

**SUNDRY NATURAL
HISTORY SCRAPS: MORE
ESPECIALLY ABOUT BIRDS**

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Sundry Natural History Scraps: More Especially About Birds by C. M. Adamson

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BY

G. M. ADAMSON.



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P R E F A C E .

HAVING for many years taken considerable interest in Birds, more particularly Water Birds, and having collected some of the kinds in their various states of plumage at the different seasons, I have sometimes made notes respecting them. From such these scraps have been compiled, and I venture to hope they may afford amusement, if not some trifling instruction, to those who may have the opportunity to see them.

An apology seems due for my venturing to write on what is perhaps usually considered a thread-bare subject, and especially for putting these scraps into their present form, but the lover of Nature seems never to become tired of reading another's ideas, who has devoted some of his attention to her works; and really, when we consider that the more we know we only find out how truly ignorant we are, it gives one some encouragement to try and find out more about them. Whatever number of us there may be interested in such like pursuits, each one will most certainly observe things differently and represent them according to his ideas; and I would guard all readers against adopting any particular writers' theories or statement of facts or probabilities, so different are men's views, and so will be their manner of representing and describing them.

No one can expect his work to be without many errors, but I need only add, if the perusal of these miscellaneous writings (which I fear contain many repetitions) give any one a slight stimulus in the direction of following a most interesting study

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my object is attained: my having made notes originally was to acquire information and not to give it.

Much of what a man knows must die with him at any rate, however much he writes. I believe, however, those who do write, on reading afterwards what they have written a few years before, if they wrote again would find that their writings must contain many alterations, and even perhaps contradictions.

Such a subject as the present is inexhaustible, and there will always be food for the mind for all beginners to enquire after and to find.

I do not venture to take the trouble or responsibility of printing these scraps except merely as presents to those I meet with who might take interest in them, and I trust they will not criticize my occasional employment too severely.

It is impossible for me to exaggerate the amusement and pleasure I have derived for years in acquiring the information which is contained in these scraps, and these must be taken as the apology for my conceit in wishing them not to be entirely lost sight of.

*North Jesmond, Newcastle-on-Tyne,
October, 1878.*

Perhaps I may add a catalogue of my collection, with the dates of capture and states of plumage of the birds in it, which in itself would show to a certain extent the time of their arrival on our shores and of their departure, and with some remarks on some of them.

[FROM THE NATURAL HISTORY TRANSACTIONS OF NORTHUMBERLAND,
DURHAM, AND NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE, VOL. VII]

*A Naturalist's View of the Extension of the Close-Time of the
Sea-Birds Preservation Act in Northumberland, and on the pro-
tection of wild Birds generally.* By CHAS. MURRAY ADAMSON.

A FEW weeks ago I observed in the newspapers that the Home-Secretary had extended the close-time in this county, Northumberland, from the 1st day of August to the 1st day of September.

I presume this has especial reference to the birds breeding at the Farne Islands. These Islands are I believe private property, and are let at an annual rental: the consequence of this is that a great number of the eggs are gathered for sale. In addition to this the poor birds during the summer are disturbed and ill-treated by the numerous steamboat loads of people, often lawless, whom I am told sometimes overawe the few persons residing on the Islands who ought to be the bird protectors. Under the circumstances, however, I rather question their being so. If they are allowed to make as much money as they can from the eggs, they of course take those eggs which are most uncommon, and which bring the highest prices, and thus the rarer species suffer most.

When I visited these Islands early in July, 1875, the keeper of the outer lighthouse, who said he had been there only a short time, told me his predecessor had a large family, and that during the summer time they had lived almost entirely on the eggs. He had himself a number of eggs ready blown, several of which I bought for my children at three shillings a dozen. At that time there were some young birds, among them Puffins nearly full grown, one of which we took from a hole and returned: there were also eggs of most of the kinds of birds which breed on the Islands. Near the end of the month there were young Gulls and Terns, some flying, on the inner Islands, but we could not find one young Oyster Catcher, nor did we see old Oyster Catchers flying about and showing, as they always do by their anxiety, that they had young. I therefore presume none got away that year, for we looked pretty closely, as the commander of the gun-boat whom we were with wanted one for a pet. That year one Shelldrake's nest was found on the Island, but our informant living there told us he had taken the eggs himself.

