

Birds of Ailsa Craig

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THE GUILLEMOT.

The Common Guillemot (*Uria Triole*) or, as it is commonly called in the Firth of Clyde, Ailsa Cock, is next to the gannet the most numerous of the birds breeding on Ailsa Craig. It is known over vast areas, breeding extensively in the Faroes, in Iceland and along the greater part of the Northern European coast-line; it breeds extensively on the American coast-line also.

It is claimed by some that there are two distinct species, the Common and the Brindled Guillemot; but in all my experience of the bird I have never been able to separate them, as it seems to me the so-called brindled guillemot is younger only and has not yet fully acquired the more mature plumage of the older birds, which in some cases becomes very dark over the back, head and throat. This plumage can be fairly accurately described as a sooty black, while the under parts are a spotless white. The bill, which is very pointed and can give a very serious bite, is black and the legs and feet are smoke-coloured.

The guillemot is resident in the Firth of Clyde over the whole year, and while it is very powerful on the wing it spends a very considerable part of its life swimming on the surface. When in search of food it flies under water and reaches very considerable depths in doing so, as birds are found drowned in nets set on the bottom in up to one hundred and eighty feet of water.

The bird is suffering very severely from the effects of crude oil and tar disposed of by steamers, and although there is an international law prohibiting the pumping of crude oil or any such substance near the land, there is no diminution of the trouble so far as one can judge. I have been often asked what was the meaning of the white streaks one sees on the surface when a light wind makes the surface of the sea dark, or why dark strips are seen when the sea is calm. In both cases this is caused by tide waves that have gathered oil and dirt together. For the sea is ever cleanly and casts her dirt ashore ultimately; and as the tides have gathered the dirt together, so they convey the animalculæ which are at the mercy of the current into these streaks also.

Every fisherman knows that where this feeding is the fishes, too, will congregate; and when the fish are there it follows the birds will also be. Our guillemot, which feeds to a great extent on small herring, is attracted with the others, but, as he swims on the surface here and there among the dirt, one can

watch that pretty white under part becoming more and more dirty. Ultimately the whole body gets clogged up and the wings become sealed to the bird's side; and at length, no longer able to fly, it finds its way to some rock on the sea-shore, where it sits cleaning and preening its feathers, and starves to death because it never can succeed. I had the matter brought very forcibly to my notice during the season of 1933. I was sitting on the shore of the Swine's Cave on Ailsa Craig, when my attention was drawn to quite a number of guillemot making a vain endeavour to rise off the water, and they were so close inshore in the lee of the island that it could be easily seen they were covered with this dirt. The thing was so tragic that it left me wondering from what place in the Firth they had swum since (they could not fly), and if their desire to rise and get ashore on the island was perhaps caused by there being an egg to hatch or a young one to feed had not tragedy overtaken them. This is, of course, something they are ignorant of, this man-made nuisance, and one wonders what may be the outcome of it all. Are we ultimately to lose some of these sea birds, or will man substitute some other driving force with no residue of dirt? I should say, however, in spite of it all, that the guillemot is almost holding its own as a breeding specimen on Ailsa Craig.

The nesting of the guillemot on Ailsa Craig takes place from the middle of May and continues for two or three weeks. One egg only is laid. The egg, which is very pointed, measures about three and a quarter by two inches, with some slight variation. It is claimed to be the largest egg for the size of the bird in the world; by comparison, while the bird is no bigger than a wood pigeon, the egg is at least equal in size to that of a turkey. It is generally understood that where one egg only is laid the bird lives over a number of years, while the size of the egg is a fair guide to the ability of the chick to get about at quite an early age.

The bird chooses the broken ledges on the almost perpendicular cliff and deposits the egg on the bare rock. I remember once seeing a ledge that had a sort of cavity at the back where the eggs had rolled together, and quite two dozen guillemot were huddled together, their wings spread over one another and their heads rising through the spread-out wings. While there is little doubt that the shape of the eggs tends to keep them from rolling off the nesting-ledge, huge numbers do roll over and are broken. I am most emphatically of the opinion that steamers sailing round the island should be rigidly debarred from making any noise to scare the birds into rising hurriedly from sitting on the egg, because great numbers are destroyed in consequence.

