

'A Three Week Stint'

(April 1946)

by Winifred Bowman

Early in February I was asked to go as volunteer cook-housekeeper for the first three weeks of the Skomer Survey. There was a certain amount of lofty talk about Aga cookers and yachts and within a few minutes I found myself hypnotised into saying yes. As the weeks went by and more details filtered through I began to wonder if I hadn't been a bit hasty. After all, I am definitely not an ornithologist, I am supposed to be a creative artist, and I didn't quite see how cooking for twenty-odd people on a lately uninhabited island off the coast of Wales was going to further my artistic ambitions. However, I have an incurable longing for the new and strange so I never really seriously considered backing out.

I was met at Haverfordwest by Pat, the supply officer, who spent the summer in a tiny lodge at Martinshaven, holding on bravely to the job of maintaining the lifeline between the islands and the mainland. It was Pat who did the shopping, despatched supplies and visitors to Skomer and Skokholm, or put them up in her lodge when weather prevented the outboard motor boat from making the crossing. (Of course the yacht didn't arrive till after I left.) I only saw Pat two or three times in the course of my spell of duty, but our notes and lists and comments to each other were long and frequent and sometimes caustic, and by the time I left the island I felt I knew Pat very well.

We shared an almost unbearable sense of superiority, for unless she produced the foodstuffs and I cooked them, all this business of watching and recording birds, dredging the sea-bottom, building traps and ringing shearwaters was a hollow mockery. From my biased point of view, bird-watchers were primarily concerned with their meals, and only secondarily interested in ornithology. The island appetite loomed like a colossal cloud over Skomer, and was never near to being dispersed.

Such nice people came there, but to me they were just one huge gaping mouth and insatiable stomach. I felt most of the time like a weary hen bird, trying to satisfy her hungry young . . . and this analogy is probably the nearest I ever came to an understanding of ornithology!

The invaluable Ben was at the station when I arrived, a shockheaded, dreamy, enthusiastic young man of twenty. We all got into the lorry, driven by the hon.-chief warden, and after some final shopping in Haverfordwest, we set out for Martinshaven and the boat.

As we rumbled and rattled along the narrow Welsh lanes, tipped by a golden flame of gorse, I listened to Ronald Lockley and Pat discussing the affairs of this island venture.

It was dusk when the Storm Petrel was finally loaded, the outboard motor started, and we set off at last. Pat waved good-bye from the beach; in her

place we had acquired the skipper, a remarkable man. Skip was a retired policeman and there wasn't anything he couldn't do. He had originally been engaged to sail the yacht but as this was still being made seaworthy at Fishguard, Skipper's sailing skill was restricted to the temperamental outboard of the small boat.

We were very lucky in the skipper, for he was, in addition to being a man of the sea, a carpenter, plumber, glazier, mechanic, cook, snarer of rabbits, and indeed anything else for which there was a sudden and critical demand. A tall, angular middle-aged fellow with a twinkling eye and sweet smile and eloquent tongue, he was my especial friend and comforter. I could never have managed without him in those first hectic weeks; indeed, none of us could.

Presently Skomer rose against the setting sun, a dark, mysterious mass. The cliffs are steep, running down in sharp jagged folds into the racing tides, and the top is nearly level, treeless, exposed to all the winds that blow. It is not pretty, nor even charming, but there is a wild grandeur in its starkness that sets the romantic and foolish heart racing. The close-cropped turf is broken by ruined stone walls and by ancient rock constructions evidently set there long ago by human hands. About the island lie several jagged pinnacles broken off from the main mass and haunted now by crying seabirds and Atlantic seals.

The cliffs of the island are pierced in several places by great fissures or wicks, running deep into the rock, on whose ledges colonies of sea-birds make their nests. On the still, enclosed waters ride hundreds of puffins, adding their occasional deep "Ha!" to the shriller screams of kittiwakes and the herring and black-backed gulls.

All this I learned later, but now, as we approached North Haven, running out of the rough waters of the race into the shelter of the little bay, I saw only the steep mass of the island cliffs towering round me, black against the pale green of the early evening sky. Not a gull cried, and when Skipper silenced the engine there was no sound save the gentle sucking of water against the stones of the beach.

The boat grounded. I was lifted on to the shingle (I had forgotten to bring Wellingtons as instructed); we found my suit-case and started up the steep path.

"Take it easy, we'll rest here a bit. You'll get used to it after you've done it as often as I have." (But I never did.)

"How on earth did they manage to cart materials for a house up here, and all the furniture and farm gear?"

"By horse and cart, and by hand, I suppose. Labour was cheap in those days. Certainly they weren't blessed with a tractor."

Presently we swung out over the blessedly level ground, striding easily over the dry spongy turf. Above us the stars shone in an immensity of cold clear

sky, and ahead of us loomed the dark shape of the house, with a single light shining from an uncurtained window.

We came to the veranda and peered through the window at the group within. Four young men and a woman sat round a table on which stood an oil lamp. They were all reading or writing industriously, heads bent over books and papers in fierce concentration. We went indoors and I was introduced.

I must confess that in spite of my brave assertions to the contrary I went to bed that night in a somewhat depressed frame of mind. Although the pioneer group round the table had been tired they had warmly welcomed me. But the house was bitterly cold, the fire smoked, there was only one oil lamp and a few candle stumps. My bed was a wooden frame with stiff steel slats, covered by a thin paillasse (ex-service equipment, and God pity the poor soldiers), the room was cold and smelt of dust, and there were several panes of glass missing from the window. As I lay in the darkness clasping my hot-water bottle in my arms I longed for my comfortable London home, my family and friends, and wondered how I would ever manage to stay my three weeks. Then I remembered the others and their indomitable cheerfulness, their calm assurance and look of achievement, and feeling ashamed of my doubts, I fell at last into an uneasy sleep.

I spent the next morning unpacking the kitchen utensils and arranging them in the small, draughty, stone-floored kitchen. The larder was reasonably well-stocked as we had a catering licence which allowed us a good margin of provisions, and Marjorie and Pat had bought quantities of stores. By the time I had accustomed myself to my new environment and cooked a few meals for our company I felt less strange and depressed. I had never cooked for large numbers before and my first estimates were rather crazy. But by the time the first batch of fourteen guests arrived two days later I had got into my stride and the first meal was a definite success. I had mastered the oil stove, and the primuses (as far as anyone ever masters those inventions of the devil), had got resigned to the fact that all the water had to be brought in buckets from the well, that my sink didn't work, and that hot water for washing had to be heated on one of my precious burners . . . also that the potatoes for lunch had to be boiled in the hot-water urn needed for tea. After the first week I knew what quantities to cook, how much jam and butter to allow each visitor, and had got very tough about making the guests do the washing up and peeling the potatoes. I became reconciled to the use of dried milk (the cows came to the island after I had gone) and the total lack of fruit, but I never got reconciled to the lack of onions, and when at last someone sent me a pound from the mainland I guarded them as if they had been golden nuggets.

There were three meals a day. Breakfast consisted of porridge, then bacon or sausages (or anything else I could scrape up to convince people they were having two courses), tea, bread and butter and marmalade. Dinner was at midday and for it I prepared enormous stews (often island rabbits), huge basins of potatoes and vegetables, and great solid puddings which I concocted sometimes from my head, and sometimes by multiplying the recipes in my cook-book by six. High tea was at six and included, besides tea,

bread and butter, and some horrid cake sent over by the grocer, a hot dish or salad. Very plain food indeed, but supplies were difficult; I was more or less single-handed. I did my best and no one starved, though often I found a haggard bird-watcher prowling round the kitchen in search of crumbs. I'm afraid I was rather heartless and shooed all such scavengers out the back door.

The water was pumped up to the house through a Heath Robinson arrangement of pipes and hoses, which periodically flew apart and deluged the kitchen. Skipper mended the sink and got the hot water system going after a fashion. I could never decide whether the price in smoke and ashes in my kitchen was worth paying for hot water in the tap. I suppose it was; it made washing up easier and even provided some of the staff with a two-inch bath once a week. Skip and I were rather mean about the hot water; we never let the lady guests (who didn't have to shave) have any of it, if we could help it, and we had grand and secret washing days on quiet afternoons. I've always had a sneaking admiration for people who live "hard" and felt unreasonably proud of wearing my blouses unironed, my hair unset, my nails unpolished, my nose unpowdered. I was tough at last. I even dealt with basinfuls of skinned rabbits without blenching.

But I definitely did not care for the dust and dirt in the house, the accumulation of six years of neglect. Phyllida, who came to help me when Marjorie went away, concentrated on the floors and dusty walls and managed to get a little spit and polish into the place, but it was a disheartening and futile job. Every morning I swept out my fourbed dormitory and every morning the dustpan was full, and the room looked as dusty as ever. I never dared look into the men's dormitories; they seemed to like an inch-deep carpet of dust and fluff.

Apart from the routine of cooking, cleaning, laying fires and doing the oil-lamps, there were many small excitements. There was the time when I dropped a heavy window on my middle finger and no one was about to hear and comfort my moans. The day when Ronald was entertaining V.I.P.s to tea and my primus stove went up in flames; the night that Skip gave notice (he immediately withdrew it after a cup of hot cocoa!) after having battled for hours in a gale in the middle of the night, with the outboard motor out of commission; the time I got very angry with Ronald and Skip because they went off to the mainland and left me on the island with all sorts of plumbing difficulties looming, and then got caught by the weather and were away three days; the wild night when a gale tore through the house, clapping every door in the place to like a heavy gun barrage, and it was too cold to get up and deal with it. There was the nuisance of a stopped drain outside the kitchen door, the agony of a trip to the ladies' lavatory in the dark and windy night, the awful cold of getting back into bed, and all the other trouble we all had those early days.

But the lovely things are the easiest to remember. Masses of daffodils and narcissi blew about in the sunlight before the door, and the cliffs were washed with pink and white of thrift and campion, and primroses waited shyly beneath the curling bracken. I remember the liquid cry of the curlew, the lovely blue of

the sea, and the fantastic colours of the distant cliffs, the heavenly hour or two in the afternoon when I could creep away from food and people and relax in a sunny corner out of the wind, doing nothing, thinking of nothing. And who could forget the evenings when we all gathered round the table in the lamplight, the enchanting calling of the roll of all the birds seen or likely to be seen on the island, the occasional flare-ups between expert and amateur, the excitement of a new discovery, and afterwards the slow and accurate talk round the driftwood fire, when these monosyllabic, shy bird-watchers spoke of other islands, set in other seas, of far-off countries, and the familiar stretches of the English country-side? One could extend the catalogue of beauties indefinitely, the truth of the matter was that Skomer was our University where skill marched with endeavour, and beauty flowered by the way. Not only did we master our own individual unfamiliar duties but we acquired and shared a knowledge of birds, beasts and flowers (of fish too, for I must not forget the marine biologists) and above all of human beings, distinguishing in a new and unique milieu the old characteristics of strength and eccentricity, meanness and generosity, stupidity and humour, the whole wisdom and folly of mankind.

