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978-1-108-06540-5 - History of British Birds: Volume 1: Containing the History and Description of Land Birds

Thomas Bewick

Excerpt

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BRITISH BIRDS.

BIRDS OF PREY.

RAPACIOUS birds, or those which subsist chiefly on flesh, are much less numerous than ravenous quadrupeds; and it seems wisely provided by nature, that their powers should be equally confined and limited as their numbers; for if, to the rapid flight and penetrating eye of the Eagle, were joined the strength and voracious appetite of the Lion, the Tiger, or the Glutton, no artifice could evade the one, and no speed could escape the other.

The characters of birds of the ravenous kind are particularly strong, and easily to be distinguished; the formidable talons, the large head, the strong and crooked beak, indicate their ability for rapine and carnage; their dispositions are fierce, and their nature untractable; unsociable and cruel, they avoid the haunts of civilization, and retire to the most melancholy and wild recesses of nature, where they can enjoy, in gloomy solitude, the effects of their depredatory excursions. The fierceness of their nature extends even to their young,

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which they drive from the nest at a very early period; the difficulty of procuring a constant supply of food for them sometimes overcomes the feelings of parental affection; and they have been known to destroy them in the fury of disappointed hunger. Different from all other kinds, the female of birds of prey is larger and stronger than the male: naturalists have puzzled themselves to assign the reason of this extraordinary property, but the final cause at least is obvious:—The care of rearing her young being solely intrusted to the female, nature has furnished her with more ample powers to provide for her own wants and those of her offspring.

This formidable tribe constitutes the first order among the genera of birds. Those of our own country consist only of two kinds, viz. the Falcon and the Owl.—We shall begin with the former.

THE FALCON TRIBE.

THE numerous families of which this kind is composed, are found in almost every part of the world, from the frigid to the torrid zone; they are divided into various classes or tribes, consisting of Eagles, Kites, Buzzards, Hawks, &c. and are readily known by the following distinguishing characteristics:

The bill is strong, sharp, and much hooked, and is furnished with a naked skin or cere situated at

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the base, in which are placed the nostrils; the head and neck are well clothed with feathers, which sufficiently distinguish it from every one of the vulture kind; the legs and feet are scaly, claws large and strong, much hooked, and very sharp: Birds of this species are also distinguished by their undaunted courage, and great activity. Buffon, speaking of the Eagle, compares it with the Lion, and ascribes to it the magnanimity, the strength, and the forbearance of that noble quadruped. The Eagle despises small animals, and disregards their insults; he seldom devours the whole of his prey, but, like the Lion, leaves the fragments to other animals; though famished with hunger, he disdain to feed on carrion. The eyes of the Eagle have the glare of those of the Lion, and are nearly of the same colour; the claws are of the same shape, and the cry of both is powerful and terrible; destined for war and plunder, they are equally fierce, bold, and untractable. Such is the resemblance which that ingenious and fanciful writer has pictured of these two noble animals; the characters of both are striking and prominent, and hence the Eagle is said to extend his dominion over the birds, as the Lion over the quadrupeds.

The same writer also observes, that in a state of nature, the Eagle never engages in a solitary chase but when the female is confined to her eggs or her

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young : at this season the return of the smaller birds affords plenty of prey, and he can with ease provide for the sustenance of himself and his mate : at other times they unite their exertions, and are always seen close together, or at a short distance from each other. Those who have an opportunity of observing their motions, say, that the one beats the bushes, whilst the other, perched on an eminence, watches the escape of the prey. They often soar out of the reach of human sight ; and notwithstanding the immense distance, their cry is still heard, and then resembles the barking of a small dog. Though a voracious bird, the Eagle can endure the want of sustenance for a long time. A common Eagle, caught in a fox trap, is said to have passed five whole weeks without the least food, and did not appear sensibly weakened till towards the last week, after which a period was put to its existence.



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THE GOLDEN EAGLE,

(*Falco Chrysetos*, Linnæus.—*Le grand Aigle*, Buffon.)

Is the largest of the genus: It measures, from the point of the bill to the extremity of the toes,

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upwards of three feet; and in breadth, from wing to wing, above eight; and weighs from sixteen to eighteen pounds. The male is smaller, and does not weigh more than twelve pounds. The bill is of a deep blue colour; the cere yellow; the eyes are large, deep sunk, and covered by a projecting brow; the iris is of a fine bright yellow, and sparkles with uncommon lustre. The general colour is deep brown, mixed with tawny on the head and neck; the quills are chocolate, with white shafts; the tail is black, spotted with ash colour; the legs are yellow, and feathered down to the toes, which are very scaly; the claws are remarkably large; the middle one is two inches in length.—This noble bird is found in various parts of Europe; it abounds most in the warmer regions, and has seldom been met with farther north than the fifty-fifth degree of latitude. It is known to breed in the mountainous parts of Ireland; it lays three, and sometimes four eggs, of which it seldom happens that more than two are prolific. Mr Pennant says there are instances, though rare, of their having bred in Snowdon Hills. Mr Wallis, in his Natural History of Northumberland, says, it formerly had its aery on the highest and steepest part of Cheviot. In the beginning of January, 1735, a very large one was shot near Warkworth, which measured, from point to point of its wings, eleven feet and a quarter.