I remember an incident that I witnessed that is worth telling. I was creeping underneath the Tootin Stone, a huge boulder of the native rock that in falling from some part of the

cliff higher up had come to rest on the top of some boulders on the very edge of the cliff in such a way that you felt you could almost push it over. Underneath this rock was a favourite place for guillemot nesting, and on this particular day when I crawled through towards the edge of the cliff near the Watery Cave, about two feet from my eyes a guillemot was working with its egg that somehow had been displaced from a narrow flat corner where it had been lying, and was now on a very pronounced slope. The bird was working the egg upward with its wing and foot and bill, using intelligence, in spite of what some men say, till at last it managed it safely into the flat corner, and with a murmur of satisfaction, it seemed, it raised its head, looked into my eyes and flew off. Well, that was one egg I didn't take.

The period of incubation of the guillemot must be quite a lengthy one, because of the size of the eggs, the thickness of their shell, etc. The eggs, no two of which have ever been seen alike, are very beautiful, ranging from an egg as spotless and white as a hen's to a dark steel grey. The white variety may vary to pepper and salt in some cases, or have small or very large black blotches. Some have a creamy ground-colour with black or brown or rich red markings, while others are veined and scrolled in the most fantastic way; and altogether to those who are really interested, a first look at the eggs is a sight never to be forgotten.

When hatched the chick remains for two or three days on the cliff and then one of the parent birds "cuddles doon" beside it and gets it on top of its back, sitting at the junction of the wings and the base of the neck; then, slipping over the edge, it volplanes away to the sea. There is occasionally disaster as the young one falls from the parent's back; and if it happens near the foot of the cliff, it seems the old bird in most cases does not find the chick, which is left, of course, to die.

It is worth noting that once the young bird goes off with the single parent the other parent drops entirely out of its life, as in a lifetime I have never seen two old birds with the young one. The young bird takes to the life very quickly and in a few days seems to be very much at home. If molested in any way by passing boats the parent bird becomes almost frantic, and I have seen one fly at the boat and, striking it, fall back into the sea.

THE RAZORBILL.

This member of the Auk family is very much scarcer than the guillemot as a breeding specimen on Ailsa Craig. Though it is slightly less in size than the guillemot, when sitting on the water or even flying it gives an impression of being larger. It is a very

handsome bird. Its very dark over part, with a very slight greenish tinge, is intensified by the spotless white under part, while the throat is brown.

There is little doubt that the razorbill is becoming very much scarcer on the Craig than it used to be, and this, of course, is caused by the fact that the nesting-site often comes within easy reach of the rats which infest the island. The single egg with, in some cases, a slightly green or cream-coloured ground, may be finely dotted with small black or brown spots varying to much larger blotches, which make the egg very pretty; but it cannot be claimed save in very few cases to be so outstandingly pleasing as the egg of the guillemot.

No attempt is made at nest-building, the single egg being laid in a crevice in the cliff under a loose boulder or any odd corner among the debris accumulated on the roll of the cliff top called the Barr Heads. Unlike the guillemot's the egg is most often laid in a situation where it cannot easily roll off the cliff. The nesting-site comes within reach of the rats in a great number of cases, and as the young razorbill is fed on the nesting-site, there is little doubt that huge numbers of them are destroyed annually.

The razorbill seems to feed nearer the shore than the guillemot and puffin, and it may be seen escorting its young one along the sandy bays of the coast which sand eels frequent. As with the guillemot, the one parent only looks after the chick when it leaves the Craig.

It is worth pointing out that, so far as I can judge from the dead birds seen on the shore, a lesser percentage of razorbills than of guillemots seem to die from the crude oil menace. An explanation might be found in the fact that their feeding grounds are not so local as those of the guillemot, which confines itself more directly to herring fry.

It is stated that the bird swims under water, but with this I entirely disagree. I have watched it fly under clear shallow water where I could see every movement. It is pretty safe, when the wings and flight feathers are short and bristly, to infer that the bird will fly under water.