It was a grand three weeks, and all the weeks that followed must have been grand too, except that they perhaps lacked the fine frenzy of our initial endeavour, and, as it turned out, the brilliant sunlight that shone over Skomer in April 1946.

THE ISLAND OF SKOMER John Buxton and R.M. Lockley (1950)

'A post-war expedition'

(23 March 1946)

by Ronald Lockley

On Saturday, March the 23rd 1946, at 10 a.m., the first swallow flew over Martinshaven - an early bird. It was a promise of what was to come, and a fresh inspiration to the hard-working members of the assault party. We strove far into the night to finish the mainland task. There was only a week left before the first arrivals were due at Skomer - a party of students from Bristol University. It was high time we got over to the island, and began the restoration of the house there. We wondered, too, if the wheatears had arrived.

On the Sunday afternoon we agreed to abandon work at Martinshaven and cross to Skomer - ostensibly to make lists of our requirements for the renovations. Actually we were all tired out and glad of the outing. We launched the Storm Petrel, the eighteen-foot open boat loaned by R.M.L., and with a new outboard engine at her stern we were quickly across the white tides of Jack Sound and into Skomer North Haven. We ran the Storm Petrel on the rough pebbles and pulled her up half way. A singing wren greeted us as we pushed up through the dead bracken and weeds which sprawled over the ancient track leading to the plateau. This was formerly wide enough for a horse and cart but now heaps of sandy soil alternated with holes to make any vehicular traffic impossible. The concrete ramp too, connecting the road with the beach, had been partly washed away by storm tides.

We climbed out of the shadows of this north-facing haven until we found the sun shining upon the wide green plateau. On each of the outcropping rocks which formed natural cairns and castles, a pair of gulls rested, great black-backed reluctantly taking to the air when we drew too near. Ravens flew overhead, and buzzards soared in the calm air. Everywhere rabbits were feeding or running to the cover of the rain-washed dead brown bracken. Fields, partly covered with bracken, or with fine closely grazed turf, separated us from the old homestead of Skomer, which stood, uncared for and desolate, with the sun sinking behind it and the sky red with a fine-weather look.

Dilapidated and ruined it had seemed at a distance, and as we drew nearer we found this impression by no means unjust. Doors, gates and windows were broken, missing, or roughly barred over. A heavy veranda helped to darken the front of the house, its iron- and woodwork rusted and decayed.

The house had been abandoned soon after the outbreak of war and had scarcely been touched since. It was amazing to find it fully furnished with a good deal of antique or at least valuable-seeming covered with mildew, dust and dirt. Great canvases stood upon the walls or were fallen from them, their subjects hidden by a thick growth of mould fungus. There was no water laid on and no light- both these systems had completely broken down.

It was all very depressing. We should have to clear and stack this furniture until it could be disposed of. We should have to admit light, warmth and air into the house by repairing windows and fitting stoves and making fires. We should have to whitewash and distemper and get our simple A.R.P. equipment fitted into these rooms; and it

Yet as we grumbled at the size of the task, we were all of us confident we could achieve it. We measured and surveyed and estimated. The buoyancy that comes of good comradeship in a common task gradually uplifted our spirits as we moved back to the beach and arranged the details of the attack.

THE ISLAND OF SKOMER John Buxton and R.M. Lockley Eds (1950)

Notes of a visit to Skomer :1896

J J Neale

We, that is, my wife, ten children, servants and self, arrived a mile beyond Marloes, the nearest village to Skomer, late on Saturday evening, May 23rd 1896. It was blowing a strong breeze but the sea was by no means rough, especially for large strong boats such as are in use there for crab and lobster fishing. The boatmen however, declined to take us across to the island under the pretence that it was unsafe. It was too late to go back to the village to try for a fresh crew. If we had gone back, there was no hotel or public house; it is a prohibition village. So we decided to make shift at the farm (Trehill) which belongs to the tenant of Skomer (William Jones). Accommodation for the female members was found in the farmhouse, while six of my boys and myself brought a lot of straw from a rick, spread it in the stable, and got an old sale for a covering and slept there. The seventh boy objected, because of the rats, which were very plentiful.

On a Sunday morning I sent to the village to find the boatmen, for I had no compunction in making them work on Sunday if they were too lazy to work on Saturday. The breeze was just as strong but they took us across in two trips but not the luggage. That was brought over on the Monday. On leaving the little cove of Martins Haven on the mainland, scarcely a bird is to be seen, and get within a mile and a half there are yes, millions! As we drew near, the sea was covered with them- puffins, razorbills, guillemots, gulls, and occasionally a cormorant etc. To those who have never seen such a sight it is amazing. On reaching the island you find all the ledges and every scrap where a bird can find footing, occupied. Near the cliffs the island is honeycombed with puffin holes, with numbers of them flying out.

Amidst such a scene of life and interest we spent very little time indoors, the more so because the weather was perfect. Occasionally, we stayed out till midnight, while sometimes we got up at three-o'clock in the morning. One night we stayed out all night. You must do all those things if you want to observe the habits of birds and in fact all animals; and as regards this island, and this island alone, probably of all islands of Great Britain, it is as full of life in the darkest hours of the night as in the day. This is because it is the principle breeding place of those mysterious birds the shearwaters, and also of the storm petrels. We know scarcely anything about the shearwaters and what we do know is principally due to Mr Drane.

Skomer is not unlike Lundy in being very precipitous; it has no nice beaches, but one or two coves fit for landing. It is about a mile and a half across from east to west. The top is covered with heather, bracken, grass and sea pinks. In the middle of the island there are several cultivated and grass fields, in the centre of, which is a farmhouse where we stayed. North of the farmhouse is a marshy spot, from which a small stream runs, and falls over the cliffs into St Brides Bay. This stream furnished a surprise. One day in moving some pebbles to wash some negatives I saw a small eel. I looked farther down and caught a fair sized one. We went back and arranged for a fishing expedition

after tea. We took spades and buckets and dipped out all the pools, but only caught one more small one. Now how did the eels get there? The lowest part of the cliff where the water fell into the sea was about fifteen feet above high water mark. Eels do not breed in fresh water; they go into the salt to spawn. I can only conclude that they must have been carried there by seabirds and escaped. We found a moorhen's nest in a tuft of rushes near. It seemed an unlikely place for a moorhen to be found.

One day we saw a couple of birds black like crows but with a peculiar flight. During flight they gave forth-peculiar calls. We thought they were choughs and asked if there were any near. We were told they bred on the cliffs on the mainland, but the fishermen and others lowered themselves with ropes from the top and invariably took the eggs for which they received a high price. They will soon be extinct here. A man on the island insisted there was a nest with young on the island then. We doubted it, as on our excursions we should have been sure to come across the old birds near enough to have been certain. He showed us the nest on the other side of a narrow gorge. We examined the nest and young carefully with our glass and thought they looked like carrion crows. We went several times but could never see old choughs but we saw some carrion crows in the distance. We went at three-o'clock one morning, hoping to be in time, but no choughs. The man and boy declared they saw 'the red-legged and red-beaked crow' sitting on the eggs. On Mr Drane's arrival we showed him the nest and he immediately said they were carrion crows. The tenant's son was not satisfied but insisted that they were choughs and would make a bet with Mr Drane to that effect. We then lowered one of my boys over the cliff and brought up the young, which gave unmistakable carrion crow calls. Mr Drane with his usual magnanimity declined to accept the bet he won. Now had there been a chough's nest and had the carrion crows destroyed the nest or young and appropriated the nest? There were lots of carrion crows nesting on the island so it was strange that the men should be mistaken and deceived actually up to the betting point. We followed up the crows relentlessly. Most of the birds know them and drive them from the vicinity of their nests of young. The razorbills, guillemots and puffins however seem to take no notice; the peregrine falcons, gulls, and oystercatchers drive them away.

The oystercatcher is the most daring and watchful of all the birds breeding on Skomer. We have watched them attack and drive away peregrine falcons, owls, large black-backed and other gulls, and crows. They are always on the alert and with their shrill cries, rapid flight, and persistence, allow no other birds, day or night, to molest their young or eggs. They dart their long snipe-like orange beaks at their enemies, and invariably make them take refuge in flight. One day we found a nest of carrions ready for flight, in fact two of them flew away like old birds. We marked one down into the bracken, and should have lost the other, had not an oyster catcher darted at it before it got out of sight, and knocked it into the heather. This enabled us to crawl up and pounce upon it before it could rise.

We never found a dead oystercatcher and hope we never shall. They were on guard the last thing at night, also through the night, and were the first birds

to raise an alarm at the earliest dawn of day. Their young are sturdy independent little fellows; like the young pewits which are also here, well protected by their resemblance to their surroundings. The puffins, guillemots and razor bills seem to me to be very low in the scale of bird intelligence, and I think if their brains were examined and compared with other birds they would be found deficient. I put the gulls, oystercatchers, carrion crows, owls and hawks much higher. If an enemy comes near these birds there is community of purpose in defending their nests and young and they do not wait to be attacked but attack first. I have however, watched jackdaws running all about round the puffin holes, peeping in to see if the proprietor was at home; if not, in they would go evidently with the intention of robbery. The gulls will also go about among them with a similar object. Now any other bird except puffins, guillemots and razor bills would attack and drive them away. I have watched the herring gulls hawk the faces of the cliffs by the hour in order to find a razor bills or guillemots egg unprotected and at once carry it away to an adjacent rock and eat it at its leisure. These birds will allow their neighbours to be robbed and their young killed without the slightest sign of emotion.

The peregrine falcons kill the puffins to feed their young yet I have seen the puffins sitting, nesting, and flying close the peregrines nest and not showing the slightest sign of fear. I have come to the conclusion they have very little sense. It is not for want of pluck, for I have seen two puffins fight for a long time in the sea, bleeding badly, and seeming never inclined to stop. If you put your hand in their holes they will bite also.

No clear explanation has been given as to the immense variety in colour of the guillemots eggs, and I am half inclined to fancy it is as one writer says, in order that each bird may know its own egg.

We were badly fixed on the island for a boat. They had their regular boatman on the mainland, but he was not available for going round the bottom of the cliffs and visiting the islets. There was a punt on the mainland that they said we could have if we liked. We hailed a crab-catcher's boat one day and I took over two of my boys and eldest daughter to fetch this punt. A wretched thing it was- two odd iron rowlocks- the other two missing- four odd oars or pieces – no dipper. For rowlocks we tied pieces of rope through the holes and slipped two of the oars through. As soon as we launched it the water poured in. We picked up a tar bucket on the beach and determined to try to reach the island somehow. One baled continually while three rowed. We arrived safely but with as much or more water in than when we started. On arrival we took out the plug and sunk the boat in the hope that a good soaking would stop up the cracks, and it made a vast improvement, better than nothing, but not much. It enabled us to get some more important geological specimens for Mr F T Howard, and to visit the Garland Stone and Midland Island. To do the latter we had to cross a small sound where a tremendous current runs. While there a breeze sprung up and then we had the utmost difficulty in returning to Skomer.

We were forced to make a second trip for Mr Drane and one of the boys. It was seriously debated whether we should leave Mr Drane on the island all night which would have been awkward as there were not coves and very little shelter. However, we decided to try for him and succeeded in reaching and landing him safely.

