John Stuart to Thomas Pennant, on the plants and birds of Rannoch

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Killin Jan. 19th. 1773 —

Dear Sir

I received yours of Decr. 4th several days ago, but as I wrote you on the 23d. of that month a long letter in which the desire you exprest was complied with, I was not in any hurry to trouble you with another. About two hours ago however I was favoured with yours of Jan. 8th., by which I was surprized to find that you had not received it. I now suspect that Mr. Jackson, to whom I sent it inclosed in a Cover, found it of such a size that he could not transmitt it to you by Post. If he has not, I dare say he would embrace the speediest method of conveying it to you another way. For the management of that affair I depended entirely on his prudence.

I am truly sorry that you should be thus obliged to write a second and a third letter before you received any answer. Be assured however, if there is at any time a delay of this kind, it must proceed from want of opportunity or some unavoidable avocations, and not from any failure in the desire of being of any little service to you in my power.

The Astragalus Uralensis, as far as I could discover, is not a native of Rannoch. But if you incline, in the new edition of your Scotch Tour,[1] to give figures of any of the other plants observed in that country, I am apt to think the Arbutus uva ursi should be one of them, as not many years ago it was here first observed to be of British growth. The berries which it bears are called in the Galic language breilleaga-nan-con i.e. dog's berries. They resemble very much those of the vaccinium vitis idæa, which the Highlanders call simply breilleaga, and reckon much more wholesome. When there happened at any time to be a want of all other food, it is said that these last have been frequently the salutary means of preserving life.

For the remarks I have sent you on your *Scotch Tour*, which I submitt entirely to your own superior judgement to make what use of you think most proper, I forgot to hint that in the 86th. page there is a small mistake. You mention there that Lord Breadalbane's tenants carry his coal for him "from Perth". They have for many years past however been in the practice of carrying these coals from Crieff or some of the Coal-works south of it, but never from Perth.

I likewise omitted in the list of birds, which I sent you in a former letter, to write down the Osprey, though I saw one of them in Rannoch, and it is well known to breed in this same country, and added, if I mistake not, it's Galic name (Ioluir'-uisg') to the Sea Eagle or F: ossifragus *Lin.*, a bird which the Highlanders distinguish by no particular name that I know from another large grey Eagle, which may possibly be the Golden one.

As you are to delay the publishing of *a new ed. of your B. Zoology* till next harvest I hope it may be in my power to add before that time to the List you received of Scotch birds to come to the knowledge of more of their Galic names, and be better ascertained with regard to others which I have already had. Among a people, who are unaccustomed to distinguish nicely the different species of animals, you may believe there must be sometimes a confusion of names.

I am obliged to you with regard to the birds I sent you a description of. As you inform that one of the ducks is certainly the female of Teal, so I had little doubt, even before the receipt of your letter, but the other, believed to be the female Golden-Eye. About the middle of Nov$^{r.}$ I got a male of this last species that was shot upon Loch-tay. It weighed two pounds and two drams. Upon dissecting it I observed an extraordinary expansion about the middle of it's aspera arteria, which a female shot about the end of the same month wanted altogether. When the lungs were inflated with air, the opening was of an oval figure, the transverse axis of which was about an inch and a half long, and the lesser axis three quarters of an inch, whereas the windpipe itself above and below that was not above three tenths of an inch in diameter. In it's collapsed and ordinary state, the rings or annular cartilages of this part folded upon one another, like those of a hoop petticoat. What the intention of such an uncommon organization may be I cannot comprehend, if it be not perhaps to assist in making some extraordinary cry or noise, which from *Linnæus's* specifick name of clangula I should be apt to think this duck accustomed to.