THE PUFFIN.

Here we have the bird that is the tragedy of Ailsa Craig, for whereas it used to be by far the most numerous bird on the Craig, within recent years it has almost ceased to breed there. It breeds along the whole European seaboard and is very plentiful on the

coasts of Greenland and north of the Arctic Circle, while in the islands and mainland of the north of Scotland it breeds in extensive colonies. The bird is migratory and in the Firth of Clyde is very rarely in the vicinity of Ailsa Craig during the month of March; but it is not very long in the Firth till it takes up its nesting-site on the rock, though egg-laying begins only about the middle of May.

The nesting-site on Ailsa Craig was either in a rabbit burrow or a hole dug in the soft, peaty soil of the upper slopes of the island, in a crevice of a rock, or under loose boulders among the debris fallen from the cliff, particularly about the West Trammins or among the Puffin Garries—accumulations of loose rock on the southern upper slopes of the island—but it is very rarely laid on a shelf of rock like a guillemot's. One single egg is laid, about the size of a hen's egg, though it is rather rougher in texture and varies slightly from being white, through having a faint zone of red spots round the thicker end, to being spotted all over with tiny brownish-red spots, in a few cases having bigger blotches of the same colour. The young bird is fed in the nesting-site till it is able to fly to the sea and fend for itself. I have never seen a parent bird accompanying a young puffin and I have rarely ever seen anything in nature so completely master of its surroundings as a young puffin as it sits "trimmed down by the stern," as a sailor would say, giving a very businesslike impression. At this stage the young one can be quite easily confused with the Little Auk, which is not uncommon in the Firth at certain periods. The young in due course migrate also.

I have never been able to solve the problem of how the parent manages to hold the herring fry or sand eels that it carries to the young bird in the nesting-site. It will alight quite close, having little fear of humans, and one can easily see these small fish hanging from the bill; it leaves one wondering how it can hold the ones already caught and open its bill to catch others. There is nothing about the sheathed bill—which it acquires for the breeding season only and sheds when the nesting period is over—to give any help in solving this problem. The bird flies under water in search of its food.

I called the story of our puffin a tragedy, and if I say that the bird was breeding in countless thousands there when I first went to Ailsa Craig fifty years ago, and that to-day there is scarcely a puffin breeding on the island, I feel you will agree. Immediately before that time a ship called the "City of Austria" came ashore loaded with a general cargo among which there were evidently rats that managed to go ashore. Those who know the Craig know it is a veritable warren of rats during the nesting season; and these rats, helped probably by such others as might be carried to the island

by coal boats, or cargo steamers in later years carrying stone sets, etc., multiplied enormously and the eggs of the puffin and the defenceless young birds became an easy prey to the rats.

We used to laugh at the sucked eggs lying everywhere, but as the trouble increased the skeletons of the parent birds could be seen in the nesting-site everywhere, proving that the rats had extended their activities. Year by year the birds dwindled, till some twenty years ago I went with some friends who were anxious to see the egg *in situ*; and though eight of us searched among the Puffin Garries for an afternoon we saw not one single bird or egg, where less than thirty years before the bird was nesting everywhere.

I come to an interesting part of the story. Fifteen or sixteen years ago the birds came in decreasing numbers at the usual time, but they did not go to Ailsa Craig to nest; they simply sat or fed over the Firth. I wondered at this, and for a year or two could not reason out why it should be; till one summer morning, coming across from Arran in our fishing boat, standing forward with my arm round the fore-stay of the boat, watching the puffins scurrying away across the water and keeping clear of the boat, I said to them: "Why don't you go to Ailsa Craig and nest as you used to do?" and in an instant out of the great big somewhere a voice said: "What is the use? If we go there and lay eggs they will probably be destroyed or our young ones killed and ourselves also." Laugh at me if you like, but I lived among the puffin day by day. I watched them, intelligently I hope, and the deduction is the only possible one under the circumstances. This raises another question: If they were afraid to nest on Ailsa Craig, why did they not go elsewhere? There were lots of nesting-places within easy reach—places they must needs pass on their way north—yet they chose to come. Was it because the natural law decreed that they must come to reproduce themselves where they were themselves born, and was it that these birds became scarcer and scarcer as visiting birds; till to-day they are almost extinct because they were dying off by natural causes and no newly-hatched birds were coming forward to take their place? and when the rat trouble ends, as it will some day, will those few of our puffins that may survive re-establish the species slowly by Craig-bred birds alone?