This punt was nearly the cause of a fatal accident to my eldest boy one evening. Two of the boys took it out and seeing a very attractive ledge with guillemots the eldest climbed near the top of the cliff and worked along the edge. When at the top, a rock he was holding on by gave way and he fell. In falling he struck the cliff, turned a somersault and he fell into the sea. Fortunately he was not quite stunned and had the presence of mind to swim to a small rock which was awash and the other boy rowed the boat to him and dragged him in. We came on the scene in time to lift him out of the boat and got him to the farm where he recovered in a few days. It quite cured him of climbing. He says it is a very queer sensation to fall from a cliff in this manner.

A friend came in a small boat one day to see us and we took advantage of the visit to borrow the yacht's boat to visit the Mew Stone. We found the cormorants had deserted the south side but there was a colony of them on the north side in a more inaccessible place. These common cormorants breed in colonies, the nests almost touching. The green cormorants of which we found several nests on the large island, do not. We found both sorts on amiable terms with their neighbours; other seabirds nesting within a yard of two were unmolested. Most of the nests had young of a large size. I brought one to show it at close quarters to Mr Drane and the visitor. It was a very large bird and savage. It had a peculiar method of attack- suddenly darting out its long neck right at our faces with great energy. It would be easy to lose an eye with it if not careful; the face was the only part this one attacked. The visitor would like it. We tried to persuade him not but he would not take our advice. On his way back it was whitewashing the deck and he cruelly told one of his men to drop it overboard. Nemesis soon overtook him. The boat became becalmed and rolled a great deal with the swell and made him seasick. Result- in the operation he lost all his false teeth overboard, and returned a wiser but a toothless man.

On two or three occasions we saw seals. Once a very large one came up astern of the punt and gazed at us with its human-looking face. No wonder it gave rise to the fiction of there being mermaids in the sea. The so-called gentleman takes a delight in shooting them although they know full well that if shot while in the water the bodies at once sink. They are harmless interesting creatures but are rapidly diminishing. We enjoyed creeping to the edge of the cliff and watching their gambols down below us in the beautiful clear water.

While watching the birds on a cliff one day our attention was attracted to two kittiwakes fighting. They were evidently fighting for possession of a female bird or else for a nest position. To look at these delightful creatures you would not think there was any fight in them. They seem as mild as doves and very much more handsome. The female kept on this little scrap of jutting rock and

every time one of the males came near another one flew to the attack. They fought turning over and over till they fell into the sea, locked together. They at once separated when one would fly back up to the ledge about a hundred feet up. At once the other flew after it and the fight recommenced. This kept on time after time for an hour I should think, and we were amazed at the persistency. At last one must have got tired for we saw no more of it. I presume those fighting were males, but they are so much alike that I have no notion how the males and females can distinguish the sexes. In no instance could I see any distinction whatever; they are quite different from land birds in this respect.

Talking of the tenacity with which seabirds cling to cliffs I will cite the following. On the south side there is a place called The Wick one side of which is composed of a perpendicular cliff. One day after a breeze there was a big swell rolling in the gorge. Being narrow it increased in volume as it came up. Near the bottom of the cliff were numbers of guillemots and all the biggest rollers swept right over them, but in no case were the birds washed away. When the waves receded they were still there. The cliff at The Wick is a sight which cannot possibly be surpassed in the British Islands for there is not an inch of foothold but it is occupied by a seabird of some sort.

The peregrine falcons were very shy. Although we were close to their nest they never came within a hundred yards, but soared away in the distance giving vent to their semi-defiant annoyed sort of short screeches. Woe to the noble peregrine if he got in the vicinity of the nest of the oyster catcher or great black-backed gull. The razor bill and the oystercatcher were the only birds which we found pretty near this gull. The razor bill evidently depended on its powerful beak for its protection. This bird sits on its egg in the same way that a duck does, but the guillemot sits upright and adjusts the egg under it with its beak.

The guillemots are very clumsy in getting clear of their eggs if suddenly alarmed. I have seen a dozen or more eggs knocked off a ledge into the sea or on the rocks below at one sudden flight. The great black-backed gulls are scarce and prefer to build their nests in more solitary spots generally with only one pair in one place. The small black backs are much more numerous and more social.

Skomer is worth a visit if only to spend a night with the stormy petrels and shearwaters. In the daytime not a sign is to be seen of one of these birds- not even at ten-o'clock at night. But about ten thirty an occasional call is heard, then another, then others; followed later by the dash of birds over our heads in all directions, all giving forth their peculiar cry 'cuckolds-in-a-row' and every bird's voice different from every other. The birds overhead were dashing about in a most bewildering manner, while they are being answered by the birds in the ground. These latter then come out of the holes and can easily be caught, as they have great difficulty in arising off the ground. In three hours and a half all this noise ceases, day begins to break and not a single shearwater is to be seen or heard. Then commences life again first with the oystercatchers, both sorts of blackbacks, kittiwakes, and all the other birds

that abound. We go back to bed. I should say that the shearwater flies at a tremendous speed; faster it seemed to me than any other bird on the island. That seems one of the dangers being out at night with them, for if one of them struck you full in the face while going at full speed, you would not be likely to forget it. Still, if there are able to find their nests and mates in the dark, they evidently have good eyesight. After a little practice at imitating their calls, one of my boys, Douglas, would find them out in the daytime in their holes by calling near a group of holes. The shearwaters would answer back.

The situation of Skomer is delightful. What a lot there is to see in our own country if we will only get away from the beaten track. It has ever been my idea of a holiday to go where scarcely anyone goes. I only wish the island belonged to some person who took an interest in natural history, and would prevent the destruction of the birds and seals.

(These notes are of a lecture given to the Biological Section of the Cardiff Naturalists Society on the 6th May 1897 and unpublished. I have omitted non-Skomer remarks and had to rearrange a few sentences. Any additions are in brackets. I also put on record another family account of the climbing accident on page 4. It was given to me by the youngest of the family present on this holiday but only one year old, 75 years later; when I was asking her about Skomer. She said; it was their own fault. The boys were forbidden to go climbing or boating except in pairs, and were not allowed to go outside North Haven in the boat. Wilfred and Howard rowed along to the Rye Rocks and separated as described, 'How' managed to get 'Wilf' into the boat, semi-conscious, and rowed back to the beach. Someone was sent to the farm and a bracken-filled cart was sent down. She implied that both were disobeying strict orders, but there was no doubt that H saved W's life, and did wonders in pulling him into the boat single-handed.

For another account of this holiday, see (CNS Transactions 31 p38 'A pilgrimage to Golgotha' by Robert Drane. FLL March 11)

A Pilgrimage to Golgotha

June 1897 by Robert Drane FLS

Paper read to the Biological Section of the Cardiff Naturalists Society

A paper given to a society must have a title and the present one is adopted to avoid what we have found to be the detrimental effect to Natural History of giving unreserved publicity to the places where the following notes were made. "They may well call it Stony Stratford for I was much bitten by fleas there" and with something less of a non-sequiter I have called the locality of my subject 'A Pilgrimage to Golgotha' because of the great number of skulls we found there and the weird character given to its solitude by the many dry bones with which it is bestrewn, some of which are here before you now to justify my title; together with a selection of Guillemots eggs, to illustrate their remarkable divergences in size, form, color and markings. I think that to those unfamiliar with the eggs of this species their variation will appear to striking as to suggest the improbability of there belonging to one kind of bird only.

I present you here also a set of Razorbill's eggs similarly selected from an immense number of the more ordinary types. My desire concerning them is to have the two series produced by photography and color so as to place them in our Transactions as a permanent record and standard of comparison. The variation is not quite so great as in the case of the Guillemot but is still very striking.

On May 31st we found two Peregrine Falcon's eggs laid without any nest upon a ledge of the cliff overhanging the sea about a hundred feet below. The parent bird was vociferous against our intrusion, circling in the air as a safe distance. On June 5th one of these eggs was hatched. The chick was of a uniform pale color like that of natural sheep's wool. The other egg was never hatched, for it was addled. Here is an adult Peregrine, on whose head I have placed an ancient Hawk's Hood to shew you this bird in his hawking costume, according to the fashion of James I's reign and here also is the unhatched egg. There was another nest about a mile from this, on the face of an all but inaccessible cliff. We determined to try to get to it. We knew when we were near it on the cliff top by the querulous alarm not which the parent bird uttered continually when we approached the place; so one morning all hands were piped up for the purpose, and a lad of about 14 was let down on the end of a strong rope about a hundred feet from the top of the cliff here about 200 ft high. The work was exciting from its obvious peril. "Rope dancers a score I had seen before", but to see a lad swing at the end of a string, who must die if he fell was a new thing. We spent some hours at the attempt, but it ended in failure; the only result being a number of "blackbird's" eggs. The local name here for the Razorbill is "blackbird" which has a strange sound to the ears of inland men, who at that name would think only of our familiar songster. And the partially-consumed body of a down-covered Great Black-backed or

Herring Gull in the maw and gizzard of which were the feathers of some bird supplied to it as food by its parent.

Mr Neale remarked that he had conceived a great contempt for this same Peregrine for it would risk nothing in the defence of family and home, while the harmless, helpless Plover and Oystercatcher would sometimes swoop down upon us and flout us with their wings, and always come very much nearer to us than the falcon ever did. But man is the very personification of inconsistency. Mr Neale has great admiration for the Great Black-backed Gull, which he considers "a truly noble bird". Well, now, I am going to be perverse for his sake and hit this noble bird so as to induce him to designate me "a truly noble animal". The Great Black-backed Gull is a coward, a fool, and a tyrant; tho' it is many times bigger and stronger than the Peregrine we frequently found its eggs and took its young while it stood afar off stoically looking on, without once risking anything in their defence. (Coward) As for intelligence it is far inferior to the Raven, for when this bird sees that the Gull has something to eat he will worry and excite him till he drops it, and the Raven appropriates the Gull's food most cleverly. (Fool). The GBBG likes to have a domain all to himself and selects, when possible, an isolated rock or islet from which, as far as he can, he excludes other birds by robbing or eating them. We know of one such islet which used to be the home of a large colony of common terns. When we were there, there was but one pair frequenting it for this Great Gull had taken a fancy to Naboth's vineyard and I feel convinced, from what I saw of the harassed life of this pair of terns that they had been robbed of their little estate by this Gull (Tyrant). Now Mr Neale will have to give this section a paper on the natural history of this "truly noble bird", of which he knows very much more than I do. If he doesn't, I shall call him "Peregrine" thenceforth. If he does, and consistently calls me "A truly noble animal" for hitting over a gull not a tenth of my own size or weight – not in defence of home and young, but only a whimsical opinion, I will be very amiable, I will not call him "Peregrine", and I will admit that the GBB Gull is a *truly noble bird*. But I have not done with it yet, for, added to his unmentioned shortcomings, I consider him a greedy and omnivores creature. He is a dealer in old clothes, and even eats *them*. I put the evidence before you that you may judge for yourselves. Here are a number of pellets consisting of bones, feathers, fur, etc, etc. They are the indigestible parts of his food which this bird ejects from his mouth, as owls and falcons do. These pellets are conclusive evidence of the nature quantity and quality of his food. Nothing comes amiss to him. Here I have the skin of a puffin turned inside out by a Carrion Crow who had eaten all the meat. Black Back comes along and swallows the old coat which both Puffin and Carrion Crow had finished with, and, later on, ejected it as you see it now.