When in Rannoch I got a sportsman in that country engaged to send me from time to time such specimens as he could procure of their most remarkable birds or other animals. About the beginning of the last month he brought me the skins of two large Eagles which were shot ten or twelve days before that on the carrion of a dog, for which as well as for cat's flesh they discover it seems a greater fondness than for any other kind of food. He lay in wait for them in a concealment he had for himself hard by the dog. Though the Eagles were so excessively quick-sighted that the only tolerable chance he had for killing was by shooting as soon as they alighted before they had any time to look about them, yet he found that they were not frequently the first in observing the prey. They commonly came in consequence of hooded crows and other birds flocks to it. He had at the same time the most convincing proof of their exquisite sense of hearing. Did a raven but once croak, he might lay his account that, if there was a single Eagle then in that part of the country, it would not fail to make use directly of the signal. — The bill of one of these birds I had from him is two inches and a half long, of a light bluish white at the base, bluish black at the point; cere yellow; from the eyes to the nostrils covered only with short black bristles; the back, throat, lower side of the neck, breast and belly all of a deep blackish brown, with some mixture of rust colour; the crown of the head and upper side of the neck of a light tawny colour; the quils, secondary feathers and coverts of the wings white at the base, above of a deep blackish brown; the tail thirteen inches long, with a broad band of white on it's upper part, and of a blackish brown colour at the end; the thighs very gross and brawny; feet covered with feathers to the very toes, measuring below the knee near four inches round and just above the toes near three inches and a half; toes yellow; hind claw two inches long, claw of the first fore-toe an inch and eight tenths, of the second an inch and four tenths, of the third one inch; from the point of the hind to that of the middle claw eight inches. — Whether this Eagle is in any measure a variety of the Ringtail Eagle *B.Z.* or Falco fulous of *Lin.* I cannot say, but I have little doubt of it's being the same with the melainætos of *Sibbald*, and black Eagle of *Martin*. By the Highlanders it is called Ioluire dhubh i.e. the black eagle. In the summer it is seldom seen in the lower grounds, builds it's nest often in the clefts of high rocks in the neighbourhood of Deer-forests, and is one of the principal enemies of the fawn, white hare and tarmachan.

The other I have got from Rannoch is the Sea Eagle or F: ossifragus. The extent of each of it's wings from the body to the point is about three feet and a half; bill from the angle of the mouth above three inches long, below the nostrils an inch and a half broad; the short strong hairs or bristles immediately below the bill hardly so numerous or so remarkable as in the Ringtail Eagle; the spaces between the eyes and nostrils cover'd with the same; tail thirteen inches long; the legs yellow, feathered on the sides and fore-part but little below the knees, but bare on the hind part from the middle of the joint; middle of the thigh six inches round; legs below the knee three inches and a half round; and just above the toes two inches and eight tenths; length of the hind claw an inch and a half, of that of the first fore-toe an inch and a half, of the second an inch and three tenths, and of the third an inch and one tenth; from the point of the hind claw to that of the middle fore-claw seven inches

Eagles were very destructive and much more numerous in Rannoch and the neighbouring countries a few years ago than at present. The Commissioners of the annexed estates very judiciously offered a crown of reward for each of these noxious birds that should be killed. The consequence was that in a short space of time such numbers were destroyed that the Hon$^{e.}$ board thought the demands made upon them on that score too heavy. They have now therefore judged it proper to reduce to three shillings and sixpence a reward, which, if they meant it should have the proper effect, they ought rather to have increased in proportion to the growing scarcity of these pernicious birds.

In my last letter I told you that I sent word to M^rs.^ Campbell of Achalader to treat one of the skins of the white hares that were killed for her, in order to be sent to you. That same day I afterwards happened to see M^r.^ Campbell himself, and let him know that you wanted a skin of that kind should be preserved for you; upon which he very readily assured me that care should be taken to keep the very best of them for you. I expected therefore that it was to be sent to me in order to be properly stuft. From a desire however of serving you, and some mistake in the message, M^r.^ Campbell sent it directly to Edin^r.^ to D^r.^ Ramsay's care, trusting it to him to get it stuffed and then forwarded to you. The head and all the external parts were left intire. The fore-head and one of the eyes had some blood about them. In other respects the fur was as well preserved and as pure and white as any I have seen.

I am affraid however that it must have been considerably hurt in the carriage. If it has, I have hopes that a new specimen may be still procured some time this winter; and if it is, I shall endeavour to get it stuft for you of the natural size, and fixt in the attitude proper for drawing. The figure you have already given of the white hare in your S. Tour and I suppose in your Zoology, is perhaps the worst in either of those books.

I must now conclude with returning to yourself and family all the compliments of the season. I shall rejoice to hear the two agreeable young ‘"Prattlers"’ are in health.[2] — I hope Lewis has by this time recovered some marrow to his bones, happy in being no longer in hazard of starving, far from his beloved Downing, in the midst of tempest-beaten barrenness; and that Moses possesses his soul in peace, perfectly secure from all the dangers of the swelling deep.

I am, D^r.^ Sir, with great esteem, your most obliged and most humble Servant

John Stuart

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To

Thomas Pennant Esq^r.^

at Downing

Flintshire

Birds

M^r^ Stuart

Editorial Notes

[1] Stuart's advice probably relates to revisions of the new edition of *A tour in Scotland. MDCCLXIX*, which would be published the following year, in 1774.

[2] Stuart is referring to Pennant's son and daughter by his first wife, Elizabeth (née Falconer), David and Arabella, who Pennant alludes to in the last lines of the *Tour in Scotland 1769*: 'finished my journey with a rapture of which no fond parent can be ignorant, that of being again restored to two innocent prattlers after an absence equally regretted by all parties.'p.220.