FRATERCULA ARCTICA.

W. L. J. 1871

FRATERCULA ARCTICA.

Puffin.

Anas arctica, Ray, Syn., p. 120, A 5.

Alca arctica, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 211.

— *labradora*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 550.

— *deleta*, Brünn., Orn., no. 104 (young).

Fratercula, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 81, pl. 6. fig. 2.

— *arctica*, Flem. Brit. Anim., p. 130.

Plautus arcticus, Klein, Av., 146. 3.

Mormon arctica, Ill. Prod. Syst. Mamm. et Av., p. 284.

— *Fratercula*, Temm. Man. d'Orn., p. 614.

— *arcticus*, Bonap. Geogr. and Comp. List of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 66.

WHEN the naturalist contemplates the infinite variety existing in nature, whether in the complicated structures of inert minerals, the singular formation of the flowers of the Orchids, the grotesque forms and colouring of fishes, or the vast diversity among birds, he cannot fail to be impressed with feelings of admiration and delight, and must necessarily perceive that all these variations are intended to answer some special end and purpose. Thoughts such as these crossed my mind when I took up my pen to commence a history of the Puffin.

What a singular bird it is, this Parrot of the sea! as it has been called—one of the few members of a genus forming part of a large family of aquatic birds, comprising the Puffins, the Auks, and the Guillemots, the denizens of the northern hemisphere, as the Penguins are of the southern—two groups strictly antipodal, and frequenters of the icy regions of the opposite portions of the globe. The further that intrepid navigator, Sir James Ross, went south, the more numerous did he find the Penguins; and the further he proceeded north, the more abundant were the Auks, the Puffins, and the Guillemots. But let us turn to the species which makes our islands its home during the summer months. At this period the Puffin visits all parts of the kingdom that afford suitable situations for the performance of the task of incubation—rocky promontories and high chalky cliffs. Here, among Willocks and Razorbills, Gulls and Cormorants, and their usual attendant the Peregrine Falcon, it deposits its single large white egg in a natural fissure of the rock, in a hole scratched for the purpose in the shelving and crumbly part of the cliff, or in the burrow of a rabbit, who often disputes with him the right of occupation. When I wrote my 'Birds of Europe,' some thirty years ago, the Puffin was plentiful at the Needles in the Isle of Wight, Beachey Head, Lulworth Cove, and all similar localities along our southern coast; I fear, however, that few now come there to breed; but on the shores of the other parts of our islands, from Scilly to Wales, from Flamborough to the Orkneys, on those of Ireland, the Isle of Man, and the outermost Hebrides, it is still abundant. On the coasts of the European continent it is, of course, far less numerous, for the simple reason that they afford few situations favourable to it; still it does inhabit the seas which wash the shores of our neighbours, from Hammerfest to Gibraltar; and occasionally penetrates into the Mediterranean. The precise limits of its southward range, however, are unknown.

I have mentioned that the Puffin comes to land for the purpose of breeding, and that it is only here in summer; and I must now state that in winter it generally keeps to the salt water, but may occasionally mount some rocky promontory; the ocean, however, is its proper element, over which it is scattered either singly or in small companies, and constantly engaged in fishing for its daily food over the sunken sand-banks or in the bays and inlets. Its diving-being much greater than its flying-powers, it is as much under as above water, and rarely flies more than is just sufficient to transport it from one part of the sea to another. How admirably adapted for such a life is its wedge-shaped bill, its close, glossy, and adpressed plumage, its long and broadly webbed feet, and its small and feeble wings, which appear barely sufficient to enable it to scale the perpendicular cliffs at the breeding-season!