June 6th We found two Puffins and one Shearwater in the same hole about 4 p.m. They were discovered by the crooning noise which the Shearwater so habitually makes in its burrows. The burrow, doubtless, belonged to the Shearwater for this bird comes and takes possession of its burrow months before the Puffin arrives for the breeding season. One would assume, from the crooning, or courting, note of the bird, the Shearwater was, not only at home, but happy there; yet, when we had taken the birds out of the hole the

Shearwater and Puffin attacked each other fighting with beak and feet with the utmost fury and tenacity. This seems very strange; but in juxtaposition with this fact may be placed another on the action of another bird of a nearly allied species, for when a Stormy Petrel is detected by its crooning noise amongst the loose rocks where it is nesting it will allow itself to be taken unresistingly, and will continue to utter its love notes in the hand of its captor, as if dominated by a fatal illusion- love mania- insanity, - or as an analogous state of mind amongst religious monomaniacs of our own species as elsewhere been described- "drunk with divine love". There is, assuredly, a downward as well as an upward development for instinct is not always conducive to the preservation of the individual, or the continuity of the species. Yet there seems to be some kind of qualified amity between these two very different species, for on another occasion I heard a Shearwater crooning in a hole, I put in my arm and drew out a Puffin; I put my arm in again and found its egg form the end of the hole, yet the crooning noise was continued. I was puzzled a moment, as further examination proved that at about 15 to 18 inches from its mouth the hole bifurcated, so that the Puffins occupied one are of the Y, the Shearwaters the other, and the stem of the Y gave both a common access to their chambers.

June 6th We dug out about 30 Shearwaters. In most of the holes we found 1 Shearwater and an egg: in 2 of them we found 2 birds and no egg. On expressing surprise to the tenant of the farm, he replied "That is always so, if there are 2 birds in one hole you will not find an egg". This a subject for confirmation; but in these holes we found some eggs just laid, and others within a few hours of hatching. Then, may it be assumed that both birds do their courting in their burrow; that as soon as the egg is excluded one of them takes charge of it; that, in the case of the two birds in one hole, the time of laying the egg had not fully arrived, and so, further, that the later eggs are not laid till the earlier ones are hatched? The Puffin's eggs at this date are so much more uniformly incubated that it is difficult to obtain a fresh egg, and most of them are difficult to blow, while some are already hatched.

Next day we came upon a curious 'find', we saw a Shearwater partially buried in recently – disturbed earth, and picking it out we found another, and another, and another, till we took out thirty. What was the meaning of this? The occupants of the island consisted of our party and five resident at the farm where we were lodged,. We regretted this destruction of these interesting and beautiful birds, but availed ourselves of the chance of ascertaining what they fed on and opened four of them. In each and all we found some soft, unctuous, bright green matter only from the mouth to the stomach. Its presence from the mouth to the stomach may be due to the habit that the petrel family have of vomiting their food when captured. We collected this matter and preserved it for examination at home. It was readily diffusible in water. I asked Mr Storie to examine it for me microscopically, and he says: "I could find neither teeth, scales, nor any sign of muscular tissue. The green matter is wholly fragmentary green algae, with its stichidia and tetraspores, with a few fragments of sertularians and a little sand. The contents of the stomach seem to indicate that the bird is a vegetarian". This accorded with my own idea but all the authorities are opposed to the assumption for they all

say the bird feeds on fish. Sometime after our return, Mr Cording the bird preserver, sent me a Shearwater, the contents of whose stomach I submitted to Mr Storie, who says they consisted of a structureless green fat, with some minute marine univalves, such as might easily be introduced into the stomach with the algae, on which the bird was assumed to feed. This rather staggered me. I had assumed that the green was chlorophyll, which was confirmed by Mr Storie's first report, but now he says, in this last instance, it is a structureless green fat, soluble in alcohol and, as I know, soluble in chloroform. And here it is. So with Dr Arnold's most kind assistance it was submitted to the spectroscope and the spectroscope said in the most decided manner that the green was not chlorophyll. Then the green was not vegetable green, and the microscope declared that the food was not fish food. Then what on earth, or in the sea, can this strange food of petrels be? Gentlemen, art is long and time is fleeting. We must wait. I am fairly puzzled. I must go again, observe and think; but anyway, I have by no means done with this mysterious bird. Done! and had better had said, scarce yet begun. I first thought, because taught they lived on fish. Then thought, surprised at naught, that they were vegetable feeders. (They are fish feeders, not vegetarians, and the green colour is due to chemical changes. – RD, July 1898).

But what of those 30 Shearwaters we found?- Why this, as subsequently we found. Some fishermen had asked one of the farm boys to get them Shearwaters for bait. The boy got 30 and buried them, waiting for the fishermen, and pay; but they came not. Meantime, the Carrion Crow did. He discovered the buried birds, pulled out some; we came next, and then unearthed the whole. That boy swore he would serve fishermen no more, and that upon a Sunday! The Shearwater (one native told me that the English name was 'Watershears') usually lay their eggs in burrows made by rabbits or Puffins. I found that both birds sometimes lay their eggs in unusual places, thus- a Shearwater's egg laid on the projecting ledge of rock which was covered only by an overgrowth of heather, and a puffins in a fissure of rock closed by a fragment of stone, much further inland than the majority breed, and where, from common observation, one would not have expected to find its egg. The essential conditions seeming to be darkness in relative proximity to the sea. The Puffin has the power of so sinking itself in the water that only the head and neck are above the surface; when it is so sunk it uses its wings for propulsion as if flying in the air. I saw the Cormorant do the same thing. I found its egg so much and so distinctly spotted as to resemble a gulls. To my very great regret I broke it in my pocket while climbing the cliffs. There is something very unconventional about this clumsy bird. It is so naturally and delightfully stupid that it reminds one of those persons who occasionally find themselves in unaccustomed surroundings, thus- they descend from the clifftops to the water in concave lines; and one day, while sitting watching below the level of the cliff top, one of them struck me in its flight, and was, it seemed to me, surprised that there were other beings in the world than Puffins on the wing, and we are all Puffins in a way, and dumbly, stupidly perceive that we belong to something other, higher than ourselves, that lifts us from life's petty rivalries and lets us stand where troubles ineffectual waves still have a peaceful land.

June 13th Found a little Lapwing (Plover) not more than one or two days hold. Found a Shearwater's egg chipped and about to be hatched. We brought home to the farm four live Puffins which we had taken from their holes on purpose. Two of these were let go on the flat surface of a grass field, they fled away from us along the surface of the ground in their usual hurried head-over-heels manner, and did not attempt to take wing when pursued and were retaken several times over. The other two we put on the floor of the granary which had open windows about two foot or two foot six inches from the ground level, through which they might easily escape, and left them undisturbed all night. Next morning they were both found trying to conceal themselves in the darkest corner they could find. These two things were done because the natives say that these birds cannot take wing from a flat surface, and here they failed to do so either under the excitement of fear, or when left for 14 hours undisturbed and without food. I had frequently noticed that both old and young Puffins had their crops quite full in the evening. I killed one Puffin chick and found 41 tiny fish about one and a half inches long in its maw. Here is one of them as a sample. This was about seven in the evening. I did not find all young birds had full crops between this hour and 11 p.m., though the old birds were often to be seen coming home in the evening with their bills full of this fish. Next morning I found several young Puffins with distended crops at 10.30, while at 12.30 I found parent and chicks in their burrow both with entirely empty crops. I cut off the parent birds head and noticed its feet were moved in their defensive action fully 2 minutes, and that the heart pulsated very nearly 6 minutes after decapitation. These investigations were too unpleasant to be followed, though the bird is not one to excite great sympathy either by its person, disposition, or habits. It will quarrel and fight with its fellows with the greatest passion and persistence. We noticed many of these contests in the water, in which both birds were frequently submerged for a minute or two, but neither would release the other, and I suppose that many of the dead Puffins we saw were the vanquished parties to these duels, which certainly last for half an hour, and are determined only by the utter exhaustion of one or both. They use both bills and feet in fighting. The beautiful and dove-like Kittiwake is also a persistent fighter, continuing the contest long enough to tire the observer, but they fight like gentlemen, with rapiers, and not like blackguards as the Puffins do.

As Mr Neale's boys had now nearly a dozen young gulls, a part of the days business was to provide food for them, this largely consisted of the eggs blown for preservation and kitchen scraps. One day we caught some eels and frogs for them. When a half-grown frog was put to the young gulls, it cried out in its instinctive alarm as I have heard rats do in the presence of a ferret which was not pursuing them. One of the nestling gulls seized the frog and swallowed it; but it came up again, and cried much louder than before, as if in extremist fear, when it was seized by another of the gulls, and was swallowed for a second time. The frog's shriek, for it was a shriek, was quite different from its ordinary voice, and was one of those sounds which one instinctively recognises as the expression of extreme terror so that it was positively pathetic and painful to hear.

On June 7th we saw a good rainbow at 7.30 p.m., and as we wanted a fine day on the eighth we quoted the old saw with approving satisfaction and faith- "A rainbow in the morning is a shepherds warning; a rainbow at night is a shepherds delight". The 8th was unsettled, gloomy, with frequent showers- not a fine day. This incident brings us to the domain of mythology, the lad of soft half light, inhabited by bats that flutter from shadow to shadow, and even as they go, become transformed- where that ignorant, common creature, Custom, the daughter of Afreetes, brings up her foster babes on lies, by sucking bottles of delusion. A sheep had died, and there it lay swollen almost to bursting point, with longitudinal knife cuts upon its underside, inflicted, before death, by the farmer. The sheep had been bitten by a 'Cuddyaver' or 'Cuttyaver' a venomous little beast inhabiting these isles, which, out of sheer malignity, thus kills the sheep. Its bite is fatal. And why those long incisions?- 'To let the poison out' Could you show us one of these venomous things?- 'Yes, perhaps so'. If you can find one can you bring it to us? - 'No! I will show it to you, but I would not touch one for a five pound note'. A day or two later a 'cuddyaver' was found. We went to see and saw a pretty, a harmless little lizard, two or three inches long. This was the Afritte which loomed large and hideous, or sunk to almost nothingness at will, as these creatures are well known to do. Of what disease the sheep had died none knew, but such deaths are ordinary occurrences in summer. There are no 'cuddyavers' in winter and no sheep die, therefore it is the 'cuddyavers' which bit and kill the sheep. Now, what does all this mean?- Adder is the name of the only poisonous British snake; the word is a mutation of Edder, a Norse word for 'poison'. It is found in Eddercop = Poison spider, and the Welsh have 'Coppyn' for spider. Edder becomes Adder- Adder passes into Avver- to which the prefix Cutty, here sounded Cuddy, is attached. We have Cuttypipe for a short pipe, Cutty-wren for smallest of birds, and Cutty-sark for a short or small skirt, so now we know that this 'Cuddyavver' is simply 'a small poison'. I have here a sheep's cranium whose former owner died of 'Cuddyaver' in 1894. It will also serve to impress upon the eye the extreme smallness of the creature's brain, and so explain the hideous expression of its idiot eye.

