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Autor(en): **Gordon, Seton**

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ALPINE BIRDS AND FLOWERS.

By SETON GORDON.

(This interesting article which appeared in the 'Manchester Guardian' some time ago is herewith reproduced by courtesy of the Editor.)

The visitor to Zermatt, a village, or perhaps rather a small country town, set high in the Southern Alps, finds himself at the gateway to a land of beauty, a land of snowy peaks, of great glaciers, of milky torrents, and of Alpine flowers.

I reached Zermatt during the last days in June. In the Isle of Skye I had left sunshine, clear air, and daylight throughout the night. At Zermatt I found the sun and clear air, but darkness at midnight, and indeed two hours before it, replaced the northern twilight.

As compared with the Scottish hills, there are few tarns or lakes in the high Alps. One such tarn lies at the foot of the Matterhorn at an altitude of 8,200 feet above the sea. Beside this clear lochan (as we should call it in Scotland), named Schwarzsee, is a small chapel, sacred to those who have lost their lives upon the Matterhorn which towers grim and terrible above it even in the sunshine of a summer day.

It was here that I made my acquaintance with two birds new to me — the Alpine chough and the snowfinch. This chough is white-billed and not, like the British chough, red-billed. Its flight as I saw it in the early morning when sun was contending with cloud in a fairyland of flowers, was singularly delicate and graceful, the wing tips being raised eagle-fashion as their owner sailed gracefully over the clear windless waters of the dark lochan. The snowfinches were feeding young. Both cock and hen seemed very similar in plumage — black and white like a snow bunting, but rather larger in size, with perhaps longer wings and less grace in flight. A third bird was haunting this high country — the water pipit, a bird not unlike the meadow pipit, and with the same joy flights high into the air, and the same descents in song. I saw no ptarmigan nor eagle, but in a hole in the rocks at 10,000 feet, which may have been marmot-haunted, were feathers which may have been those of a ptarmigan.

To one familiar with the Alpine flowers of the high Scottish hills, with the flowers of high Norway, and of the tundra of Iceland, a visit to the Schwarzsee, and a night spent beside it, was a memorable experience. At the end of June, after a rainless fortnight, the flowers were bewildering in beauty and variety. The snow-line was then roughly 10,000 feet. Here, at the edge of the melting snow, the purple mountain saxifrage, a plant which flowers in the Scottish hills in late March and April, had opened its flowers where a few days before snow had been lying. I saw one particularly beautiful specimen growing in shingle where no other plant flowered, near a clear hill stream. The plant was small and there were few blooms upon it, but these were remarkable for the richness of their deep red colour. The cushion pink — another old friend of the Highlands — was in association with the purple mountain saxifrage. The flowers were perhaps rather smaller and the flowering cushions

more dense than in Scotland; I saw a single flower of the purple saxifrage without any leaf opening in the heart of a green cushion of *silene acaulis*, the cushion pink with strange effect. Perhaps the most beautiful flower on these Alpine slopes is one that is I think unknown on Scottish hills — *Gentiana verna*. Like other Alpine gentians, it closes its flowers when the sun leaves them: when the sun is warm and the flowers are open the eye is almost dazzled by the intense quality of their blue, especially when the species grows in a little colony, the flowers touching one another. Among them often flowered the beautiful anemone *sulphurea*, its large graceful flowers scenting the breeze.

In the spray of mountain streams one saw the flowers of *Primula farinosa*, a cousin of the rare *Primula Scotica* that is found in parts of Northern Scotland. The pink of this primula often blended with that of the cushion pink, with which it was often closely associated. In the same damp sites grew the large-flower *ranunculus glacialis*, a white flowered buttercup that I had seen at sea-level in Spitsbergen and at over 6,000 feet above the sea in Norway. There was also to be seen the beautiful white-flowered Alpine butterwort. Above these flowers the snowfinches fluttered and the choughs sailed.

Less expected birds were the swifts that descended before sunset towards Zermatt, flying from the direction of the snowy Matterhorn. It is likely that in fine sunny weather swifts regularly visit the Matterhorn summit, as they visit the Cairngorm summits in June and July. Of the larger Alpine swift I saw no sign, nor do I think it is found in the district. The Matterhorn had been climbed on only two occasions this year, but a young American with a guide passed me, intending to pass the night at Hörnli Hut and set out to scale its precipitous sides at dawn.

When morning broke the mist was dense; when it partially cleared the silence was broken by the song of a snowfinch and the shrill whistle, once repeated, of an Alpine chough. The gentians were closed and the dew was thick on the flower cushions of *silene acaulis*. The edelweiss is a plant that is generally associated with dangerous precipices, but here, in almost level country, I came upon a colony of these strange and much prized flowers. Such widespread damage has been worked by collectors that the Swiss Government now prohibits the gathering and exporting of the roots.

The mist was still close as I descended. On a moraine the bear-berry and juniper plants were brown and lifeless, the result of the prolonged frost of an almost snowless winter. When I came upon the first Swiss pine it twisted through the mist, vast and nebulous. Soon came the Alpine rhododendron zone, the flowers rosy, the buds a less striking pink. This plant has also suffered from the absence of snow to protect it against the keen frost of this high altitude.

At ten o'clock the mist thinned and the cone of the Matterhorn stood out, snowy and immense, against the deep blue of the sky. Through my telescope I could see two tiny figures, one in a white shirt, and I thought of the American and his sturdy, clean-shaven guide, and that the Matterhorn had now been climbed for the third time this summer.