Speaking of the breeding of the Puffin, Mr. Selby says, "Many resort to the Fern Islands, selecting such as are covered with vegetable mould; and here they dig their own burrows, from there not being any rabbits to dispossess on the particular islets they frequent. They commence this operation about the first week in May; and the hole is generally excavated to the depth of three feet, often in a curving direction, and occasionally with two entrances. When engaged in digging, which is principally performed by the males, they are sometimes so intent upon their work as to admit of being taken by hand, as they also may be during incubation: at this period I have frequently obtained specimens by thrusting my arm into the burrow, though at the risk of receiving a severe bite from the powerful and sharp-edged bill of the old

bird. At the further end of the hole the single egg is deposited: in size it nearly equals that of a pullet, but varies much in form, some being acute at one end, while in others both ends are equally obtuse. Its colour, when first laid, is white; but it soon becomes soiled from its immediate contact with the earth, no materials being collected for a nest at the end of the burrow. The young are hatched after a month's incubation, and are then covered with a long blackish down above, which soon gives place to the feathered plumage; so that at the end of a month or five weeks they are able to quit the burrow and follow their parents to the open sea. Soon after this time, or about the second week in August, the whole leave our coasts on their equatorial migration. On the water the Puffin is more wary than the Guillemot, generally taking wing or diving before a boat can approach within gun-shot. It flies rapidly, but not to any great distance at once, being obliged to employ its short and narrow wings to their utmost power for the support of its body, which is heavy in proportion to its dimensions."

"By far the most abundant species in St. Kilda," says Macgillivray, "is the Puffin, which breeds in the crevices of the rocks as well as in artificial burrows in almost every situation, sometimes at a considerable distance from the water's edge. It is taken by the fowlers in two ways,—when on the nest, by introducing the hand and dragging out the bird, at the risk of a severe bite; and when sitting on the rocks, by a noose of horsehair attached to a slender rod, generally formed of bamboo-cane. The latter mode is most successful in wet weather, as the Puffins then sit best upon the rocks, allowing a person to approach within a few yards; and as many as three hundred may be taken in the course of the day by an expert bird-catcher. . . . The Puffin forms the chief article of food with the St. Kildians during the summer months, and is usually cooked by roasting among the ashes."

It has not been very clearly ascertained how far the Puffin proceeds in a northerly direction, or whether its range extends beyond the neighbourhood of the North Cape in Europe or the southern part of Greenland. I suspect that a nearly allied species, the *Fratercula glacialis*, takes its place in those regions; for Mr. Alfred Newton, during his recent visit to Spitsbergen, found the bird so called, and not the present one, in that inhospitable country. On the authority of Professor Baird, I give the northern portion of America as one of the habitats of our bird. It appears to be the commonest species of the two in Iceland; and in the Færoes it is exceedingly abundant.

The Puffin is subject to precisely the same kind of seasonal changes in its plumage as those which take place in the Auks and the Guillemots. The black throat-mark being peculiar to summer, the whole of the throat at the opposite season is either white or greyish white; the colour of the bill, which is clear and vivid in the spring, becomes more clouded, and the yellow at the angle of the mouth less prominent or dilated. The bill of very young birds, while dressed in the first costume of black down, differs but little from that of the young Guillemot; but it soon begins to resemble that of the adult; it is not, however, until the second year that it attains the full normal form. For what particular purpose can the strong hooked claws of this bird have been given to it? Is it for clinging to the branches of seaweed and corallines during its search for crustaceans and other aquatic creatures at the bottom of the deep, or to enable the bird to excavate the hole for the deposit of its egg? I think the former is the more likely reason, because the bird does not, I believe, confine itself to fish, although it is upon that kind of food that its newly hatched young are mostly fed. How often have I seen a lengthened row of silver sprats hanging from the beak of an old bird, when flying in a straight line just above the surface of the water towards the rocks, upon which the young were patiently waiting! How evenly were they arranged along the bill, from the gap to the tip! How beautifully they glittered in the sun!

The Plate represents an adult, and a young bird of a week old, of the natural size. The distant scenery is intended to represent one of the "rookeries" of Guillemots and Razorbills, which, with Puffins, make up the general mass. The bird in the air is the Peregrine Falcon.

Gould, John. 1873. "Puffin, *Fratercula arctica* [Pl. 51]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324095>.

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

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324095>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/324095>

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>.