MERGULUS ALLE.

MERGULUS ALLE.

Little Auk.

Alca alle, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 50.

Uria alle, Temm. Man. d'Orn., 1815, p. 611.

Mergulus melanoleucos, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 42.

Alca candida, Brünn. Orn. Bor., p. 26.

Mergulus alle, Vieill. Gal. des Ois., tom. ii. p. 237, pl. 295.

——— *arcticus*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 994.

Arctica alle, G. R. Gray, List of Gen. of Birds, 1841, p. 98.

IN the British Islands, the Little Auk mostly occurs during the seasons of autumn and winter, while its principal summer haunts are Spitzbergen, Iceland, Greenland, Baffin's Bay, and Davis's Straits. As far as our intrepid voyagers have proceeded, even to the eighty-first degree of north latitude, numbers beyond computation were observed enlivening the scene with their presence. "So numerous were they," says Captain Beechey, "that we have often seen an uninterrupted line extending full halfway over Magdalen Bay, or to a distance of more than three miles. This column, on the average, might have been about six yards broad and as many deep. There must have been nearly four millions of birds on the wing at one time." "The incredible numbers of these species," says Meyer, "that have been seen by voyagers on the surface of the northern seas are very remarkable; it is said that they cover the surface of the water and the floating masses of ice as far as the eye can discern, and, when they take flight, actually darken the sky. This species is so entirely a sea-bird that it is only seen on land or in the immediate vicinity of the coast during the breeding-season, and at other times hardly ever within fifteen or twenty miles from the shore."

Col. Sabine, in his 'Memoir on the Birds of Greenland,' observes that "the Little Auk was abundant in Baffin's Bay and Davis's Straits, and in latitude 76° was so numerous in the channels of water separating fields of ice, that many hundreds were killed daily, and the ship's company supplied with them."

"This pretty little bird," says Mr. Alfred Newton in his 'Notes on the Birds of Spitsbergen,' "is numerous almost beyond belief on the greater part of the coast. Parry's Expedition met with it as far to the north as the party travelled, and in August found it in great numbers between lat. 81° and 82° N. Its breeding-places, though at a less height than those of its allies, are still far from being easily accessible; but I found one to within a few feet of which I could climb and superintend the capture of the young. Mr. Lamont, in his entertaining work 'Seasons with the Sea-horses,' states his opinion that it is the mutings of this bird which produce the well-known 'red snow.' I do not at all agree to this; for, setting aside that the cause of that singular appearance has been fully determined, and that it occurs in regions where there are no birds of the kind, the mutings of the Roche or Little Auk are like anchovy-paste, while the red snow, or such of it as I saw, is of an entirely different colour, being a dull crimson."—*Ibis*, 1865, p. 521.

The same author states, in his note to Sabine Baring Gould's 'Iceland, its Scenes and Sagas,' that according to Faber it occurs in that country all the year round, but only breeds on Grimsey, where Faber found it in 1820, and Proctor in 1837. This is probably one of the most southern of its breeding-quarters; for although it has been said to breed at St. Abb's Head and other parts of Scotland, I believe we have no reliable evidence of the fact. "Although periodically driven upon our shores," says Mr. Hewitson, "and sometimes in considerable numbers during the winter months, this beautiful little bird has its home much further north. It is abundant on some part of the shores of Greenland, where it breeds, and whence both the birds and eggs have been brought to this country by the sailors employed in the Greenland fishery. Mr. Proctor, who met with it in Iceland, says that it is very local there, and makes no nest, but deposits its single egg upon the bare ground, amongst and under the large stones which have fallen from the cliffs above. The birds allowed him to turn over the stones and take them off their eggs; he found twelve or fourteen eggs on the 2nd of July, far advanced in incubation. Most of these were slightly spotted with rust-colour, but only a few of them very distinctly." In 'McClintock's Voyage' it is stated that the "Rotche or Little Auk, lays its single egg upon the bare rock far within the crevices, and beyond the reach of Fox, Owl, or Burgomaster Gull." The egg figured by Mr. Hewitson measures one inch and seven-eighths in length, by one inch and three-eighths in breadth, and is of a pale bluish white, with a few speckles of rusty yellow principally at the larger end. The egg is very large for the size of the bird—so large, in fact, that it would seem impossible that it should be laid by so tiny a creature; for it fully equals that of a Bantam, a bird nearly six times the weight of the Little Auk.