We found on one of our islands three varieties of owls- The White or Barn Owl, the Brown or Wood Owl, and the Short-eared Owl. We took a half-grown Short-eared Owl, sitting on the ground and brought it home, where, alas, it met a tragic death at Mr Neale's, where his raven's pulled it into little bits. We saw the Brown Owl repeatedly hawking for field mice (voles) or young rabbits in the daytime while the sun was shining, a habit which, relying on authorities, we should have thought inconsistent with its natural history; still there is the fact, we saw it repeatedly, it was easily distinguished from the White Owl by its colour and from the Short-eared by its form and large round head. Of the latest authorities Saunders (1989) says, p. 288; ' During the day this bird remains concealed and dislikes sunlight more than any other British member of the family' and Bowdler Sharpe (1896, Vol. 2, 101, says: ' It is nocturnal in its habits and seldom flies by daylight'. Yet this is the species which we saw repeatedly on the wing while the sun was shining. We did not find the 'nest' or egg, of either of these owls. But on a very small detached islet we found the White or Barn Owl breeding in a little cave in the rocks overlooking the sea, where only one house was within one mile of it; yet this owl is of all

others the one most frequently found associated with man, as its common name implies. Here we found it about a mile from the nearest house, with well-grown young and fresh eggs in the same nest. I have heard the evidence of its habits, - pellets and animal remains taken from its little cavern. The pellets consist of fur and feathers. The fur is that of the wood mouse and the bank vole (*Microtus glareolus*). There are five crania four of which are of this vole and one that of the woodmouse, and other nine those of the rock pipit only. Very near this owl's house was a considerable colony of the Common Cormorant, in which we found many nests, some containing almost fresh eggs and others half-grown young, ugly creatures covered with sooty black down perhaps a month old. They are said to lay sometimes as many as six eggs, but we saw no nest with more than three eggs or young. As to the economy of these birds, Saunders says, 'They use their wings under water for propulsion as in air for flight'. Bowdler Sharpe, 'That it uses its tail as a rudder underwater, but does not make use of its wings'. I would say to all observers, take nothing for granted, but see before you believe and verify before you record. Follow on authority and you feel safe, consult a second and you will doubt you will doubt both. Personally, in this case, I am with Saunders, and think the Cormorant uses its wings underwater for propulsion.

The cormorant does not feed its young in the usual way. It opens its mouth and the young bird thrusts its head down its parent's throat and takes the contents of its parent's crop. No description can convey an adequate idea of this act, it is most singular, but is easily observed, for in the breeding season these birds are by no means shy, and I conceived therefrom an alternative conception of the expression 'The bowels of compassion'.

We saw the Shag, or Green Cormorant breeding here, - not in colonies like the Common Cormorant, but solitarily, here and there one pair, and few in all, on ledges of rock, amongst Guillemots and Razorbills; but all those we saw were in completely inaccessible places. I have since observed that this is only locally so.

I may just record the fact that, botanically, these islands are not interesting, as the following list of the more notable plants will indicate;- *Rubia peregrina*, *Sedum telephium* (abundant), *Scutellaria galericulata*, *Hydrocotyl vulgaris*, *Senescio sylvaticus* (Abundant and large), *Cotyledon umbelicus* (Eighteen inches high), and *Rosa spinosissima* (Sparingly), *Erythrea polchelia* (White variety). There is not a tree on any of these islands.

Of Insects we noted- Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, Pearl Bordered, and High Brown Fritillary (Rather early June 12th), *Sycaena Argiolus* (Azure Blue), Small Heath, Wood-brown and Meadow-brown Butterflies; and amongst moths, the Humming Bird Hawk Moth, Oak Egger and Five Spot Burnet. This list will serve to show how very casual the observation was, as nothing but the most obvious and commonplace is noted; but it surprised me to find so many species even as these on these treeless, wind-worn islands.

Of birds Stonechat (common), Wheatear (very common), Rock Pipit (abundant). Green Plover (and young ones, two or three days old June 13th),

Pheasant (and found its nest among bracken), Common Blackbird, Nilghtjar, Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, Barn Owl, Brown Owl, Short-eared Owl, Swallow, Sparrow, Corn Bunting, Water Hen (and nest). Common Tern- Puffin, Razorbills, Guillemots, and Manx Shearwaters (all in thousands), Storm Petrels (numerous), Oystercatcher (very common), Cormorant, Shag, Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Herring, Kittiwake, and an undetermined gull.

Of mammals- Homo (several varieties), Seal, Shrew (*Sorex minutus*), Woodmouse, Rabbit, a very large variety of the Bank Vole, no rats on any of the islands; also Frogs, Eels, and the little lizard, which they here call 'Cuttyaver' and regard as poisonous

This is, assuredly an incomplete list, but it shews how rich for a naturalist these small islands are, with the adventitious advantage of so circumscribed a field that observation is easy.

We found upon the shore some ribs and vertebrae and I was asked what they were. Supposing them to represent some unfortunate animal that had fallen over the cliff, I suggested that they were those of a cow; the farmer's boy laughed and said "No-ar they baint, twor a seal what was washed up the winter before last". And the President of the Cardiff Naturalists Society covered his mouth in an attitude of humiliation.

One of Mr Neale's sharp-eyed boys caught a little shrew after sunset. It was the *Sorex minutus*, the smallest British mammal. We brought it home alive, with some pieces of dried turf in which to conceal itself, and put it into a large jar for the night. In the early morning it was dead. The shrews are remarkable and remarkably disagreeable beasts, and are made to typify the disagreeable women of this world,- they are very thin, with long sharp noses and extremely small eyes- like old maids who subsist on tea, scandal and vinegar, which do not conduce to beauty of person, disposition of character. They cannot agree amongst themselves, and if two are caged together one of them soon kills the other and dies itself- of chagrin? Cats, who ought to like them, detest them who will always kill but never eat them. They are rarely seen alive; but in districts in which they abound, are very frequently found dead without assignable cause. They are the very Ishmaels of the animal world. This poor little thing worried itself to death by its ceaseless and frantic efforts to escape from the jar where it had food to eat and dry turf to hide in. A vole, or a mole, a mouse, a bat, or owl would have been almost happy. This peevish little thing killed itself with spleen. You will not understand this as being seriously scientific, but still tis true that (he or she) there is- The Shrew, a very nasty creature.

We caught many voles which so far as I understand, do not agree with either of the two, possible ones found in this country. Of these two, it cannot be the Common Field Vole with which everybody is familiar, and from it differs widely in appearance, colour and size. It is very like the remaining one, The Bank Vole (*Microtus glareolus*) but it is much larger, and I cannot make its teeth agree with Lydekker page 213 (1895) who gives the length of this species

head and body 4 inches, tail one and one third inch equals five and one third inches. These voles measured respectively six inches, six and a half inches, and seven inches, the tail being two inches to two and a quarter inches, so that the smallest is larger than Lydekker's largest.

Now we come to the genus Homo, an individual of this family. One of Mr Neale's sons, in his eager pursuit of science and bird's eggs climbing along the ledges of rock, dislodged a loose mass of some hundredweights, and with it was suddenly precipitated into the deep sea some twenty to thirty feet below. If you could now see whence he fell you would wonder how he escaped a sudden death, and which he did escape only by the accident of a boat and a cool-headed boy, his brother, being sufficiently near to reach him before he sank, although a good swimmer, he was disabled by a blow received in his fall. How he was got into the boat neither he nor his brother knew, but he was, an assistance obtained, we sent home for a cart it was now nearly dark, got him in the cart on a bed of bracken and took him home, well nigh unconscious all the while. Fortunately no serious injury had been sustained. And in a few days he was at his old game again, although a decidedly more cautious fellow.

We found three others of this genus- farm labourers- sleeping in a loft in bedsteads, on which was first placed some straw, then a bed of oatflights, with dark-brown blankets and pillows, all terribly filthy. There was no other furniture but a form- no drawers, closet of toilet-ware, no soap, water, brushes, or other accessories of any kind. From this standpoint their lives seemed suspended, like Mohamet's coffin, between the cave man and a rude civilisation, about equivalent to that of the villain of feudal times, and yet these human beings were not by any means unworthy relatives. It is quite easy to talk of such people with contempt and to feel it too, but they by no means lacked that touch of nature that makes us all akin. Nothing could be kinder than their attitude towards us. Personally I have never been treated with more instinctive consideration than I received from these ignorant and humble people who have never enjoyed any of the advantages of education civilisation, or culture. I am a Conservative- Tory, if you prefer that word; but these men are my relatives, and of my family, I am not ashamed. Let us now turn our attention to a different section of this same genus Homo- Sportsmen, Peer and 'English Gentleman'.

Mr Neale had arranged with the tenant that while we were there to study the birds the islands should not be invaded by strangers and leave to land upon it withheld. One day I was on the cliffs watching, when I repeatedly heard shots which I did not understand. Presently, a boat rounded an angle with three men in it; one of these was shooting at Puffins, Gulls and Guillemots (for sport). I saw the birds drop into the water, but no attempts was made to recover them. 'It was for sport' in the height of the breeding season and many of these victims of sport had young ones which would have to starve. I shouted a remonstrance when I took in the facts; received an execration in extremely choice language; the sporting continued, and a new protest was useless. I saw our own boatman later on and asked who those fellows were who were shooting the birds and he told me. But surely a gentleman would

not use such language as he did? "Why not? He never hears anything else from his father, who never speaks without a curse. Next day we were bathing at the foot of cliffs a hundred and fifty feet high, when stones came over repeatedly and fell unpleasantly near us. Presently we saw three heads appear against the skyline; the stones still falling. We had no idea who they were who threw these, but we could see they were aimed at the Puffins sitting along the verge, and shouted, "Stop that! You fellows up there, or you will hit us". The only reply was, "You go to hell!" I saw these three men afterwards and asked the young farmer who they were. He said they were Lord- his son, and Captain- their friend. We said we thought he would have kept the island free of intrusion while we were there. He said he told them they ought to have asked leave to come, and the reply given him was, "If I had to ask leave everytime, I should have nothing else to do, perhaps I shall buy the island some day"* This gentleman has since purchased the island. The day after this, at our bathing place, I found hiding under a mass of rock a Puffin, with its wing injured and an eye knocked out, in the interest of English sport; in the interest of mercy, I killed it.

Let India perish- trade and commerce die,
But spare- Oh, spare us, God!- our aristocracy.