In passing it may be worth noting that the rats, which are still very numerous, live, during the winter months when no birds are on the island, on bulbs of the wild blue hyacinth which are very plentiful and on limpets or any offal washed ashore on the island. Some years ago an endeavour was made to kill them off, and Lord Ailsa, who was very much interested in the preservation of the birds on his estates, sent his head gamekeeper, Mr. Cassidy, to Ailsa Craig to try to rectify matters; but it is only those who know the place intimately

who can appreciate the enormous difficulty of even touching the fringe of the matter. Time and weather have worked together in splitting the rocks asunder and piling them up in huge scree over the whole area of the Craig, thus creating veritable havens for the rats. This is to be regretted, as they are a very serious menace to the young birds that are reared clear of the cliffs, and ultimately even some of them may not be safe once the birds higher up become too scarce to satisfy the need of the rats.

THE LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL.

This bird is an edition in miniature of the Larger Black-Backed Gull and breeds fairly commonly on Ailsa Craig, though in diminishing numbers. To the Firth of Clyde the bird is a migrant, only arriving about the month of March and leaving again about the end of September. Its place is taken, in certain years during the winter months and in very limited numbers only, by a type that seems slightly more sooty-coloured on the back and with the white under part greyer-looking than in the common type.

It is fairly common as a breeding species over the greater part of Scotland, and in the Clyde area there are colonies on the Ayrshire coast-line and on Holy Isle, Arran. If these be taken into account there is little doubt that the bird is at least holding its own in numbers. It is worth noting that before the rat trouble the colonies spoken of did not exist and there is little doubt that the birds left Ailsa Craig for these sites because of the rats. It breeds over the whole of the British Isles, but is not known as far North as Greenland or Iceland. It is very much smaller than the preceding bird, but the white markings on the feathers are scarcely so pronounced.

The nest, made of coarse herbage and built by preference on Ailsa Craig in some corner hid by a slight ledge on the upper slope, contains two, three or four eggs with the ground colour a pale greyish or brighter green and slightly or more boldly marked with dark grey or brown blotches. It is impossible to tell the egg of the lesser black-backed from the egg of the herring gull, and one can only be sure of identity by seeing the bird at the nest. Personally, I always thought that the egg of the lesser black-back was less pointed at the small or narrow end and was inclined to be greener in the ground colour than the egg of the herring gull, and I arrived at this conclusion by comparing eggs in the nest of birds seen at the nest. While this was certainly a guide I yet saw so many of an ordinary type as to make any definite claim doubtful.

The bird feeds its young on animal food or garbage of any kind (crabs, herring, etc.) gathered from the shore, in the nesting site, till they are able to fly off and fend for themselves.

THE HERRING GULL.

This is a fairly common but decreasing nesting bird on Ailsa Craig. If this be true of the Craig, however, it is more than compensated for by the fact that it is increasing steadily as a nesting species on the Ayrshire coast and Holy Isle, Arran, while it also nests sparingly along the Argyllshire coast-line, mixing there with the common gull, which does not breed on Ailsa Craig and is outwith our list. The herring gull covers a very much greater area than the lesser black-backed gull, but unlike it is resident in the Clyde during the whole year.

During the summer months the adult male has the head, tail and under parts white with the upper parts pale bluey-grey. It is slightly larger than the preceding species, with the bill yellow and the legs flesh-coloured.

The nest is built of coarse herbage and contains two, three or four eggs. The bird is also partial to a corner or niche among the boulders or rock situated on the western slopes of the island. The eggs are usually light brownish in ground colour and mottled in a lesser or greater degree with dark grey or brown blotches, but the type is not fixed, as forms of a greener tint are common, causing difficulty in distinguishing between the eggs of this and of the lesser black-back. There is little doubt that the eggs and very young suffer badly from the rats, and this will account for the diminishing numbers of the birds.

