerving above the snowfields and above the rocky ground.

One day I saw a peregrine falcon soaring high in the blue sky, and the flash of white wings as a snowfinch dived at the fierce bird of prey. I do not think that any other small bird would have had the bravery to attack a peregrine high in the air, without assistance. I do not know what is the highest recorded nest of the snowfinch in Switzerland: I doubt whether there are any higher nesting-sites than on Gornergrat, at 10,200 feet above the level of the distant sea, which is invisible even from the Matterhorn. Have the birds of the Alps, the snowfinch and the chough, which fly daily above the wide expanses of snow, dazzling beneath the summer sun, special vision in order to guard themselves from snow-blindness? Unless the human mountaineer were to protect his eyes with snow-glasses, he would certainly suffer from snow-blindness after even a single day's walking in snow, yet snowfinch and chough face the snow-glare daily with no ill effect. Birds have what is termed a third eyelid, or nictitating membrane, which can be drawn over the eye at will, and which is semi-transparent. It is possible that during flights over the snow this membrane is brought into use.

A small bird of a size similar to the snowfinch, which has its summer home almost as high on the Alps, is the Alpine accentor. There is an active and busy bird rather inconspicuously plumaged except, when seen at close quarters, for the reddish-brown markings on the flanks. Like the snowfinch, the Alpine accentor nests in crannies of rock, but it does not nest on buildings. The Alpine accentor is double-brooded. In early July, some of the birds had young, while others were mating and pairing preparatory to beginning

to rear a second brood. The vertical range of this hardy bird is not known. A friend of mine told me that while climbing the Matterhorn he had heard an individual in song at a height of 12,000 feet.

The black redstart nests on St. Paul's, and has colonised some of the bombed buildings in the City of London. It might not, therefore, be expected that in the Swiss Alps it should nest up to a height of 9,000 feet above sea-level, and perhaps even higher. It does not, like the snowfinch, confine itself to the high, treeless ground, but nests in buildings of the small townships of the Visp valley, such as Zmütt. I found, in early July, a nest in a low wall in the upland village of Findeln. The cock black redstart is a handsome bird, with brick-red tail, black throat and breast, and white patch on either wing.

The ptarmigan is so essentially a part of the bird life of the Scottish hills that it might be thought that in the Alps also it would be frequently seen. Actually, it is very scarce. During frequent climbs and walks in the Zermatt district, in 1949 and again in 1953, my wife and I saw only one ptarmigan. He was a male bird, and was on gently-sloping ground at a height of 9,000 feet. We watched him feeding on the small green leaves of a plant of *Silene acaulis*; before we had reached the plant he had spirited himself away, nor did we see him again.

In the forests of larch and Cembra pine, the thick-billed nutcracker, a bird of the crow family with broad wings and short, white-edged tail, is sometimes seen flying with undulating flight in family parties just above the tree-tops. The feathers of its plumage are dark brown, flecked with white. The carrion crow takes the place of the grey crow of the Scottish hills, and one day I saw a pair of carrion crows in angry pursuit of that large, long-tailed and broad-winged bird of prey known as the goshawk, which used to nest in the Old Caledonian Forest of Scotland, but which is now extinct as a British species.

Common swifts nest in considerable numbers in Zermatt, and on fine days fly up on the air currents to a height of 10,000 feet, perhaps higher. Curiously enough, the Alpine swift, a larger, white-bellied bird, in Switzerland is not so Alpine in its habits as the common species. I saw a single Alpine swift flying with common swifts up the Findeln valley: its flight was easier and more graceful than that of its companions. Above Zürich I saw several Alpine swifts among a throng of wheeling common swifts. The more powerful, yet leisurely flight distinguished these Alpine swifts rather than their larger size: there was something shearwater-like in their gliding and wheeling.

(The Sphere.)

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