I have spoken of the Storm Petrel as abundant, but I had been on the island a week before I had heard or seen one; they seem so completely nocturnal. On June 7th I picked up a pair of black wings attached by their bones and tendons so fresh as to show that the bird had been killed and eaten during the preceding night. It could not escape the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor the destruction that wasteth and noonday. Oh, the eating of that accursed apple- the pity on't, the pity on't. These wings were the wings of the Storm Petrel and its enemy was an owl, for not other bird of prey is about when the petrels are on the wing. Consulting the natives we were told that if we wanted petrels we must go out after dark along the dry stone walls or among the heaps of broken rocks and we should hear them. As for the speaker, he could find in the daytime, by using his nose to detect their haunts as a dog would do. This might have been a figure of speech. We could not smell them anywhere, anyhow, but he seemed quite serious, went and found one. At 10 p.m. Mr Neale and I went out to look for petrels. We soon heard a strange voice issuing from a congeries lapidum. Then, within a yard of so of it, another, more strange, more weird, and more varied. The first was 'Churr-Chat, Churr-Churr-Chet'. The other I cannot pretend to illiterate. Having found our first petrels we spread a mackintosh on the ground, lay down upon that covered ourselves with rugs, and watched and listened for upwards of an hour within two or three feet of the birds. With but little intermission they continued their conversation or courting, for courting it was. I smoked and we both talked, so that the birds must have been aware of our presence but that did not disturb them in the least. Ultimately the crooning ceased; then one of the petrels silently emerged, and took wing like a swallow. Five minutes later the other followed. It was now the darkest part of a summer night. We marked the place where they came out for investigation by daylight. We soon found another petrel, not two this time. As we knew what happened in the last instance, we set to work at once removing the stones, directed all the while by

the continual Churr Churr Chet. When we were very near the bird we light a candle and proceeded more cautiously, till presently on lifting out a stone there sat the little petrel quite unconcerned; and then, a little way off, we found its egg, - our first, at midnight, under some hundredweight of stones. While looking at the egg by candlelight, another petrel emerged from its hiding place into the cavity we had made, and there it sat as quiet and unconcerned as its mate had done until it appeared we had no suspicion that there were two. We put the two birds in our pockets and went home with the egg, as proud as peacocks with a plurality of tails. Before going to bed I released the petrels in my bedroom, they flew round and about for a few turns, and then settled for the night. Their fragility and innocence were striking, they allowed themselves to be taken in the hand quite unresistingly, and would nestle in its warmth; still they were not wholly destitute of fear, for when first taken they vomited a little green oily fluid which was without offensive odour. Next morning we took our petrels to a pond and put them into the water, for you know I have suggested that petrels are not truly aquatic birds at all, and here was a rare chance of testing my theory. They used their webbed feet as if unpractised in the art of swimming; their plumage became soaked they escaped to the side and tried to climb out of the water. Being replaced they both took wing from the water as easily as a puffin would have done. Such are the facts, and my witnesses are here. We tried the same experiment with shearwaters in the sea. They did not seem to dislike the water as much as the petrels did, for they swam away a considerable distance before they took wing.

On another occasion when we found a petrel and its egg by moving laboriously huge pieces of loose rock requiring the help of three persons, but ever directed by the birds 'Churr-Chet', the captured bird continued its Churr-Chetting in Mr Neale's hand, such was its infatuated submission to the law of its nature. We released the bird and blew the egg. It was quite fresh. This was on June 12th. In an egg taken 5 days earlier the chick's body was formed so that it was not easily blown.

Now what have we learned of the petrel? We were told by the natives that where we found two Shearwaters in one hole we should not find an egg, and we found it was so. This bird is very nearly allied to our petrel, and so we may expect some analogies with habit etc. When we found our first petrels we had two birds crooning together; the voice of the one being easily rendered by the words 'Churr-Chett', the voice of the other so different as not to lend itself to transliteration and here we found no egg. (courting continued, result in future). In the case of the next two, we heard one bird only, and it said 'Churr-Chett'. The other bird uttered no sound; it was there but silent. (the egg was laid).. In a third case we found one bird only with one egg. It cried 'Churr-Chett' in Mr Neale's hand. (incubation commenced). Now therefore, I am disposed to assume that the voice which we first heard, and which I cannot reproduce was that of the male courting before the egg is laid, and that the 'Churr-Chett' distinguishes the female.

One night we went out at 10.30 to observe Shearwaters, or 'Cukles' as they are here called. They did not begin to come out till nearly eleven; then the

night is at its darkest, and everything except these birds is as silent as the grave, - "Tis then that churchyards yawn and graves give up their dead", and till then I never realised so well what Shakespeare said. The ground now becomes alive with them and the air is thick with their wings. The scene was strange and exciting in the highest degree. The fun became faster and more furious by the minute. We wrapped ourselves in rugs and sat side by side upon a mass of rock. I remembered that on the Bosphorus, where these queer birds have a ghostly habit of flying up and down – up and down, - they are called "Ames Damnees"- lost souls, - and the appropriateness of the epithet as I now understood it made my tingle all over. As a youth I was much moved by the presentation of the Witches Frolic in *McBeth*, and I saw it often repeated in my dreams with an excitement gentle only because of a sense of security from their spells, - it was a show, a tale, and unreality; - but here were real lost souls flying in all manner of directions with the irresponsibility and confusion of unrestrained insanity, - they touched us in their flight, - they flee between our heads as we sat shoulder to shoulder. There were thousands upon thousands of them crying in every key of melancholy sound- "Cuckolds-In-A-Row, Cuckles-Ah-A-Roe, Cuckles-Ah-Char, Cuckles-Ah-Oh, Cuckolds-In-O, Cuckolds-In-A-Row-Co, and one of the startling things was to hear one of these voices rapidly approaching you, stop most abruptly in mid-utterance, and you felt that silence herself had put her hand upon the mouth of one whose eyes just saw a stranger present in this infernal world. You feel this state of things cannot possibly last long, it is does not; at 12.30 it is at its height, by 2 am it has very sensibly decreased, at 2.15 it is almost over, and at half-past completely so. Not a bird is left upon the wing; not one is visible. The silence seems ominous! The sky lightens to the north; the day break is at hand; you feel a slight movement of cool wind; you cannot help but sigh. Then comes a shrill cry, the spell is quite broken, and you are back into the world. Whose that call? - It was the Oystercatcher the warder of the east, who cries, "the dawn! the dawn!". The next to wake are the gulls, the puffins next, and we go home about 3.15, knee deep in bracken drenched in dew. We than had some whiskey and water. I drank the whiskey and Mr Neale had his dew. I went to bed feeling I had seen the world of shades, and when I come to stand by the dark river's side I shall feel that I have been somewhere thereabouts before.

An Island Mystery: Seabirds May Provide the Clue to Luxuriant Herbage

J P Goodwin

Farmer and Stockbreeder September 14th 1948

Islands of the West Wales Coast have long been known to be the resting and breeding places of vast flocks of seabirds, and only in recent years has more attention been given to their farming possibilities. One of them is Skomer standing out in the Atlantic three miles from the Pembrokeshire mainland and here Mr and Mrs T R Codd are farming chiefly rearing fat cattle which reach super special grade without even a handful of feed beyond the herbage of the island.

There has been much conjecture concerning the reason for cattle doing so well there, for Skomer appears to be just a hump of rock of about 800 acres offering little visible means of subsistence to cattle. There are no trees, no shelter from the great winds of the West and South West, and conditions seem wholly unsuited to beef production. Yet four heifers, to take one example, yielded their owner over £50 each above their purchase price after about 18 months stay on the island, and did it only on the keep they found for themselves.

Greener herbage

The Pembrokeshire AEC are undertaking research to find the cause of the thriftiness of stock placed on this island. The herbage is greener than that on the mainland and there is luxuriance of vegetation contrasting sharply with that on other parts of Pembrokeshire. Skomer's vegetation consists mainly of Nardus, fescue and Yorkshire Fog, bracken and heather. There are also many plants commonly regarded as of low nutritive value such as sorrel, bladder campion, and woodsage on which the cattle eagerly graze, and which must possess some beneficial qualities yet undiscovered.

Soil analyses have so far provided no explanation, but recently samples of the grass and weed growth under scientific examination have revealed the presence of a specially luxuriant form of sorrel and campion in particular; so luxuriant indeed, that the examining botanist, knowing nothing of their origin, hazarded the opinion that they appear to have been stimulated by the droppings of sea birds.

The cattle, which Mr Codd introduces from time to time across the narrow but dangerous Jack Sound to his lonely farm are constantly in search of these weeds growing on the ledges of the cliffs which fall from 300 ft sharply into the sea. The animals loose their footing and tumble headlong beyond hope of rescue. So high are his losses of stock by such casualties that he is seeking an alternative plan for farming this 800 acre herbage covered rock for adequate fencing is out of the question since six or seven miles of the stoutest

fencing around the island would be required to give adequate protection to the incautious cattle.

A beginning has been made with sheep in what is called 'The Neck' of Skomer, the eastern portion of 75 acres, separated from the rest of the island by a narrow strip of land which can be and is effectively fenced off. Ewes and followers numbering about 130 are already on this portion from which they have eliminated the ragwort and grazed the vegetation down to a verdant smoothness. Losses among these sheep through falls are very low, and some means may be devised of extending the flock of Kerry Hill ewes and their crosses to the main part of the island.

Transport to and from the island is of course the prime and constant problem. Mr and Mrs Codd convey all their output and all their supplies by small boats.

The Only Building

Sometimes the weather forbids the launching of a boat for days on end. And the only road is a rough affair of rough stones on the bare rock climbing to a height of several hundred feet by a zig-zag route to the farmhouse- the only building- standing at the highest point. Yet they succeeded last year in ploughing 30 acres for potatoes, cereals and rape for the first time, it is believed, for many years, and 16 acres seeded out were cut for hay this season.

It is believed that Skomer could make a substantial contribution through its natural fertility and the renewal thereof by the droppings of the myriad of birds in spring, to the national larder.

A Visit to Skomer 1903

By the Vicar of St Martins Haverfordwest
St Martin's Haverfordwest Parish Magazine

Always have I felt the reproach that I have not visited all my parish, for there lay in the Atlantic a little island which all the billows of the mighty ocean have not succeeded in wiping out of the Parish of S. Martin. It vexed me like a bit of gravel in one's boot. Why it is in the Parish when it is right out in the sea and separated by 14 miles of roadway, you must ask Mr Johnny Phillips or some other learned authority, but in the Parish it is and I have been 5 years meaning to visit it, and have only yesterday –May 22nd – succeeded in doing it.

In these days of motor cars and obliging friends it is so much easier to make a distant and difficult visit than it was for my predecessors, so I am venturing to think that I am the first vicar for a considerable time that has paid this romantic island a visit, and more probably still, the first Vicar to have baptised a little parishioner on it.

Of the journey down nothing special need be said as we tore between the green hedges blazing like fire with gorse and radiant with campion, but on the little beach called St Martin's Haven- from its name we seemed on home ground- there awaited us, for we were four in all, a boat of some substance, for it is needed, as we found on our homeward journey, and a couple of boatman.

