

WINTER NOTES ON ORNITHOLOGY.

By Prof C. B. WILSON.

I.

The best time in which to commence the study of ornithology is winter, paradoxical as such a statement may seem. We are accustomed, and rightly too, to associate our ideas of wealth in bird life with the coming of spring, when soft vernal breezes blow through the woods, when the leaves begin to open and the early flowers to blossom, when everything in short seems ready to burst with the potent life and energy it contains. But this very wealth and pregnancy forms the great stumbling block which clogs the threshold of every department of science, and effectually hinders the entrance of many who would otherwise find within both healthful recreation, and a never failing source of pleasure in all their varied intercourse with nature. But the mere fact that there is much to be mastered, and that too before one can lay claim to even a limited knowledge, should afford a serious obstacle to no one: it is rather an incentive, enhancing the value of such knowledge when once acquired, and not the difficulty of its acquisition.

At this season of the year, however, we escape the dilemma completely, for the vast majority of the birds have long since migrated to the warmer south and the few that remain fairly force themselves upon our attention, their very scarcity rendering them the more conspicuous at a time when all animate nature seems to gather together for the sake of the warmth and genial cheer afforded by companionship. We are out of doors less in winter and so live more inwardly, becoming thereby both natural and necessarily more hospitable and social, drawing nearer the objects of our study which become for the time

being our book companions. We study them as only they should be studied, as fellow-beings sharing life in common with ourselves, and there is no necessity of ending these useful lives for the sake of gratifying our curiosity.

There is a certain indefinable yet intensely potent charm in finding so much that is alive and ruggedly vigorous, when to the careless or indifferent nature seems to present only dreariness and death. Enough of life itself, or its immediate products is always at hand, even in the coldest winter weather, and is well worth all the attention we are willing and able to bestow. Fortunately there is another fact which also tends to diminish the obstacles in our progress. There is no need of lengthy descriptions preparatory to the science. Even the varietal tyro can tell a bird at a glance and will never mistake it for any other member of the animal kingdom. This individuality is also paralleled by that of the species so that we may readily distinguish between a crow, a hawk, an owl and a robin. But our work is only begun when this distinction has been clearly established. Individuality of course reaches its acme in the lives and habits of individuals. These must be studied separately, no sure nor even probable knowledge can be drawn from relationship.

There are about 30 species that reside with us in these northern climes the year round. To these add 20 more that straggle downward in the winter from regions yet farther north, and we have all that can be met with under the most favorable circumstances. It need not, and it does not take long to master these 50 species, and once mastered they furnish us the key that will unlock all the mysteries of the feathered world. We shall then become acquainted with one member of nearly all the