

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 the 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.