For years I had stated that I had never seen any gull dive so as to submerge itself entirely under water, but I had an interesting demonstration from the herring gull that I was wrong. As I was walking up Rothesay quay one morning during the winter herring fishing my attention was drawn to huge numbers of gulls diving into the dock. Curious to see what was going on, I went over and saw not one but dozens of herring gull make a fairly decent attempt at a dive and completely submerge themselves for some seconds at least and lift from the bottom herring that had been emptied from some boat into the inner harbour. I went into a boat and measured the depth of the water and found it was three and a half feet deep. The bottom of the dock was flat level, so there was no doubt at all about the depth to which they were diving. I watched the birds for quite a while and discovered that though it was easy for the birds in mature plumage to pick up the herring I did not see a single immature bird lift one. This, of course, set me wondering why, and I arrived at the conclusion that these older birds had acquired the ability to dive by practical everyday experience, and that, so far, it was not a developed trait handed

down as an established accomplishment to their progeny. It is useless, of course, pursuing the idea that some day the gulls may, moving along evolutionary lines, acquire the ability to dive.

The birds are quite too plentiful in the Clyde and must take a heavy toll especially of herring. They feed voraciously on the herring being shaken from, and those swimming through, the meshes of the fishermen's nets. This will show how close they come. One winter night, when working with herring, I reached out and caught five with my right hand, one at a time, and held the five by the tip of a wing, all in my left hand. If herring are on the surface these gulls are generally flying about, and being so numerous they must catch vast numbers of the fish.

Within the last fifty years the herring gull has wandered inland to the cornfields and feeds on grain, being quite as big a nuisance on the corn-stooks as crows are. Vast numbers congregate on Lady Isle to rest during the night-time, and the rocks are covered with corn husks from the excrement of the birds.

The young are fed on Ailsa Craig till they are able to fly off and feed themselves.

THE GREATER BLACK-BACKED GULL.

This magnificent bird is surely "the villain of the piece" among all the birds of the Clyde area, and is on our list as a breeding species on Ailsa Craig on the strength of a nest with three eggs found by a friend of mine in the month of June, 1922. There is little doubt that it may nest there fairly regularly, but so few people interested go among the gulls that it could be easily overlooked.

It is very common among the western islands and lochs of Scotland but likes a solitary nesting-site, although small colonies do exist here and there. It breeds quite extensively on the small island of Glunimer near Sanda Island. It is a nesting species in Iceland and Greenland and on the coast-line of Northern Europe, while further south there is a nesting colony in France.

The Greater Black-backed Gull is very pretty either sitting in solitary state or flying rather lazily, as it does unless when pursuing other birds for anything they have picked up in the way of food, and then he is a dashing and fearless raider. The under parts of the adult are a white which is intensified by the dark upper parts tinged with a slaty grey. The wing-spread reaches almost to six feet, the primaries tipped with white, while the male reaches thirty inches in length.

The bird is resident in the Clyde area and in spite of the fact that he is an outlaw with every man's hand against him, neither bird nor nest being protected in any way, there is little doubt that he is holding his own at least in numbers. It must be admitted that he is a most voracious thief and robber, and nothing in bird or animal life, eggs or young, is sacred to him ; and he pursues other gulls that may have picked up some morsel of food and compels them to drop whatever it may be to be immediately pounced on. Because of persecution it is the shyest of all our gulls.

The nest is built of grasses on some isolated rock or coast-line or on the margin of some inland loch, and the two or three eggs laid are stone-coloured marked with dark grey or brown spots, or boldly marked with large blotches of the same colours.

The Greater Black-back may be the villain of the piece, but it would be advisable for the bird to be very carefully watched to see that want of human sympathy does not lead to his undoing, as his presence does lend a certain amount of dignity to our coast-line. The Firth of Clyde without the Greater Black-backed Gull would have lost very much of its charm and interest.