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BY

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CHAPTER I.

MAMMALS.—THE WATER-SHREW, THE OTTER, AND THE WATER-VOLE.

We shall begin our examination of the fauna of British lakes and rivers with the Mammals, as being the most highly-organized, and therefore meriting

THE WATER-SHREW.

most attention. Among these the order *Insectivora* occupies a prominent place, and there are several familiar examples to be encountered in nearly every stream. There is, for instance, the Water-shrew, whose habits are worthy of careful attention. The Water-shrew (*Sorex fodiens*, Jennings) is somewhat

larger than the common shrew, from which it is distinguished by being darker on its upper portions, which are separated by an abrupt line from the lighter or lower part: its length, including the tail, is $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The nose is flattened, and it has very short round ears, with three internal lobes; the tail is nearly square; the fur is very velvety, and varies in colour from black to dark brown; the incisor teeth are bright red-brown at the tip. This little animal is widely distributed in England and Scotland; it makes a burrow on the banks of a stream or pond, the mouth of which is easy of access from the water; it dives with facility and swims with great rapidity, making but a slight ripple on the water, so as not to disturb the insects which form its food. I have dissected four, and found their stomachs to contain nothing but the remains of water-beetles, dragon-flies, and their larvæ. About twenty years ago, in Sussex, I had a good opportunity of examining these animals. I noticed a family of four, two half-grown, leave a burrow, the entrance of which would about admit the thumb. The old ones taking to the water, swam down the stream, while the young followed each other in diving. There is wonderful benefit to the naturalist in being able to move without noise, and observe without being observed. If a man goes to a marsh and remains for some time perfectly still, he will in most cases get an insight into the habits of animals which the talkative or bustling observer cannot do. This was the experience of Audubon, of Waterton, and of others whom I have known, of less note. Remembering these precepts, I threw myself full-

length on the grass and waited for a quarter of an hour, by which time the whole family of water-shrews had returned laden to their hole, each carrying a water-beetle. This was a small experience, but surely one worth a quarter of an hour's silent observation.

Mr. Dovaston, in the second volume of the "Magazine of Natural History," thus describes these animals:—"On a delicious evening far in April, 1825, a little before sunset, strolling in my orchard beside a pool, and looking into the clear water for insects I expected about that time to come out, I was surprised by seeing what I momentarily imagined to be a *Dytiscus marginalis*, or some very large beetle, dart with rapid motion, and suddenly disappear. Laying myself down cautiously and motionless on the grass, I soon, to my delight and wonder, observed it was a mouse. I repeatedly marked it glide from the bank under water and bury itself in the mass of leaves at the bottom; I mean the leaves that had fallen off the trees in autumn, and which lay very thick in the mud. It very shortly returned, and entered the bank, occasionally putting its long sharp nose out of the water, and paddling close to the edge. This it repeated at very frequent intervals from place to place, seldom going more than two yards from the side, and always returning in about half a minute. I presume it sought and obtained some insect or other food among the rubbish and leaves, and retired to consume it. Sometimes it would run a little on the surface, and sometimes timidly and hastily come ashore, but with the greatest caution, and instantly plunge in again. During the whole sweet spring of that fine year I constantly

visited my new acquaintance. When under water he looks gray, on account of the pearly cluster of minute air-bubbles that adhere to his fur and bespangle him all over. He swims very rapidly, and though he appears to *dart*, his very nimble wriggle is clearly discernible."

As an example of the order *Carnivora* we give the Otter (*Lutra vulgaris*), the most important of our aquatic mammalia. It is allied to the weasels, among which Linnæus classed it. It is found from $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 feet in length, and varies in colour according to age and locality, from grayish-brown to chocolate on the back, while the under parts of the neck and breast are grayish or brownish white. The head is very wide and flat, the muzzle short, broad, and round, with a thick upper lip and a flat nose; the neck is very thick, almost as much so as the thorax. The body is very much elongated and flexible, having almost a snake-like movement; its feet have five sharp prehensile claws, which are webbed somewhat like those of a seal; the tail is long, thick, and muscular, and is most important in the economy of the animal, as facilitating its steering and swimming, for it acts both as a rudder and as a scull, a peculiarity connecting it with the Fishes, although its tail is not nearly of the importance that a fish's tail is. It would be possible for an otter to live without its tail, not so a fish. The teeth of the Otter are very powerful, which any one finds to his cost who has the misfortune to be bitten by the animal; they seize with the ferocity and tenacity of a ferret, but from their much greater size with vastly more power. The fur of the Otter is extremely serviceable,

comparable to beaver and sealskin in many respects, although inferior in lustre and richness of colour; but brings a very high price when it is in a condition —a thing rare in England—suitable for making high class trimmings for ladies' jackets. The longer hairs are somewhat coarse, and these in the manufacturing process are removed, so that the fur is left more silky than anything the human loom can weave. The Otter feeds almost entirely on fishes, in rivers, but has no objection to crustacean dainties at sea. It swims with great rapidity on the surface of the water and can readily dive below its surface; but for these rapid movements it could not at all times obtain a plentiful supply of fish. It brings its prey to land to devour it, for it could not eat it in the water without swallowing a great quantity of that liquid. It is this habit that renders it a matter of but little difficulty to shoot otters, if the sportsman knows the time to be still.

The Otter is dainty, eating only the more juicy and fleshy portions of the fish. Its lair is often thickly strewed with half-devoured fish. A Mr. Morgan O'Brian, a gamekeeper in the county of Kerry, wrote to me many years ago an interesting letter, in which he described the habits of the Otter in his county. There was one remarkable lair on the banks of the Feale which was occupied by a family of five otters; it was situated on a peninsula which ran into the river; the stronghold was under the root of a large willow tree, very difficult of access to dogs: there had always been otters there in his knowledge, which extended over twenty years. For five successive summers he used to visit the peninsula daily, the first thing in the morning,