

RECENT LITERATURE.

Walton's 'A Hermit's Wild Friends,'¹—As a popular work on out-door 'wild things' this collection of well-intentioned sketches will doubtless meet with many admirers, being printed on heavy paper in large type, with broad-margined pages embellished profusely with marginal cuts, and copiously illustrated with full-page plates, many of them after drawings by Fuertes, and others by Kennedy, with still others that have seen previous service. It is written, however, with a know-it-all cocksureness that only lack of knowledge ever prompts, and doubtless no amount of proof of error in the author's statements would in the slightest degree affect his attitude in the case. The author's "eighteen years of hermit life" in the woods on Cape Ann, Massachusetts, have given him opportunity for intimate acquaintance with the birds, small mammals and reptiles to be found in such localities, and he evidently knows them well. It is therefore the greater pity that through his wealth of imagination and predilection for humanizing his birds and mice and squirrels he should, perhaps unconsciously and therefore without dishonest motive, so often turn his sketches into incredible natural history romances. It would take too much space to itemize this general charge, but in the case of 'Wabbles,' a male Song Sparrow, alleged to have lived in his immediate neighborhood for "fourteen years," and "eleven years . . . with his second wife," we begin to wonder if the author knows the size of a No. 4 shot, a no inconsiderable pellet of lead he claims to have removed from "the muscle of the wing-joint" of 'Wabbles' when he first made his acquaintance. If he had been satisfied to call it a No. 10, or even a No. 8, it would take less imagination to conceive of its arrest by and lodgment in "the muscle of the wing-joint" of a Song Sparrow. And we could then have been better prepared to take a little stock in Wabbles's setting up a little family singing school and teaching "his boys to sing the mating-song of his species"; and also that on one tenth day of March, twelve years before the close of the author's related association with Wabbles, he might have "brought with him from the South a male linnnet," and that "a week later Mrs. Wabbles returned, and with her was the mate of the linnnet," in consequence of these four birds having "met in the South," and because: "In the course of bird gossip either the linnets or sparrows had announced that the summer home was on Cape Ann." In this romance of Wabbles a series of events is narrated with all the seriousness of positive knowledge, yet many of them are of such

¹ A Hermit's Wild Friends, or Eighteen Years in the Woods. By Mason A. Walton (The Hermit of Gloucester). Boston: Dana Estes and Company, Publishers. "Published October, 1903." 8vo, pp. i-x, 11-304, with numerous full-page illustrations and text-cuts.

a nature as to be outside the realm of the least shadow of proof, and can only rest on belief or on the promptings of the imagination.

This sample from the Hermit's repertoire is only one of many that adorn his chapters; indeed, it is a fair illustration of the general character of the book. His dogmatism in the chapter on 'The Instinct of the Cowbird' is only a further illustration of the cocksureness of ignorance. Apropos of young Cowbirds flocking together, and with the older members of their kind, in the fall, it is enough to quote: "I will say now, that long before I had opportunity to study the bird, I did not believe it possible for a young bird, by its own knowledge, to hunt up and associate with birds of its kind." Any one approaching an intricate question with this condition of mind can readily see, or imagine (perhaps unconsciously) that he sees, just what he desires to see. So our Hermit finds no trouble in solving, to *his* "belief," all the problems of the Cowbird question. It appears, however, that his first young Cowbird "was big and black," and he "thought it was a male. I made it a male," he says, "in my note-book. While the bird was in the nest I fastened a bit of copper wire to its leg, and the next spring when it returned, I found the bird was a female. I saw her with another female, I think it was the mother, visiting birds' nests. So the young Cowbird was educated to lay its eggs in other birds' nests. Nesting is educational and not instinctive." That is his answer to his question, "Why do young Cowbirds lay eggs in other birds' nests instead of building nests for themselves?" First, young Cowbirds, as all ornithologists know, but as many of Hermit's lay readers may not know, are brown and not black. Second, he saw his marked young Cowbird the next year, which proved then to be a female, going about with another female, presumed to be her mother, visiting other birds' nests and being thus "educated" as to what to do with her eggs, when in the course of natural events she should have eggs to dispose of! This is a sample of the Hermit's evidence and of his wonderful logic.

'A Hermit's Wild Friends' is not all bad; it has many delightfully written pages, but it is so obviously permeated with romance that one never knows when to take its pages seriously. It is noticed here not as a contribution to natural history, but as an example of a class of so-called 'nature books' that is misleading hosts of credulous readers who are unable to discriminate fact from fiction. Such books have thus a pernicious influence in giving wrong conceptions of the faculties and habits of animals. Nor is such writing confined to books, but leaves its nauseous trail over our magazines and newspapers. A fine example of this kind of literature appeared recently in 'The Outlook,' entitled 'Animal Surgery.'¹ The surprise is that such reading matter should find place in so

¹ Animal Surgery. By William J. Long. Author of "Beasts of the Field," "Secrets of the Woods," etc. The Outlook, Vol. LXXV, No. 2, Sept. 12, 1903, pp. 122-127.