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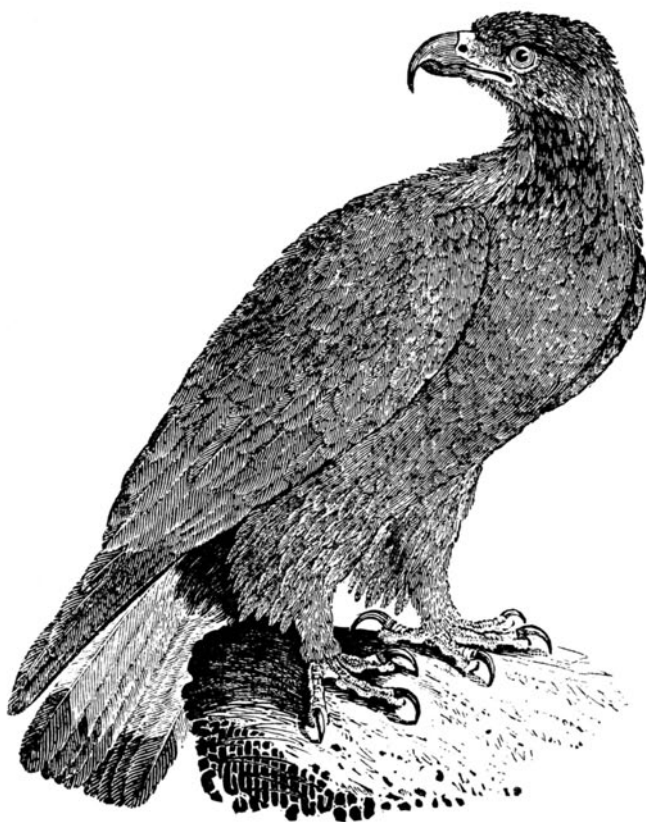
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THE RINGTAILED EAGLE.

(*Falco Fulvus*. Lin.—*L'Aigle Commun*. Buff.)

THIS is the common Eagle of Buffon, and, according to that author, includes two varieties, the brown and the black Eagle; they are both of the

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same brown colour, distinguished only by a deeper shade; and are nearly of the same size. In both, the upper part of the head and neck is mixed with rust colour, and the base of the larger feathers marked with white; the bill is of a dark horn colour, the cere of a bright yellow, the iris hazel, and between the bill and the eye there is a naked skin of a dirty brown colour; the legs are feathered to the toes, which are yellow, and the claws black; the tail is distinguished by a white ring, which covers about two thirds of its length; the remaining part is black.

The Ringtailed Eagle is more numerous and diffused than the Golden Eagle, and prefers more northern climates. It is found in France, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, and in America as far north as Hudson's Bay.



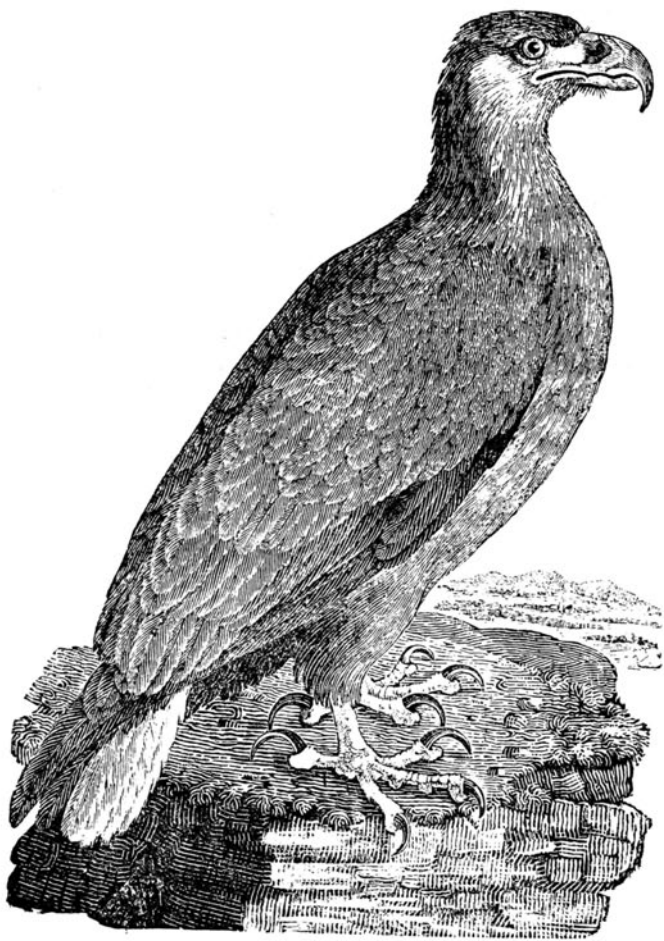
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THE WHITE-TAILED EAGLE.

GREAT ERNE—CINEREOUS EAGLE.

(*Falco Albiulla*, Lin.—*Le grand Pygargue*, Buff.)

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OF this there appear to be three varieties, which differ chiefly in size, and consist of the following: the great Erne, or Cinereous Eagle, of Latham and Pennant; the small Erne, or lesser White-tailed Eagle; and the White-headed Erne, or Bald Eagle. The two first are distinguished only by their size, and the last by the whiteness of its head and neck.

The white-tailed Eagle is inferior in size to the Golden Eagle; the beak, cere, and eyes are of a pale yellow; the space between the beak and the eye is of a blueish colour, and thinly covered with hair; the sides of the head and neck are of a pale ash colour, mixed with reddish brown; the general colour of the plumage is brown, darkest on the upper part of the head, neck, and back; the quill feathers are very dark; the breast is irregularly marked with white spots; the tail is white; the legs, which are of a bright yellow, are feathered a little below the knees; the claws are black.

This bird inhabits all the northern parts of Europe, and is found in Scotland and many parts of Great-Britain; it is equal in strength and vigour to the common Eagle, but more furious; and is said to drive its young ones from the nest, after having fed them only a very short time. It has commonly two or three young, and builds its nest upon lofty trees.