

The Reverend Lea's Curiosities

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The Reverend Josiah Turner Lea of Far Forest (1822-1899) held many curiosities in the vicarage with which he entertained naturalist visitors. He was an original member of the Worcester Naturalists' Club and published his Personal Observations on the Natural History of Wyre. Here he describes some curiosities to members of the Severn Valley Field Club in a talk on 6th August 1885 at a place near the "Hopyard" in the Wyre Forest.

"...the 'Hopyard' where has been the only instance of the "Merlin" hawks breeding that I have known...It was the year when fishing up the brook with my brother, we found the body of a male Merlin hawk severed from the head (which we never found), and which must have been clean cut by the telegraph wires, and the impetus of the flight of the bird must have carried it to the place we found it, a distance of over 60 yards...I know of many instances of woodcocks being killed in the same way."

The Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) is now only a winter visitor to Worcestershire. The Long Mynd in Shropshire is the only place in the Marches where these falcons now nest (Alott 2011). At the edge of its northern breeding range, it was obviously a rare and notable occurrence, even in Lea's day. However, Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) still breed in the Wyre Forest. Is the decapitation really down to telegraph wires, or could it be gamekeepers, or another avian predator.

"I have in my possession an adder of 30½ inches long the largest, ut opinor, known...I have another preserved of 27 inches... in a bottle of Spirits of Wine: both of these were killed in these parts."

Over 35 years Lea examined 500 adders (*Vipera berus*) that had been killed, and in 1888 alone dissected some 50 specimens. More recently, an adder slough found in the Forest in 1984 was estimated to be just over 31 inches (79 cm), Lea found the average size for a female adder to be just over 21 ins or 55 cm (Sylvia Sheldon 1995).

"I have also in my possession a remarkable case of birds, viz.: the male and female hybrid inter the black game and the pheasant, both killed in the Forest, though not in the same year."

Black Game, or Black Grouse (*Tetrao tetrix*) as they are called these days, were native and became extinct in the Wyre Forest in 1895 (Harrison & Harrison 2005). Pheasants (*Phasianus colchicus*), you may have noticed, are not! Three other cases of Black Grouse x Pheasant hybrids were also noted from other places in Shropshire in the first half of the 19th Century. It was noted that both species involved were polygamous, and hybrids were probably

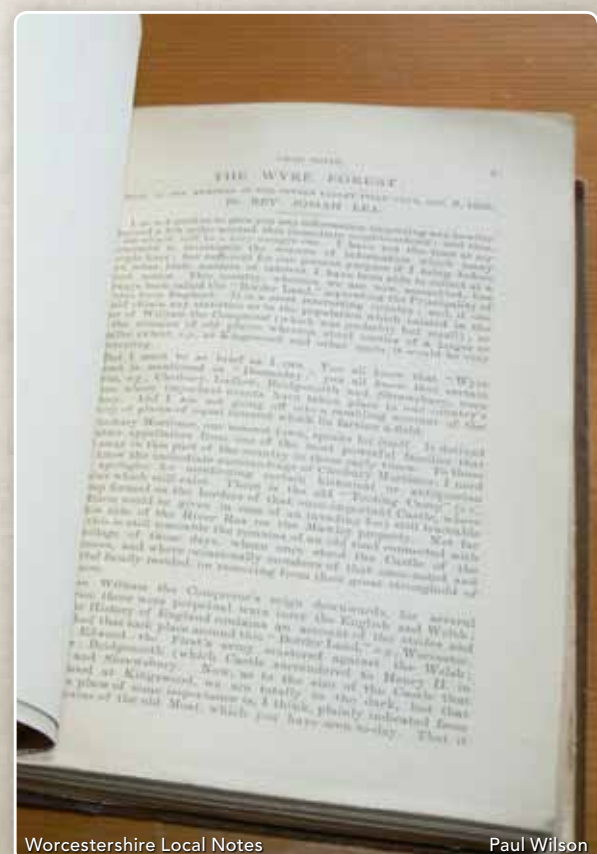
attributed to grey hens (female black grouse) straying into Pheasant cover (Beckwith 1893). Black Grouse like a mixture of heath and woodland. Lea implied that in his day the Wyre Forest had plenty of heath:

"Where are the grand old oaks?...cut down for fuel ...to smelt the iron-stone...and now you see no trees, no swine, but plenty of heath and heather."

However, Lea seems to have held a romantic view of the Forests pre-industrial bosky past, but at least he would be gratified to see that the swine are back!

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- Worcestershire Local Notes is a collection of various transactions and other papers bound circa 1909 for the personal collection of Francis Christina Baldwyn-Childe (died 1930 aged 97). Primarily an antiquarian, concentrating on her own family estates at Kyre Park and Kinlet, she had a keen interest in the activities of local naturalist and field clubs.



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