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Wild Life in a Southern County

Richard Jefferies (1848–87) remains one of the most thoughtful and most lyrical writers on the English countryside. He had aspirations to make a living as a novelist, but it was his short, factually based articles for *The Live Stock Journal* and other magazines, drawn from a wealth of knowledge of the rural community into which he had been born, which when collected in book form brought him recognition (though not wealth), and which continued to be read and admired after his early death. *Wild Life in a Southern County*, published in 1879, examines the habitats of the Downs and the birds and animals which live there. Written in Jefferies' highly descriptive style, these essays reveal his deep love and knowledge of the countryside. The sense of wonder evoked by the natural world, which permeates all of Jefferies' works, is fully exemplified in this volume.

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Wild Life in a Southern County

RICHARD JEFFERIES



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WILD LIFE
IN
A SOUTHERN COUNTY

BY THE AUTHOR OF
'THE GAMEKEEPER AT HOME'

LONDON
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1879

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INSCRIBED
TO
FREDERICK GREENWOOD

P R E F A C E.

THERE is a frontier line to civilization in this country yet, and not far outside its great centres we come quickly even now on the borderland of nature. Modern progress, except where it has exterminated them, has scarcely touched the habits of bird or animal; so almost up to the very houses of the metropolis the nightingale yearly returns to her former haunts. If we go a few hours' journey only, and then step just beyond the highway—where the steam ploughing engine has left the mark of its wide wheels on the dust—and glance into the hedgerow, the copse, or stream, there are nature's children as unrestrained in their wild, free life as they were in the veritable backwoods of primitive England. So, too, in some degree with the tillers of the soil: old manners and customs linger, and there seems an echo of the past in the breadth of their pronunciation.

But a difficulty confronts the explorer who would carry away a note of what he has seen, because nature is not cut and dried to hand, nor easily classified, each subject shading gradually into another. In studying the ways, for instance, of so common a bird as the

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[More information](#)

starling it cannot be separated from the farmhouse in the thatch of which it often breeds, the rooks with whom it associates, or the friendly sheep upon whose backs it sometimes rides. Since the subjects are so closely connected, it is best, perhaps, to take the places they prefer for the convenience of division, and group them as far as possible in the districts they usually frequent.

The following chapters have, therefore, been so arranged as to correspond in some degree with the contour of the country. Commencing at the highest spot, an ancient entrenchment on the Downs has been chosen as the starting-place from whence to explore the uplands. Beneath the hill a spring breaks forth, and, tracing its course downwards, there next come the village and the hamlet. Still farther the streamlet becomes a broad brook, flowing through meadows in the midst of which stands a solitary farmhouse. The house itself, the garden and orchard, are visited by various birds and animals. In the fields immediately around—in the great hedges and the copse—are numerous others, and an expedition is made to the forest. Returning to the farm again as a centre, the rookery remains to be examined, and the ways and habits of the inhabitants of the hedges. Finally come the fish and wild-fowl of the brook and lake ;—finishing in the Vale.

R. J.

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-02535-5 - Wild Life in a Southern County
 Richard Jefferies
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
THE DOWNS. An Entrenchment : Ways of Larks : 'Hares—A Combat : Happiness of Animals : Ants—A long Journey . . .	1

CHAPTER II.

A DROUGHT. Ancient Garrison of the Entrenchment : Tradi- tions of Forest : Curious Ponds : A Mirage	17
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

THE HILLSIDE HEDGE : its Birds and Flowers : A Green Track : The Springhead	45
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

THE VILLAGE. The Washpool : Village Industries : The Belfry : Jackdaws : Village Chronicles	67
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

VILLAGE ARCHITECTURE. The Cottage Preacher : Cottage Society : The Shepherd : Events of the Village Year	88
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VI.

THE HAMLET. Cottage Astrology : Ghost-Lore : Herbs.--THE WAGGON AND ITS CREW. Stiles : The Trysting-place : The Thatcher : Smugglers : Ague	107
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-02535-5 - Wild Life in a Southern County
 Richard Jefferies
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CHAPTER VII.		PAGE
THE FARMHOUSE. Traditions: Hunting Pictures: The Farmer's Year: Sport: The Auction Festival: A Summer's Day: Beauty of Wheat		126
CHAPTER VIII.		
BIRDS OF THE FARMHOUSE. Speech of a Starling: Popula- tion of a Gable: The King of the Hedge: The Thrush's Anvil		148
CHAPTER IX.		
THE ORCHARD. Emigrant Martins: The Missel-Thrush: Caravan Route of Birds and Animals: A Fox in Ambush: A Snake in a Clock		169
CHAPTER X.		
THE WOODPILE. Lizards: Sheds and Rickyard: The Witches' Briar: Insects: Plants, Flowers, and Fruit		190
CHAPTER XI.		
THE HOME-FIELD. Hazel Corner: The Divining-Rod: Rabbits' Holes: The Corncrake: Ventriloquism of Birds: Hedge-Fruit		210
CHAPTER XII.		
THE ASH COPSE. The Nightingale: Cloud of Starlings: Hedge- hogs. HERON'S MEAD: Moorhens. Among the Reeds		228
CHAPTER XIII.		
THE WARREN. Rabbit Burrows: Ferrets: The Quarry.—THE FOREST: Squirrels: Deer: Dying Rabbit: A Hawk		245

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-02535-5 - Wild Life in a Southern County
 Richard Jefferies
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents. xi

CHAPTER XIV.

	PAGE
THE ROOKERY. Building Nests : Young Birds : Rook-Shooting : Stealing Rooks : Antics in the Air : Mode of Flight : White Rooks	262

CHAPTER XV.

ROOKS RETURNING TO ROOST. Vast Flocks : Rook Parliament : The two Rook Armies and their Routes : Rook Laws, Traditions, and Ancient History : 'Throws' of Timber : Thieving Jackdaws	280
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVI.

NOTES ON BIRDS. Nightingales : Chaffinches : Migration : Packing : Intermarriage : Peewits : Crows : Cuckoo's Flight : Golden-crested Wren	295
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVII.

NOTES ON THE YEAR. The Two Natural Eras : Spiders : The Seasons represented together : A Murderous Wasp : Feng-shui. The Birds' White Elephant : Hedge-Memoranda	313
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVIII.

SNAKE-LORE. Snakes Swallowing Frogs : Swimming : Fond of Milk : Trapping Snakes : Frogs Climbing : Toads in Trees. — THE BROOK. The Hatch : Kingfishers' Haunts and Nests	333
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIX.

COURSE OF THE BROOK. The Birds' Bathing-place : Roach : Jacks on their Journeys : Stickleback's Nest : Woodcock. — THE LAKE. Herons : Mussels : Reign of Terror in the Lake	352
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-02535-5 - Wild Life in a Southern County
 Richard Jefferies
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xii

Contents.

CHAPTER XX.

	PAGE
WILDFOWL OF THE LAKE. Sea Birds: Driftwood: Forces of Nature at Work: Waves: Evaporation: An Eagle. FROST AND SNOW. Effect on Birds and Animals: Water-Meadows: Shooting Stars: Phosphorescence: Waterspout: Noises 'in the Air'	370