That year I do not think any young Cormorants got away, as, late in July, this species all had recently laid eggs, many nests having only one egg, and not a young bird was to be seen. Several young Terns were flying, but there were still plenty of Terns' eggs. Probably many of these, in consequence of the lateness of the season, would never be hatched, and if they were, the old birds would very likely forsake the young before they arrived at sufficient age to take care of themselves, as the old birds of some species seem to leave their breeding grounds at a fixed time, probably to get to some other locality in time to moult or for some other reason we do not understand. The consequence of the destruction of the eggs is, that the birds do not hatch their young at the time Nature intended they should, and their season is altogether disarranged.

We saw no young Eider Ducks following the old females, many of which were in flocks. I am quite willing to admit the gross cruelty practised at these Islands by summer visitors, but the worst part is perhaps not the shooting; the young birds are wantonly destroyed, and in 1875 the grass on the Island inhabited by the Puffins was set on fire and many of the old birds, as well as the young, were burnt in their holes. How is a repetition of this to be prevented? In 1874 some young Black-backed Gulls were not able to fly in September, and we saw at that late season a young Eider Duck only recently hatched.

During our visits to the Islands in 1875 we did not see the Roseate Tern; nevertheless it might be there amongst the number of birds and escape our observation, although this bird's cry and flight make it conspicuous to any one knowing it. One of the Outer Farnes was frequented by the Arctic Terns, and one of the Inner Farnes by the Common Tern.

Under the present law it would appear that the owners of land have no more right to take the eggs on it except such as are especially protected by Acts of Parliament, than a stranger; and I have been informed, that some years since the question about the right or legality of taking the Farne Island eggs was put to the test. Some men were summoned for taking them; they employed a lawyer to defend them; and when the case was to have come

on it was withdrawn, the prosecuting parties having discovered there was no law to reach the accused. Generally speaking, the kinds of birds which suffer most are such as breed in numbers together. When they breed in such numbers together and the eggs are so easily found, great destruction may be made in a very short time. It is not so where the birds are evenly distributed over a large tract of country. The only remedy against such wanton mischief would be an Act of Parliament causing eggs and all other produce on lands to belong to the proprietors of the soil. This might be done, perhaps, by a Permissive Bill, whereby the proprietors might be able to protect their property or not as they thought right.

Now, I would not for one moment defend the destruction or wanton molestation of breeding birds; I would have them strictly protected; but it does seem unnecessarily hard to close the time for shooting birds in a whole county in order to protect them on a small portion of ground where they ought to be private property. At the present time it would appear to be contrary to law to prevent any person landing on the Farne Islands between high and low water mark, and even if they landed above high water mark, it would be difficult to prove damage on such barren ground.

In the latter part of July, some years since, Mr. John Hancock and I visited, with Mr. Losh who then resided in the neighbourhood, a breeding place, in Lancashire or Westmorland, of the Lesser Black-backed Gull, the commonest Farne Island bird; and they, young and old, had left the district, excepting one young bird, which was fully fledged, and an old bird, probably its parent. We then went to Walney Island where the birds were protected, the Black-headed Gulls and the Sandwich Terns, the latter also a common Farne Island bird, had all flown and gone; whilst at Fowley, where the birds were not protected, the Common Tern, and the Roseate Tern, which was there far from uncommon, still had eggs and young. We were told that on this Island the eggs were gathered to be used in making varnish.*

* It was during this expedition Mr. Hancock shot the Tern with a cockle on its beak, which he mentions in his Catalogue. It was a rather exceptional bird, I think an immu-