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Short Sketches of the Wild Sports & Natural History of the Highlands

Charles St. John

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From the Introduction.
I HAVE lived for several years in the northern counties of Scotland, and during the last four or five in the province of Moray, a part of the country peculiarly adapted for collecting facts in Natural History, and for becoming intimate with the habits of many of our British wild birds and quadrupeds. Having been in the habit of keeping an irregular kind of journal and of making notes of any incidents which have fallen under my observation connected with the zoology of the country, I have now endeavoured, by dint of cutting and pruning those rough sketches, to put them into a shape calculated to amuse, and perhaps, in some slight degree, to instruct some of my fellow-lovers of Nature. From my earliest childhood I have been more addicted to the investigation of the habits and manners of every kind of living animal than to any more useful avocation, and have in consequence made myself tolerably well acquainted with the domestic economy of most of our British *feræ naturæ*, from the field-mouse and wheatear, which I stalked and trapped in the plains and downs of Wiltshire during my boyhood, to the red deer and eagle, whose territory I have invaded in later years on the mountains of Scotland. My present abode in Morayshire is surrounded by as great a variety of beautiful scenery as can be found in any district in Britain; and no part of the country can produce a greater variety of objects of interest either to the naturalist or to the lover of the picturesque. The rapid and glorious Findhorn, the very perfection of a Highland river, here passes through one of the most fertile plains in Scotland, or indeed in the world; and though a few miles higher up it rages through the wildest and most rugged rocks, and through the romantic and shaded glens of the forests of Darnaway and Altyre, the stream, as if exhausted, empties itself peaceably and quietly into the Bay of Findhorn, a salt-water loch of some four or five miles in length, entirely shut out by different points of land from the storms which are so frequent in the Moray Firth, of which it forms a kind of creek. At low-water this bay becomes an extent of wet sand, with the river Findhorn and one or two smaller streams winding through it, till they meet in the deeper part of the basin near the town of Findhorn, where there is always a considerable depth of water, and a harbour for shipping.
From its sheltered situation and the quantity of food left on the sands at low-water, the Bay of Findhorn is always a great resort of wild-fowl of all kinds, from the swan to the teal, and also of innumerable waders of every species; while occasionally a seal ventures into the mouth of the river in pursuit of salmon . The bay is separated from the main water of the Firth by that most extraordinary and peculiar range of country called the Sandhills of Moray, a long, low range of hills formed of the purest sand, with scarcely any herbage, excepting here and there patches of bent or broom, which are inhabited by hares, rabbits, and foxes. At the extreme point of this range is a farm of forty or fifty acres of arable land, where the tenant endeavours to grow a scanty crop of grain and turnips, in spite of the rabbits and the drifting sands. From the inland side of the bay stretch the fertile plains of Moray, extending from the Findhorn to near Elgin in a continuous flat of the richest soil, and comprising districts of the very best partridge-shooting that can be found in Scotland, while the streams and swamps that intersect it afford a constant supply of wild-fowl . As we advance inland we are sheltered by the wide-extending woods of Altyre, abounding with roe and game, and beyond these woods again is a very extensive range of a most excellent grouse-shooting country, reaching for many miles over a succession of moderately sized hills which reach as far as the Spey....

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