

## Island Pond

by D. R. Saunders

The Countryman Wildlife Book  
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Most of us have a favourite pond, and mine is a little stretch of water on Skomer, off the coast of Pembrokeshire. It has a charm all of its own. No trees fringe it, no farm ducks paddle on its waters, no fish swim in it; for a dragonfly to skim over it is a rare event. It covers about half an acre and, when full, is not more than three feet deep; in summer it may shrink to a puddle and has been known to dry out completely. At one end a few stunted bushes of willow and sallow cover the small embankment which encloses its waters; through a gap in the dam a tiny stream gurgles its way to the sea half a mile off. The wild iris enriches the June scene with its yellow flowers along much of the banks; and on one side a patch of heather makes a splash of colour on dull autumn days. Great tussocks of sedge and rush hide shallow pools where water mint, marsh pennywort, cuckoo flower and bog pimpernel grow.

So small and open, the pond has many moods, quickly reflecting the vagaries of wind, sun and rain. On clear spring days it gleams an azure blue, but this changes to a muddy green in times of summer drought. When gales pile huge seas against the western cliffs of the island, the surface is whipped into wavelets which lap the embankment, and the wind whines through the bushes, breaking the iris down in its fury.

Many birds are attracted to feed, rest, bathe or preen at the pond. In spring the sun gleams on the bottle green heads of the mallard drakes, while their mates sit on nests in the bog below. Later the ducks shepherd their broods along the water's edge, keeping near cover in case of attack from above. In autumn and winter small parties of teal dabble in the shallows, joined occasionally by wigeon. I once saw a shoveler drake and two female goldeneye. Usually a pair of moorhens nest there, but they are rarely to be seen, and often the first sign of their success is the appearance of the young at the pond, their behaviour being quite unlike that of mainland birds. The heron is an occasional visitor but does not stay long, as the gulls mob it unmercifully.

My favourites are the true waders, which pay their fleeting calls when the great autumn movement is in progress. Wood, green and common sandpipers have been there—once all three together. Occasionally a green-shank flies off as I approach, and returns after I have entered the hide, we have built beside the pond. Little stints have several times rested and fed by its waters; hardly bigger than house sparrows, they show no fear of man. Ruff, redshank, dunlin, lapwing, snipe and jack snipe are other visitors and once, after a period of gales, a grey phalarope spent the day swimming and spinning on the surface.

The pond is much used by gulls: some great black-backs but mainly herring gulls and lesser black-backs, which have a large colony less than two hundred yards away. All day in summer a stream of gulls come to bathe and preen; sometimes sixty may be there together. The air is full of the noise of their splashing and flapping, and the green water runs in droplets from their white heads and necks as they bathe. When the brown juveniles arrive in July they fight among themselves, and many of the weaker ones are

killed. The water recedes, leaving the bodies, which are greedily eaten by their relatives and by foraging ravens and crows. One of the victims, an immature great black-back, had been ringed on Fair Isle. Though nesting in thousands on the cliffs, the kittiwakes seldom come to the pond; but one spring a pair of black-headed gulls, which do not breed on the island, raised our hopes temporarily by taking up a territory near by and driving off all avian intruders.

The willow bushes on the embankment shelter many small migrants. Occasionally in spring willow warblers and chiffchaffs sing a few snatches which seem to bring a breath of woods and hedges to Skomer. In autumn a robin usually claims a territory and shows its flame-coloured breast among the withering leaves. The wheezy call of a reed bunting and the scolding taktak of stonechats are sounds I associate with the pond at all seasons. Often rock and meadow pipits, with pied wagtails which nest in the ruined farm and rarely a grey wagtail, feed on the flies attracted by the warm mud when the water is low. Best of all the small birds are the swallows and martins. When, on a still evening in early April, I see the first of them swoop low after insects or to sip the pond's waters, I feel that spring has really come to the bare island.