The above account forms the pith of the information that has been recorded respecting the bird in its

summer quarters. After the breeding-season is over and the rigours of winter have set in, the myriads of lower animals upon which it feeds disappear from the surface, and seek shelter in the depths of the ocean; the Little Auk then betakes itself to warmer seas, gradually proceeding southward until it reaches the latitude of Gibraltar, and occasionally even still further in the same direction; for Mr. Frederick Du Cane Godman found a specimen in the collection of a gentleman in Terceira, one of the Azores, which had been killed in the island four or five years before the date of his visit, 1865. The British Islands lying in the course of the bird's southern passage, they are often visited by the Little Auk during the autumn; and many instances of its occurrence therein either singly or in large and small flocks, are on record. During furious gales they sometimes wander far inland, and are either shot on our rivers or die from exhaustion. To give a list of the various instances of its having visited us would be useless; for they occur more or less numerously every year, according to circumstances, and perhaps more frequently in Scotland and in our northern counties than elsewhere; but specimens have been obtained in the midland, and even in the southern ones. R. Gray, Esq., of Southcroft, Govan, Glasgow, informed the Rev. F. O. Morris that "a large flock of these birds visited the Dunbar shore during a severe storm in November and December 1846. Many of them were in a disabled state, and were found in fields and gardens in the neighbourhood. Small flocks were also observed along the shore, and some were met with in the harbour and other smooth waters to which they could get access. I had at one time eight or nine individuals in custody."

Mr. Stevenson writes to me:—"From my notes of the occurrence of this bird during the last eighteen years, I can no longer term it only an occasional visitant, although the greater number have been driven to our shores by severe gales. Year after year one or two, and even as many as eight specimens have been brought to the Norwich bird-stuffers during the winter months; most of these have been picked up in a dead or dying state. With singular regularity the bird appears between the first week of November and the end of December; few are met with in January and February; but a chance straggler has been obtained as late as the 18th of March. When caught by heavy gales they are sometimes carried between thirty and forty miles inland; and I have known them to fall in an exhausted state in the streets of our towns and cities. They were particularly plentiful in 1846 and again in 1862. A specimen in my collection, with the rich-black throat of the breeding-season, was killed at Wells on the 25th of May 1857. It is difficult to account for the appearance of the bird so late in the season; it was shot while flying over the waves close inshore, and may have been prevented from migrating by some previous injury. It is stated in the 'Zoologist' for 1846, that an example in an extremely emaciated condition was killed at Downham, in Norfolk, in the July of that year."

Audubon tells us that in America the Little Auk sometimes makes its appearance on the eastern coasts during very cold and stormy weather, but does not proceed further southward than the shores of New Jersey, where it is of very rare occurrence. "In the course of my voyages across the Atlantic, I have often observed the Little Auk in small groups rising and flying to short distances on the approach of the ship, or diving close to the bow and reappearing a little way behind. Now with expanded wings they would flutter, and run, as it were, on the surface of the deep; again they would seem to be busily engaged in procuring food, which consisted apparently of shrimps, other crustacea, and particles of sea-weed, all of which I have found in their stomachs. I have often thought how easy it would be to catch these tiny wanderers of the ocean with nets thrown expertly from the bow of a boat; for they manifest very little apprehension of danger from the proximity of one, insomuch that I have seen several killed with the oars. Those which were caught alive and placed on the deck would rest a few minutes with their bodies flat, then run about briskly or attempt to fly off, which they sometimes accomplished when they happened to go in a straight course the whole length of the ship, so as to rise easily over the bulwarks. On effecting their escape they would alight on the water and immediately disappear."—*Orn. Biog.*, vol. iv. p. 304.

"The whole of the birds in the breeding-season," says Col. Sabine, "the sexes being alike, have the under part of the neck of a uniform sooty black, terminating abruptly and in an even line against the white of the belly; the young birds as soon as feathered were marked exactly like the mature birds, but in the third week of September every specimen, whether old or young, was observed to be in change; and in the course of a few days the entire feathers of the throat and cheeks had become white." It is in this latter or winter dress that most of the specimens killed or captured in this country are clothed.

I am indebted to Mr. Alfred Newton for the loan of the very fine example, in summer plumage, from which my foremost figure was taken.

The Plate represents two birds, of the natural size—one in its summer, and the other in its winter plumage.

Gould, John. 1873. "Little Auk, *Mergulus alle* [Pl. 50]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324094>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/222497>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324094>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/324094>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries

Sponsored by

Biodiversity Heritage Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.