The outward voyage just on 2 miles was safely made, with very considerable rowing. One has 'mainland' island on the south, and Skokholm peeping away beyond it and the sides of Skomer were soon sheltering us from the roll. We landed just by The Neck which unites the northern and southern parts of the island, running the boat up on the stony beach. The air was balmy and full of the scent of flowers, and the sweep of the side of the island was a purple haze of bluebells. There is but one house on the island, where the gamekeeper lives, and where the tenant of Lord Kensington Mr Neale of shipping fame, has his quarters. Mr Neale is a passionate enthusiast over birds, and perhaps knows about as much of the seabird as any living authority, and on the island he or his sons spend a good deal of time. Else there is but the gamekeeper and his wife and their four little children.

As the reader may imagine the sea voyage had created a considerable appetite, so we made our luncheon with great appreciation, lying at the foot of a crag with the most glorious view of St Bride's Bay before us; Ramsey lying away on the distant horn, separated from the mainland by its rushing Sound.

After luncheon we were taken by two of Mr Neale's sons to be shown two golden eagles which is father was rearing; magnificent birds, kings of the feathered world, chafing doubtless at their confinement but kept there for fear of the damage they would do should they leave the island and prey on the sheep and lambs of the mainland.

Then we started to explore and reached the most northern point- the island by the way is about 3 miles in length. The views of the distant coast, the cliff scenery, the Atlantic pelting against the rocks, two or three hundred feet below, the birds of every species wheeling, screaming, building, nesting – all of it gave one a feeling of wonderful delight. One felt one was out in the midst of God Almighty's own world, which no man had tampered with or spoiled.

It is a real bird land this island of Skomer. We saw gulls and puffins without number, oystercatchers, 'popples' and ever so many more, which I am not ornithologist enough to recognise or describe. Here you get hawks and bustards, falcons and ravens, we heard the voice of the pheasant, and saw the broken egg shells where the mischievous jackdaws or the carrion crow had left traces of their theft, having first robbed some sister bird's nest, eaten the contents, and like modern trippers left the fragments of their feast.

There came what seemed like a serious adventure, though it was ridiculous enough too, considering the size of the island. A fog, dense enough to hide the sea almost at the base of the cliffs had blown over the land from the Southwest. All traces of where we wanted to get were blotted out, after an hour and a half we were completely lost. We tried in vain to get back to the farmhouse, and it might well have been that we should have been there yet- if the fog had not lifted- had not the Messrs Neale come out to look for us. They started one south and the other north and shot off their guns. Guided by the sound at last we found them, or they us, and so back safely to the farm.

Then an unexpected and to me intensely delightful experience occurred. I had not paid yet a visit to the farm itself to my parishioners. I did so receiving a kindly welcome, and there I found a little baby unbaptised and the mother desiring baptism for it. So without prayer book or vestment with a bowl of water on the kitchen table the little Baby of the Island was received into the arms of the Blessed Saviour and William Eustace was made 'a member of Christ, the Child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven'.

The homeward journey was made through the fog-laden air and this I frankly confess the least pleasing feature, for as we neared 'Jack Sound', which lies between the Islands, the water was roaring through like a mill race. One was in the midst of seething billowy waters, tearing out to the mighty ocean which seemed to boil around our craft. The boatmen made nothing of it but pulled on their oars with a dogged stubbornness till we were out in smooth waters again. They told me afterwards that the 'race' was nothing- absolutely nothing- that afternoon, but that sometimes the water would be dashing into the boat on either side, and then they would have to look about them.

I couldn't have been accompanied with better companions than I was, namely the Reverend Harry Morgan of St Brides, Messrs T Y Lewis, and John Phillips. They have between them a store of natural history, archaeological lore, and everything else that an ignorant person like myself needed to know, and if ever Skomer is formed into a Diocese and I am made bishop of it, I will make the Reverend H Morgan my Archdeacon of it, Mr Lewis my Chancellor, and Mr John Phillips Registrar; and the seabirds at any rate and the flowers

and the cliffs will have three officers to understand their nature and their requirements.

The Manx Shearwater on Skomer Island

by Richard M Barrington

The Zoologist (1888) pp 367-371

For over twenty years I have been visiting out-of-the-way islands on our western and southern coasts, from North Rona to St. Kilda, and thence southwards to the Skelligs and Blaskets:- not merely flying visits, but living on them for days and weeks at a time in the height of the breeding-season. I have scarcely missed a year. Notwithstanding this I have been slow to record my experiences in print. Wishing to examine the breed station of the Gannet, at Grasholme Island, off the coast Pembrokeshire, I pitched my tent on Skomer Island, towards the end of the first week in June last, about eight miles nearer shore, the position and appearance of which has been well described by the Rev. Murray A. Mathew in 'The Zoologist' November, 1884. Not a Manx Shearwater was seen all day except one or two which swept over the waves as we were crossing; but it is well known that owing to its crepuscular habits, the number seen in the daytime affords little indication of the proximity or otherwise of a breeding-station.

All went well until about 9.30 p.m. We were enjoying quiet of the evening, watching the thousands of Puffins, in midst of which we were camped, flying from the edges of the cliffs out to sea and back again. The island is about four miles round, I should say, and I think that of all I have ever visited it would take first prize for Puffins, St. Kilda, where I stayed three weeks, being a good second. The boatmen had left us, but we were informed that numerous as were the Puffins, the Shearwaters on Skomer were still more abundant. I had a friend with me (V.), and we strolled along the cliffs for a walk; the ground (like all Puffin-breeding stations), was honeycombed with holes, and our feet went through every moment. "Do you hear that?" I said. "What?" said V. "Listen at this hole, I said. "Cuck-cuck-oo, cuck-cuck-oo, cuck-cuck-oo" (the "oo" was sounded like "oh," occasionally like "aw"). There was no mistake: it was a Manx Shearwater; the first we had heard. V. became excited and determined to get the bird. We rooted away with our hands at the bank for about two yards; the hole went gradually deeper, the Shearwater inside, at intervals of a minute or so, still crowing, "Cuck-cuck-oo." It seemed to be getting louder, and this gave us hopes of reaching the bird. Our hands were now quite tired, dirty, and the finger-nails broken with scraping. We got a huge piece of driftwood and prised up the soft bank, using a stone as a fulcrum. This brought us about four feet farther. Still the crowing continued the noise outside apparently stimulating the Shearwater to louder efforts. V. now got an old crowbar, as the driftwood was rotten. This bar was used in connection with a hoisting-derrick on the edge of the cliff; we did not bring it with us. The bar helped us about two yards farther, and V.'s enthusiasm was beginning to flag, but the defiant crows of the Shearwater inside urged him on, and he kept at it. We were both extremely warm (to use no stronger term), and rested ourselves for a moment, listening to the loud cries of the bird in the hole, which were more vigorous than ever, when we heard another close by. It was 10.15 p.m. We had been following-the first Shearwater as if it was

the only one in Skomer. " Try the second one," said I; "it may be easier to reach." Ere we could attempt anything we heard a third, a fourth, a fifth. In twenty minutes the whole ground seemed alive with them; Shearwaters crowded in every hole, where half-an-hour previously there was a dead silence, save occasionally the "oh" of a Puffin.

Presently the sounds, which were at first rather deep down, came nearer the entrances of the holes. It was quite dusk, yet we distinctly saw the white breasts and under parts of the Shearwaters as they fluttered out of the burrows. The crowing was no longer confined to underground regions; it soon began over overhead, and the swift swerving flight of *Puffinus anglorum* crossed, and recrossed our line of vision against the lighter parts of the sky. Now every hole seemed to deliver up its occupant, and as we went back to the tent, Shearwaters fluttered across the path in dozens, everywhere making for the edge of the cliff, or for some prominence from which they could rise. They were crowing all the time, those overhead as well as those in the holes. The air became alive with Shearwaters answering those underground, the rush of their wings as they sailed past with extraordinary swiftness would of itself have made a loud volume of sound, but when the night-air was filled with their cries in addition, it was indeed as if Bedlam were let loose. The note is always the same,— "cuck-cuck-oo,"—generally repeated three times, and with a varying degree of loudness and of harshness, or hoarseness, which is concentrated in the final "oo." We lay down to sleep, but it was a mockery, for as the night wore on, the noise became worse and at times awful, and the maximum of intensity was reached about 11.30 p.m. The tent was on a slope about 150 feet over the sea, and though rather out of the track of the Shearwaters on their fluttering career downwards, they repeatedly banged themselves with all their force against the sides. It was as if some one kept throwing clods of turf against the canvass.

Unable to sleep, we determined to go out, and either frighten or kill some of the Shearwaters. Armed with a stick each walked about two hundred yards, and caught or killed all we could carry—forty to fifty—in about half-an-hour. On the steep slope over the sea we had few chances, because they were quickly able to fly; but further up, amid the heat bracken and on bare level places, the Shearwaters cannot rise but flutter along the ground twenty, thirty, and even a hundred yards or still further, if there is no hillock from which they can rise, and here they could be knocked over with ease. Even on a moderate slope they cannot rise immediately, at all events they did not do so, and probably if a Manx Shearwater were placed on a level floor it might not be able to fly at all.

Has any one tried the experiment? At all events facts are stubborn things, and in the dim light of a summer's night, on Skomer Island, in June this year, my friend and I caught or killed numbers of Manx Shearwaters, fluttering over level ground or down a moderate incline, quite unable to rise. Some Shearwaters actually crowded in my hand as I carried them to the tent by the legs. Our midnight raid had no effect whatever in quieting the birds, and we got no-sleep until after three in the morning, when the noisy multitude began to enter their holes again, and after three not a crow of a Shearwater was

heard until about ten the next night. It will thus be seen that in summer-time the great bulk of the Manx Shearwaters feed only five hours or thereabouts out of the twenty-four. They are seventeen hours in the holes, during which time one might travel all over Skomer Island and not see one, and very few noticed in the daytime at sea.

I cannot agree with the [Rev. Mr. Mathew](#), in describing the noise made by the Shearwaters as a "soft, weird, and unearthly chorus, though I have no doubt it "resembled nothing he had ever listened to before. "If there was one attribute of the noise more striking than another, it was not only the want of softness, but the hoarseness, or harshness, of the final "oo," or "co," or "caw," sometimes shrieked desperately from the throats of the flying Shearwaters. In the holes, and at a distance, the noise appeared more subdued.

We stayed three or four nights on Skomer, which will ever be associated in my mind with the Manx Shearwater. As I have visited a great many islands, I venture to express an opinion that Skomer is the greatest British breeding-place of the Manx Shearwater, and, for its size, perhaps the greatest in Europe. The birds are not confined to the edge of the cliffs (indeed they rather avoid the extreme edge, which is mainly colonized by Puffins), but breed all over the island. The Puffins and Shearwaters constantly live in the same holes, but the Shearwaters seem to burrow deeper than the Puffins, and the Puffins do not breed so far inland. Skomer is largely devoted to rabbits, and the courteous and hospitable owner, Capt. Davies, complains bitterly of the injury done to him by the Shearwaters and Puffins. He states that they have become far more numerous since the passing of the Sea Birds Protection Act, and have driven away the rabbits, disturbing the does in the breeding season. The Shearwaters he complains most of, because they breed everywhere, and take possession of the rabbit-holes in the very centre of the island. Captain Davies offered a small reward for their destruction one evening to his farm-boys, and he told me they brought him I think it was twenty-four dozen Shearwaters in a few hours, striking them with sticks as they ; fluttered along the ground attempting to fly. The eggs are so very deep in the holes they are difficult to obtain.

