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Travels in Switzerland, and in the country of Grisons

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T R A V E L S
I N
S W I T Z E R L A N D,
A N D I N T H E
C O U N T R Y O F T H E G R I S O N S :

I N A
S E R I E S O F L E T T E R S
T O
WILLIAM MELMOTH, Esq.

F R O M
WILLIAM COXE, M.A. F.R.S. F.A.S.

Rector of BEMERTON; Member of the Imperial Oeconomical
Society at ST. PETERSBURGH, of the Royal Academy of
Sciences at COPENHAGEN, and Chaplain to His
Grace the DUKE of MARLBOROUGH.

I N T H R E E V O L U M E S.

T H E S E C O N D E D I T I O N.

V O L. I.

L O N D O N:

P R I N T E D F O R T. C A D E L L, I N T H E S T R A N D.

1791.



Head of the BEARDED VULTURE from a Drawing of the Natural Size.

London, Published as the Act directs January 26th 1789, by T. Cadell, Strand.

L E T T E R 58.

Mr. Sprungli's Collection of Swiss Birds—Of the
Bearded Vulture.

MR. Sprungli's cabinet of natural history, is remarkable for the collection of stuffed birds, both local and migratory, that are found in Switzerland.

In 1776 this collection consisted of two hundred specimens; and when I last visited Berne, in 1786, it had received an addition of fifty species.

As naturalists have long expected with impatience an account of this invaluable collection, I obtained from Mr. Sprungli the enclosed catalogue, which will assist me in attempting to form a *Faunula Helvetica* *.

One of the most remarkable birds in Mr. Sprungli's collection, is the *vultur barbatus* of Linnæus, the *vultur aureus* of Gesner, or bearded vulture of the English ornithologists. As many fabulous tales have been related concerning its uncommon strength and rapaciousness; as great confusion has arisen from the variety of names applied by different naturalists to the same bird; and as some travel-

* See the Third volume.

lers have doubted whether this specimen is the large vulture of the Alps, or the golden vulture of Conrad Gesner; I shall here subjoin a description from particulars principally communicated to me by Mr. Sprungli himself, accompanied with a drawing of the head from the natural size.

This specimen was a female bird, caught in the canton of Glarus; it measured from the tip of the beak to the extremity of the tail, six feet six inches French * measure; and eight feet from the tip of one wing to that of the other expanded. It weighed, when first taken, eleven pounds. This bird, though always called a vulture, yet differs from that genus, and is referable to the eagle, in having the head and neck covered with feathers; whereas one of the distinctions of the vulture, according to Linnæus, is that the head is destitute of feathers.

Notwithstanding this distinguishing mark, by which it is referable to the eagle or *falco* genus; yet Linnæus was probably induced to class it with the vultures, from the general form of the body, and shape of the beak, which is the *first essential* characteristic in the genera of birds.

* Six feet eleven inches $\frac{1}{2}$ English, and eight feet six inches $\frac{6}{15}$.

Mr,

Mr. Sprungli, however, is of opinion, that it might be classed between the vulture and the eagle; and Stor * proposes to form a new genus of it, under the name of GYPAETUS, by the following characters:

Rostrum rectum, basi cera instructum setis porrectis confertissimis barbatum; apice autem unco sulcato.

Caput pennis tectum.

The specific character he would define thus:

Gypaetus (grandis) albido-rutilus dorso fuscus, tænia nigra supra et infra oculos.

It inhabits the highest parts of the great chain of the Alps which separates Switzerland from Italy, makes its nest in clefts of rocks inaccessible to man, and usually produces three young ones at a time, sometimes four, if we may judge from that number accompanying the old birds, when they descend into the lower regions for prey. They live on animals which inhabit the Alps, such as the chamois, white hares, marmots, snow hens, kids, and particularly lambs, from which circumstance it is called *lammer-geyer*, or *lamb vulture*.

If common report may be credited, this rapacious creature sometimes attacks even man, and

* See Stor's *Alpen Reisin*, vol. i.

carries off children. Mr. Sprungli, without absolutely denying the possibility of this account, has, notwithstanding all his researches, never been able to ascertain a well-authenticated instance; and thence rather concludes it to be a fable invented by the peasants to frighten their children. This species does not appear but in small companies, usually consisting of the two old birds and their young.