intelligently conducted a journal. In this article is related a tale of two female Eider Ducks seen in a freshwater pond, "acting queerly," dipping their heads under water, etc., where the water was too deep for them to be feeding. As darkness came on speedily the mystery of this curious behavior could not be solved. A few weeks later, however, another bird of this species, an old drake, was seen in the same pond acting in the same queer way, and in this case the bird was shot, and found to have been caught by the tongue by a large saltwater mussel. Counsel was sought of an old fisherman, who had witnessed similar behavior by saltwater ducks on a few occasions, but he had no explanation of it to offer. On being shown the mussel taken from the drake's tongue, he said: "Mussels of that kind won't live in fresh water." Then both Mr. Long and the fisherman had an inspiration. The ducks caught by the tongue by mussels repaired to freshwater ponds to kill the mussels by drowning them! On this single case was built at once a theory to explain why saltwater ducks visit freshwater ponds and thrust their heads under water in such a queer way. "I have," he adds, "seen three different eiders practice this bit of surgery myself, and have heard of at least a dozen more, all of the same species, that were seen in fresh water ponds or rivers dipping their heads under water repeatedly." But in only one case, according to his own showing, did he know that the bird had a mussel on its tongue. The assumption is made that the case is proved, and the questions are raised as to how a bird found out "that certain mussels will drown in fresh-water," and "how do the other birds know it now when the need arises unexpectedly"; but, strange to say, they are left without an answer,—a golden opportunity neglected. Mr. Long does not claim to know, even, "whether all the ducks have this wisdom, or whether it is confined to a few rare birds."

The way in which a Woodcock proceeded to mend a broken leg is detailed with great minuteness. As witnessed by Mr. Long, the bird applied a bandage of clay and fibers of grass and rootlets with his bill to the wounded member, and after it had hardened enough to suit him flattered away and disappeared in the thick woods. This bit of clever surgery was seen from "across a little stream," "too far away for me [him] to be absolutely sure of what all his motions meant." But then, *some years afterward*, Mr. Long, after examining hundreds of woodcock in the markets, at last "found one whose leg had at one time been broken by a shot and then had perfectly healed. There were plain signs of dried mud at the break; but that was also true of the other leg near the foot, which only indicated that the bird had been feeding in a soft place." The final proof came still later, through a lawyer friend of his who once upon a time had shot a woodcock which had a lump of clay on its leg, on the removal of which the leg was found to have been broken. The lawyer did not see the woodcock apply the clay, as did Mr. Long in his first case, nor was it suggested that the oozing fluids from the wound might cause the clay or earth to adhere and harden in a perfectly natural way. So,

Mr. Long was now emboldened, "since proof is at hand," to relate his observation, made so many years before, of how he saw a woodcock put its broken leg in splints.

These are only samples of the deplorable kind of 'natural history' writing that is now so rapidly coming into vogue, of which Mr. Walton's 'A Hermit's Wild Friends' and so much of Mr. Long's writings form striking examples. An active imagination, a slight knowledge of the subject considered, a clever knack at writing, a few pictures, make up the necessary capital for any amount of natural history romancing, and from the infliction of which upon the public publishers and editors seem to interpose no relief, either through ignorance or the consideration that such yarns meet with ready sale.—J. A. A.

Fisher's 'Birds of Laysan.'—In a paper of some forty pages, illustrated with ten plates, Mr. Walter K. Fisher has given a very interesting account of his ornithological work in the Laysan and Leeward Islands of the Hawaiian Group,¹ which he visited in the summer of 1902, on the expedition of the 'Albatross' to Hawaiian waters for the purpose of deep-sea explorations. Although the cruise lasted from March to August, there seems to have been very little opportunity for on-shore work. The 'Albatross' reached Laysan on May 16 and remained there till the 23d, during which period Mr. Fisher, with Mr. J. O. Snyder, was detailed "to make observations on the bird life of the island and collect such specimens as seemed desirable." Later brief stops were made at French Frigate Shoals, Necker and Bird Islands, but a landing was made only at Necker. In 'The Auk' for October, 1903 (pp. 384-397), Mr. Fisher gave an illustrated account of the forms of bird life peculiar to Laysan, and has contributed to the present number of this journal (pp. 8-20) a paper on the Laysan Albatross.

In the present official report some ten pages are devoted to the itinerary of the trip, including a general account, with illustrations, of the islands visited, and the more striking features of their bird life; this is followed by a systematic list of the 27 species observed, giving detailed accounts of their manner of life on these remote islands. The paper is illustrated with a colored plate of the Necker Island Tern (*Procelsterna saxatilis* Fisher) discovered on this trip, and 52 half-tones made up into nine plates. It is thus an important contribution to the history of island bird life, and especially to that of Laysan and the other islands visited.—J. A. A.

Jones's 'The Birds of Ohio.'²—The first twenty-two pages of this

¹ Birds of Laysan and the Leeward Islands, Hawaiian Group. By Walter K. Fisher. U. S. Fish Commission Bulletin for 1903, pp. 1-39, pll. i-x. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903.

² The Birds of Ohio. A Revised Catalogue. By Lynds Jones, M. Sc., Oberlin College. Ohio State Academy of Science, Special Papers No. 6. 8vo, pp. 141, with map. Oct. 15, 1903.