Mr. Dixon says the " Manx Shearwater is one of the commonest birds of St. Kilda"; but he was unable, he tells us; to land on " Soa, their great stronghold." owing to "the tremendous swell which was breaking over it." I visited Soa the year previous to Mr. Dixon's excursion to St. Kilda, and found it was a large island grazing one hundred and fifty to two hundred sheep, and more than one thousand feet high,—very unlikely to be covered with even a " tremendous swell,"—and I should say that the Shearwaters of Skomer Island are much more numerous. On some future occasion I may trouble you with a few notes on St. Kilda birds, as my experiences do not altogether coincide with those of Mr. Dixon. At present my subject is the Skomer Shearwaters, whose noise and numbers have made a vivid and lasting impression on me. Mr. Dixon's notes on the St. :Kilda Shearwater will be found in ' The Ibis' for 1885, p. 94, and in Mr. Seebohm's ' British Birds,' vol. iii., p. 491.

A Visit to Skomer Island

By Murray A Mathew

The Zoologist 8 433- 439 1884

In delightful weather at the end of May I was able to gratify a long-formed wish to visit Skomer Island, and to make acquaintance with its birds, particularly the Manx Shearwaters. I had the advantage of the company of Mr Mortimer Probert, of St Davids, who is an enthusiastic oologist. Received with no little kindness by the hospitable occupier of the island and his family, we saw the sights of his interesting domain under most favourable circumstances, and much that is stated below is the result of information which he imparted to us.

Skomer Island lies off the south-west of Pembrokeshire, at the southern extremity of St Bride's Bay, corresponding with Ramsey Island, which occupies a similar position to the north, and like the sister island is parted from the mainland by a narrow sound of deep water through which the tide rushes with great force. The sounds which part the two islands from the shore have besides the same characteristic in being studded with rocks, which render them rather dangerous for navigation when there is anything like a sea on, which is generally the case. In area Skomer contains about 700 acres. All over its surface large citadel-looking rocks crop up, and give to the island its name, which is taken from a Danish word signifying "the rocky". Remains of an ancient occupation are visible in sepulchral barrows, and in the rough outlines of dwelling places and enclosures. A conspicuous mark in the eastern side of the island is a lofty upright stone. There are similar stones on the mainland, which are said to mark victories gained by Harold over the Danes. The village of Haroldston takes its name from such a memorial.

A visitor to the island in the summer-time is struck with astonishment at the vast multitudes of Puffins which resort to it for nesting. They are everywhere, and are so tame that they hardly trouble to move out of one's way. In walking, you are sure sooner or later to find your foot slipping through into some Puffin's burrow, astonishing the bird sitting placidly on its egg. The whole demeanour of the Puffins may be said to be placid. It is not easy either to hurry them or to frighten them. Every now and then they may be seen scuttling out of their holes and making off in a ridiculous manner, rolling and tumbling head over heels before at last they can rise on wing. Unless they face the wind, or are on an eminence, Puffins are unable to fly and when these conditions are not present to them they may be easily caught. All along the edge of the cliffs they were to be seen thickly congregated; their white breasts turned towards us had the appearance of monster snow-flakes. The only notice taken by the birds of our approach was to fall in, in closer order, the outside ones advancing together with an absurd kind of military precision until the host was drawn up to the brink of the cliff four or five deep. And even then, unless one went close up to them, they remained stolidly motionless, regarding the stranger with no apprehension and with much indifference out of their queer little eyes. Throw a stone at them, and the bird near which it passes will only duck its head. As we were watching a great

body of Puffins, wheeling backwards and forwards over the water, we suddenly noticed one with pure white wings, which was a very conspicuous object among its companions. After a while this bird flew several times close by where we were seated, and might easily have been dropped had a gun been at hand. The Puffins arrive on Skomer with great punctuality on the 1st of April, and leave the island early in August. The Manx Shearwaters are a little earlier in coming and later in their departures.

In the bird way Skomer possesses two phenomena, being the great multitude of its Puffins, the other the equally vast hosts of the Manx Shearwaters. During the daytime none of the Shearwaters were visible, being all asleep in their burrows. Anyone walking over the island might have little notion of the vast population slumbering just under his feet, in the deepest rabbit-hearths, or in the holes of their own excavation. Since the Sea Birds Protection Act was passed, the rabbits on Skomer have greatly diminished in numbers; the annual take, which used to be 9000 is now barely 8,000. As the rabbits are the chief produce of the island, this represents a serious loss. The Herring Gulls are the greatest depredators, being for ever on the hunt for young rabbits; and the Puffins and Shearwaters are continually worrying the breeding rabbits in their burrows, thus contributing their share of the mischief. The Shearwaters do not emerge from their holes until dark. At 10 p.m. there was no sign of them, but going out at midnight the whole island seemed alive, and the air vocal with their unearthly wailing cry.

From the sky above, from the ground at one's feet, and from below the ground, the noise proceeded, and was compared by a friend to the cry of jackals at night, and it seemed to us that the words "Come over the wall," "Come under the wall," rapidly repeated in a sibilant whisper, would represent the sound which surrounded us. It was not a deafening noise, far from it; rather a soft weird, and unearthly chorus, resembling nothing we had ever listened to before. It was too dark to see the birds, unless as they flew directly overhead, but we could hear them fluttering close by, and feel our cheeks fanned by their wings. A setter we had with us caught the birds and brought them to our hands uninjured as fast as we could take them from her; and it would have been easy in this manner to have captured hundreds, or aided by a lantern to have run down the birds and knocked them over with sticks. One night we were told that the farm servants actually destroyed a multitude in this manner, and that the bodies of the birds were ploughed into the ground as a dressing for wheat. Alas, poor "cockles"! to what vile uses did they come. NB "Cockle" is the local name for the Manx Shearwater, from the noise the bird makes when its nest is dug into. The night we spent on the island the wailing of the birds was incessant until about 3 a.m., and at the first streak of dawn it died away as they then retired to their holes.

We were out early in the morning to perambulate the island, and came upon a single Shearwater at the mouth of its burrow, and no rabbit could have made a more precipitate bolt than it did on our approach. After peering into many rabbit-homes we at last found one in which a "cockle" was to be seen, distant about an arm's length, sitting either asleep or upon its egg; and not coveting its treasure, after a good look into the hold we left it undisturbed. We

searched in vain for the White-winged Puffin, which was either out on the water, or in its hole, or somewhere else out of sight./ On the top of the island we came upon numerous Sea Pies, nesting in the stunted heather and fern. The old birds wheeling above our heads and keeping up an incessant piping of alarm and anger, were very handsome objects, with their vividly contrasted black and white plumage standing out well against the blue sky. We could find no eggs, and all the birds seemed to have young; and it was not long before some little chicks were detected crouching beneath the shooting bracken. These bore a great resemblance to young Peewits, but had far stouter legs. We sat down for some time opposite a grand cliff at Wick Haven, on the south-west side of the island, which swarmed with myriads of birds. The lower ledges were occupied by countless Kittiwakes seated on or beside their nests, which, like the structures of the House Martin, seemed made with mud. On the higher ledges sat Razor-billed Auks and Guillemots row upon row, in places five and six deep, and every coign of vantage on the top of the cliff was occupied by the inevitable Puffin. A babel of sounds came forth from these innumerable birds, the coarse cackle of the Kittiwakes, which seemed to formulate the complaint, "tobacco I want, tobacco I want," prevailing over all.

Walking further on we came to a spot where a little colony of Lesser Black-backed Gulls had taken up a station on the top of the cliff, and soon found several nests containing eggs. A little later I nearly trod upon a Whimbrel among the fern. The bird walked slowly off, trailing its wings- suspicious behaviour which made me search for its nest, but none was found. It would have been a grand discovery could Whimbrel's eggs have been detected so far south as Skomer. Choughs and Ravens were noticed about the cliffs but the absence of all hawks surprised us; not even a Kestrel was visible. We were told that a pair of Peregrines had an eyrie upon the island, and that Buzzards sometimes visited it. An old stone wall was pointed out to us as frequented by Stormy Petrels; which place their nests, like Wheatears almost in the interstices of the stones; but we were not fortunate enough to find what would have been to us one of these interesting nests. Partidges thrive very well on Skomer, and in the season good bags are made. The island possesses an immunity from rats. Mice are abundant, and are looked after by numerous White Owls, which have their habitations among the rocks.

While gazing on the myriads of sea-birds, we could not help thinking what an enormous quantity of fish there must be in the adjacent waters to maintain them, and what immense numbers the birds must capture. When the young Puffins are hatched the old birds may be seen returning from fishing to their burrows, with little fish hanging like ribbons, two or three on either side of their beaks. These little fish are presumable young herrings. But no doubt there are enough fish in the green depths for all the birds, for all the seals, for all the larger predaceous fish, and for all the fishermen who go after them; and plenty over when the wants of all these are appeased to the full. Seals are not scarce around Skomer, and inhabit the caves at the base of the cliffs. We were favoured by the sight of one. As we sat among the sea-pinks (what singular cushions these plants form!), on the side of the island looking down on one of the havens, the seal was immediately beneath, and in the clear

water his movements were perfectly visible. Every now and then he would lift his head just above the surface, and gaze up at us in a lazy indifferent manner, and then we could see him sink again and slowly paddling beneath the water among the masses of many-coloured sea-weed. An ordinary sight this to dwellers upon the island, but to landsmen like ourselves, the apparition of the seal appeared something to be preserve among the pleasant pictures stored away in the gallery of memory.

The experiment has been tried on Skomer of removing the eggs from the Gulls' nests and substituting hens' eggs, which have been invariably hatched out, and the chickens then removed to the farm-yard. Even a pair of Carrion Crows were successfully entrusted with a quota of hen's eggs, and this, which might well seem a risky venture, resulted in the due appearance of the chickens and their safe removal home. The fact that one of them was black, although he eggs were the produce of fowls in which that colour was not represented, was of course regarded by the farm people as due to the influence of the Crows.

I must not omit to state that there are no Common Terns upon Skomer, as I erroneously asserted in my paper on the Birds of Pembrokeshire (p. 218); but a small colony of about twenty pairs, as I learned from the boatman who brought us across, inhabit Skokolm Stack, a large rock off the eastern end of Skokolm Island, some four or five miles distant from Skomer, and this would appear to be the only breeding-station of these birds in Pembrokeshire waters.

Skomer, like Lundy and Ramsey, is without either bush or tree, and does not appear to be dowered with the same wealth of wild flowers that one finds on those two island. The white lychnis, and the beautiful wild roses of Ramsey were absent form Skomer. But as one walks round its cliffs there are some grand effects of colour. At one place the rocks are coal black; this is at their base, and where they contrast with the green sea-water and sea weeds of varied hues; higher up there are larger masses of deep orange-colour, while intermingling are rocks of brown and grey of different shades.