

The Birds of Montreal and Vicinity.

PAPER III.

"The melancholy days are come, the saddest of the year,
Of wailing winds, and naked woods, and meadows brown and sere;
Heaped in the hollows of the groves, the wither'd leaves lie dead—
They rustle to the eddying gust, and to the rabbits' tread—
The robin and the wren are flown, and from the shrubs the jay,
And from the wood-top, calls the crow, through all the gloomy day."

Family: STRIGIDAE.—The Owls.

"Form usually short and heavy, with the head disproportionately large, and frequently furnished with erectile tufts of feathers resembling the ears of quadrupeds. General organization adapted to vigorous and noiseless, but not rapid flight, and to the capture of animals in the morning and evening twilight. Eyes usually very large, directed forwards, and in the greater number of species formed for seeing by twilight, or in the night. Bill rather strong, curved, nearly concealed by projecting bristle-like feathers; wings generally long; outer edges of primary quills fringed; legs generally rather short, and in all species, except in one Asiatic genus (*Ketupa*), more or less feathered, generally densely. Cavity of the ear very large. Face encircled by a more or less perfect disc of short rigid feathers, which, with the large eyes, gives to these birds an entirely peculiar and frequently cat-like expression. Female larger than the male.

There are about one hundred and fifty species of owls, which are found in all parts of the world, of which about forty are inhabitants of the continent of America and its islands. The larger species subsist on small quadrupeds and birds, but by far the majority almost exclusively prey on insects. Though the larger number are nocturnal, a few species are strictly diurnal, and in their habits seem to approach the birds of the preceding family.

Sub-Family: BUBONINAE.—The Horned Owls.

Head large, with erectile and prominent ear-tufts. Eyes large; facial disc not complete above the eyes and bill; legs, feet and claws usually very strong.

This division contains numerous species, some of which are very large, but the greater number are medium sized or small. They inhabit all parts of the world except "Australia."

Genus: BUBO.—Cuvier.

This genus includes the large horned owls, or cat owls, as they are sometimes called. These birds are most numerous in Asia and Africa, and there are in all countries about fifteen species.

GREAT HORNED OWL. (*Bubo Virginianus*, Gmelin.) This is a very large and powerful bird; female measures in length, 21 to 25 inches; male, 18 to 21 inches. Colour on the back of head, body and tail, dark brown, with bands of yellowish brown intermixed. Facial discs and under portion of body and tail of a yellowish brown colour with darker horizontal bands. Breast with a large white patch extending like a collar nearly round the neck. The ear-tufts, or horns as they are sometimes called, are formed of large feathers, and project upwards from the sides of the head, above the ears; they are of a dark, and in some cases blackish-brown colour.

The colour is said to vary somewhat, the white on the breast and neck being one of the most distinguishing, or constant, characters.

"This beautiful and majestic bird was called by Buffon, *Duc de Virginie*; by the Cree Indians, a tribe in the North-West, *Nelotky—Omeseu*, and according to Sir John Richardson, by the Indians of the plains of the Saskatchewan, *Otowack Oho*. The savages, it is said, hold it in great respect, as a bird of evil omen, and carry this superstition so far as to be displeased with anyone who imitates the unearthly hootings of this midnight marauder.

In the "American Ornithology" Wilson writes as follows concerning this species:—"His favorite residence is in the dark solitudes of deep swamps, covered with a growth of gigantic timber; and here, as soon as evening draws on, and mankind retire to rest, he sends forth such sounds as

seem scarcely to belong to this world, startling the solitary pilgrim as he slumbers by his forest fire,

'Making night hideous.'

"Along the mountainous shores of the Ohio, and amidst the deep forests of Indiana, alone, and reposing in the woods, this ghostly watchman has frequently warned me of the approach of morning, and amused me with his singular exclamations, sometimes sweeping down an "around my fire, uttering a loud and sudden *Waugh O! Waugh O!* sufficient to have alarmed a whole garrison. He has other nocturnal solos, no less melodious; one of which very strikingly resembles the half-suppressed screams of a person suffocated, or throttled, and cannot fail of being exceedingly entertaining to a lonely benighted traveller in the midst of an Indian wilderness.

"There is something in the character of the owl so reclusive, solitary and mysterious, something so discordant in the tones of its voice, heard only amid the silence and gloom of night, and in the most lonely and sequestered situations, as to have strongly impressed the minds of mankind in general with sensations of awe and abhorrence of the whole tribe. The poets have indulged freely in this general prejudice; and in their descriptions and delineations of midnight storms and gloomy scenes of nature, the owl is generally introduced to heighten the horror of the picture. Ignorance and superstition, in all ages, and in all countries, listen to the voice of the owl, and even contemplate its physiognomy, with feelings of disgust and a kind of fearful awe. The priests, or conjurers, among some of our Indian nations have taken advantage of the reverential horror for this bird, and have adopted the Great Horned Owl, the subject of the present account, as the symbol or emblem of their office. "Among the Creeks," says Mr. Bartram, in his *Travels*, p. 504, "the junior priests, or students, constantly wear a white mantle, and have a Great Horned Owl skin cased and stuffed very ingeniously, so well executed as almost to appear like the living bird, having large sparkling glass beads or buttons fixed in the head for eyes. These insignia of wisdom and divination they wear sometimes as a crest on the top of the head, at other times the image sits on the arm, or is borne on the hand. These bachelors are also distinguished from the other people by their taciturnity, grave and solemn countenance, dignified step, and singing to themselves songs or hymns in a low sweet voice, as they stroll about the town."

"Nothing is a more effectual cure for superstition than a knowledge of the general laws and productions of nature, nor more forcibly leads our reflections to the first great self-existent Cause of all, to whom our reverential awe is then humbly devoted, and not to any of His dependent creatures. With all the gloomy habits and ungracious tones of the owl, there is nothing in this bird supernatural or mysterious, or more than that of a simple bird of prey, formed for feeding by night—like many other animals—and of reposing by day. The harshness of its voice, occasioned by the width and capacity of its throat, may be intended by Heaven as an alarm and warning to the birds and animals on which it preys, to secure themselves from danger. The voices of all carnivorous birds and animals are also observed to be harsh and hideous, probably for this very purpose."

"The Great Horned Owl is said to feed on poultry, hares, squirrels, mice, partridges, small birds of all kinds, and a dead fish thrown up on the shore is regarded as quite an addition to the 'bill of fare,' and, "as he hunts while others sleep, no doubt his larder is generally well supplied." The present species is said to pair early in spring, and usually selects a large branch, not far from the trunk of a tree, upon which to construct its nest. The latter is composed, externally, of crooked sticks, which are piled up to a considerable height. The inside of the nest is lined with dried leaves and a few feathers. The external diameter of the structure measures about three feet. The eggs, from three to six in number, are almost globular in form, about the size of a hen's egg, and of a dull white colour. "The young birds remain in the nest until fully fledged, and afterwards follow their parents for a considerable time, uttering a mournful sound to induce them to supply them with food. They acquire the full plumage of the old birds in the first spring, and until then are considerably lighter, with more dull