Conrad Gefner has given a short but accurate description of this bird under the name of *vultur aureus*, or gold-geyer*; and an engraving from a skin sent to him from the Grisons. This figure, although rudely executed, yet exhibits with sufficient accuracy the distinguishing characters of the species and genus, such as the configuration of the beak, the legs feathered down to the claws, and particularly the beard. In fine, a comparison with the specimen in Mr. Sprungli's collection evidently proves that it is the same bird.

Since this great naturalist, no other person seems to have described it from nature, except Edwards, under the denomination of the bearded vulture. The description of that bird, and the engraving given by Edwards † from a specimen

* See *Hist. Avium*, edit. Frank. p. 710.

† See tab. 106. of his History.

*

sent

sent from Santa Cruz in Barbary, correspond exactly with the *vultur barbatus* of Sprungli; and the head, if compared with the drawing annexed to this account, will be found to answer sufficiently.

Mr. Sprungli also favoured me with the following remarks, in answer to those travellers who assert, that his specimen is not the large vulture of the Alps, sometimes called, from its *yellowish* plumage, the *vautour jaune*, but a smaller species; because the larger sort measures sometimes fourteen feet, or more, from the tip of one wing to that of the other. He possesses two specimens of this bird; the one a full grown female, from which my description and drawing are taken, measuring eight French feet: the other is a male, but young, and is somewhat less. He has also examined four specimens, none of which measured more than nine feet; but as these several specimens were not full grown males, he is ready to allow, that an instance or two may possibly have occurred, in which this bird may have measured near twelve feet from tip to tip of the wing. Those who give it a greater expansion, have derived their information either from persons who were not naturalists, or from uncertain and exaggerated reports. The same remark may also be applied to the fabulous stories recorded by the peasants, concerning its wonderful strength

as

as well as size. It is likewise to be observed, that the peasants do not confine the name of *lammer-geyer* to this species; but extend it indiscriminately to several large birds of prey, from whence has arisen great confusion of names, and much uncertainty in the accounts of this bird.

Some ornithologists seem to have formed of it several species, which on comparison will appear to be the same, or only varieties of the same species. Thus the bearded vulture, the cinereous vulture, and the fulvous vulture, which Mr. Latham has described as three different species, are probably the same bird as that in Mr. Sprungli's collection. Of the first there can be no doubt, since Mr. Latham refers to the bearded vulture of Edwards, which I have shewn to be that of Mr. Sprungli. The cinereous vulture is described by Latham after Brisson: "Beneath the throat hangs a kind of beard, composed of very narrow feathers like hairs; legs covered with feathers quite to the toes, which are yellow; claws black*." This description accords with the bird in question, and particularly in the beard, which is the distinguishing characteristic.

The fulvous vulture of Latham is the griffin of Buffon: and the French naturalist doubts whether it is not a variety of Gesner's golden

* *Syn.* vol. i. p. 14.

vulture,

vulture, which is proved to be the same as Mr. Sprungli's specimen.

While the most celebrated ornithologists have thus given to the bird different names, they have also in other instances confounded it with other birds, to which it has no other resemblance than that of size, strength, and voracity.

Thus Buffon erroneously conjectures the *vultur gryphus* of Linnæus, or the *condor* * of America, to be the same as the *lammer-geyer*, or vulture of the Alps; whereas the description of the condor given by Linnæus, as well as by those who had seen it, differs entirely from that of the bearded vulture. The condor is described by the Swede as having "the head destitute of feathers, but covered with a slight brown coloured down, with a comb reaching along the top of the head, and having the throat naked and of a

* Mr. Latham, in his Supplement to the General Synopsis of Birds, p. 1. seems also to adopt the conjecture of Buffon, in classing the Lammer-geyer and Condor under the same species; though he confesses, "that it still remains dubious, whether the Lammer-geyer be the same with the Condor, or a mere variety of the Bearded Vulture." He adds also, with a candour which does him honour, "It is much to be feared, that other authors, as well as myself, have greatly confounded the species of Vultures; for being, like the Falcon tribe, long lived, their plumage puts on a great variety of drefs, sufficient to deceive those who have hitherto attempted to discriminate them."

reddish colour." Frezier, in his Voyage to the South Seas, also thus describes the condor:—"We one day killed a bird of prey called a condor, which was nine feet from the end of one wing to the end of the other, and had a brown comb or crest, but not jagged like a cock's: the fore part of its throat is red without feathers, like a turkey; and they are generally large and strong enough to take up a lamb. In order to get them from the flock, they draw themselves into a circle, and advance towards them with their wings extended, that being drove together, and too close, they may not be able to defend themselves; then they pick them out and carry them off. Garcilasso says, there are some in Peru sixteen feet from the point of one wing to the other, and that a certain nation of Indians adored them."

Mr. Latham seems also to be no less mistaken, when, on the authority of the translator of the Abbè Fortis's Travels into Dalmatia, he conceives the *vultur percnopterus* of Linnæus to be the *vautour des Alpes* described by Conrad Gesner, and the same as Mr. Sprungli's specimen; whereas, on the authority of Hasselquist, who saw great numbers of the *percnopteri* in Egypt, the head of that bird is "naked and wrinkled;" and Ray says, the feet are naked; two characters that essentially distinguish it from the bearded vulture,

vulture, in which the head is wholly covered with feathers, and also the feet down to the ends of the claws.

The bearded vulture, besides inhabiting those Alps which separate Italy from Switzerland, is found in Corsica and Sardinia. M. de Hahn informed Mr. Sprungli, that he saw a bird in Corsica which was wounded in the wing, and shewed as a sight, that was unquestionably the same as Mr. Sprungli's stuffed specimen: and M. Lettel, in his Natural History of Sardinia, gives a figure and description of the same bird, under the name of *bartgeyer*, or bearded vulture. It has also been found in the mountains of Africa, since Mr. Edwards received his specimen from Santa Cruz in Barbary. It is also frequent on Caucasus and the mountains of Dauria, or the south-eastern part of Siberia, as we learn from the travels of both Pallas and Gmelin.

You will perhaps be surprised not to find among the Swiss birds in the annexed catalogue, the *aigle blanc*, or *aquila alba* of * Briffon; the *falco Italicus* †, and the *falco montanus* of the same ‡; as particularly *zwitzer-falk*, the German name of the latter, seems necessarily to imply that it must be a Swiss bird: Mr. Sprungli how-

* I. p. 424.

† Ib. p. 336.

‡ Ib. p. 352.

ever assured me, that he never had been able to discover any of these species in the Alps; that probably the *aigle blanc*, if it exists, is a variety of the chrysaetos; and that both Briffon and Willoughby do not cite Gesner for their descriptions of the *falco italicus*, but those only who have never been in the Alps.

Of the crows it is worthy of observation, that the *corvus graculus* of Linnæus, or *coracias* of Briffon, is faithfully represented by Mr. Pennant, in his British Zoology, under the denomination of the red-legged crow. It is the same bird of which Conrad Gesner * has given a figure, and to which he applies the German appellations, *taha*, *steintahen*, *steinkrae*, and which he justly suspects to be the *cornix cornubiæ*, or the red-legged crow. The *pyrrhocorax* of Gesner, which some ornithologists seem to have confounded with the *corvus graculus*, is however very different, and is called by Linnæus *corvus pyrrhocorax*. Both these species inhabit the Alps, but the *pyrrhocorax* is the most common; and these appear, according to Mr. Sprungli's observations, to be the only species of the crow genus that prefer to all others alpine situations. As to the *corvus eremita* of Linnæus, Mr. Sprungli ac-

* *Hist. Av. ed. Frank.* p. 468.

knowledges

knowledges it is totally unknown to him. All the ornithologists indeed mention this bird as an inhabitant of the Alps, on the authority of Conrad Gefner, who describes it under the name of *corvus sylvaticus*, accompanied with a figure, which has not the least resemblance to a crow, but rather to a curlew; yet Gefner's description of it is much too imperfect to assist us in ascertaining the bird of which he treats.

L E T T E R 59.

Mr. Wytttenbach's Collection—Account of the Chain of Hills and Alps seen from the environs of Berne.

THE Reverend Mr. Wytttenbach of Berne, possesses a very curious cabinet, principally relating to the natural history of Switzerland, and to the canton of Berne in particular. It contains specimens of several thousand plants, among which is a large number of the alpine