PUFFINUS MAJOR, Fab.

Waller, Imp.

Illustrated by H.C. Richter del. et lith.

PUFFINUS MAJOR, *Fabr.*

Great Shearwater.

Puffinus major, Faber, Prod. der isländ. Orn., p. 56.

——— *arcticus*, Macgill. Man. of Nat. Hist. Orn., vol. ii. p. 262.

Cymotomus arcticus, Macgill. Man. of Nat. Hist. Orn., vol. ii. p. 13.

Puffinus fuliginosus, A. Strickl. Proc. of Comm. of Sci. and Corr. of Zool. Soc., part ii. 1832, p. 129 ?

Procellaria fuliginosa, Jenyns, Man. of Brit. Vert. Anim., p. 285 ?

——— *major* (part.), Temm. Man. d'Orn. 2nd edit., tom. iv. p. 509.

Ardena major, Reich. Syst. Av., tab. xiv. fig. 770.

LEAVING the American monographist of the Procellariidæ, Mr. Elliott Coues, and others to determine among themselves the true synonymy of this species, I shall very briefly state where the bird most frequently occurs in our islands, where it is most numerous, and add a few remarks respecting the dark-coloured individuals which are sometimes met with. Although it is probable that it never breeds within the limits of Britain, or, if so, only in the southernmost of the Scilly Islands, it certainly occurs in great numbers along the shores of Devonshire and Cornwall, the fishermen who pursue their calling off the coasts of those counties frequently bringing in living or dead examples which have become entangled in their nets or caught by the baited hooks intended for the capture of fish. On other parts of our coasts and on those of Ireland its occurrence is only accidental. The seas which wash the base of the dreary Eddystone, the Lizard, and the rocky promontory of the Land's End, those surrounding the Scilly Islands, the Bay of Biscay, the Mediterranean, and the seas around Madeira constitute the true home of the species; beyond this, or on the other side of the equator, its existence, in my opinion, is very doubtful; and its occurrence in the arctic circle, which has been affirmed, is, I believe, equally dubious. That birds of this form and having a very general resemblance to the one here figured are to be found in other countries besides those mentioned I do not deny; but I think that on examination they will be found to be referable to other species. As regards the colouring of this large Petrel, I may remark that out of fifty or eighty specimens which have come under my notice, not more than three or four have been of a fuliginous or chocolate hue similar to one of the two figured in my 'Birds of Europe.' Now, as these dark-coloured individuals are usually in company with others of a lighter plumage like the one here represented, and moreover are of the same size, I am inclined to believe them to be merely melanic varieties; in which opinion I am strengthened by being aware that dark-tinted examples occur not only in this extensive family, but also in other allied groups of birds—for instance, in some of the members of the genus *Stercorarius*, more particularly in *S. parasiticus* and *S. pomatorhinus*. I have been sadly puzzled when a specimen of the latter species, sooty-black to a feather, has come under my notice. We cannot for a moment consider such birds distinct; it is likely, therefore, that I am right in regarding the dark-coloured examples of the Great Shearwater as mere varieties.

To show how abundant the bird is off the Devonshire coast, I may here insert a few extracts from notes on the subject kindly communicated to me by Mr. Gatcombe. In November 1860 he says:—"A friend of mine has four specimens of the Great Shearwater, two of which have the whole of the plumage greyish brown, and two with white breasts, all taken at the same time by fishermen off Plymouth Sound and brought in alive. A few years since large flocks made their appearance off Plymouth in both the dark and light states of plumage, when this bird and many others were caught with baited hooks; indeed almost every autumn large numbers of these birds may be seen off the coasts of Devon and Cornwall. Many of the Manx Shearwaters are occasionally obtained, and I remember being told that one year Torbay literally swarmed with them; but I think that on the whole the Greater Shearwater is the commonest species on our coasts. I suspect there can be little doubt that the dark-coloured examples are merely the young of the year, as birds with dark and others with white breasts are found together in the same flock;" in which opinion I do not coincide, although the young of the year are clouded of a darker hue than the adults. In another note, dated October 8th, 1865, he says, "Yesterday several specimens of the Greater Shearwater were brought in alive by some fishermen, who took them with a line and bait near the Eddystone. Large flocks occasionally occur in the Channel during the autumn; and this appears to be the case now; for the fishermen told me that fifty or sixty were flying close to the boat at the same time."

Mr. Rodd, who has also favoured me with some notes on the occurrence of the bird off the Cornish coasts, says, "All the specimens obtained have been procured in the autumn, and they have all appeared in the same kind of plumage: the caps of some specimens have been darker than others; but none have come under my notice of a chocolate-colour or approaching to that tint in the more subdued tone of broccoli-brown.

I have closely questioned Vingoe on the subject; and he is quite certain that he has scarcely observed any variation in these large autumnal Petrels." "Penzance, October 23rd, 1867. The *Puffinus major* (Greater Shearwater) has turned up again in our bay this week. It is in the same state of plumage, the tips of the dorsal feathers being broadly edged, like those I have before seen and obtained; the upper tail-coverts are white; the under portion of the belly, thighs, and vent broccoli-brown."

Lord Lilford informs me that he has occasionally seen the Great Shearwater in the Mediterranean, but never obtained a specimen, and adds:—"I found the bird evidently breeding on some of the more westerly islands of the Scilly group in July 1852; and Mr. Vingoe and I found a fine specimen dead on the beach near Marazion in that month."

The two birds figured by Mr. Yarrell were transmitted to him by the late D. W. Mitchell, Esq., accompanied by the following account of the appearance of the species on the same coast:—"In November 1839 a man brought me a *Puffinus major* alive, which he said he had found asleep in his boat when he went to unmoor her preparatory to a fishing-expedition. I suppose this happened about three in the afternoon; and the bird had probably taken up its quarters at daylight. The moorings at Newlyn are from one hundred to two hundred yards from the shore. There were great numbers of this species off Mount's Bay at that time; and I soon after had two more brought to me which had been taken by hooks. One of them is the light-coloured specimen in your collection; the dark-coloured bird you have figured was, I believe, obtained in a similar manner about the same period in 1838. It is the only example in that state which I met with during my residence in Cornwall. The adult bird appears pretty regularly every autumn, though not always in equal numbers. It has long been in several collections at Plymouth, though it does not appear to have been distinguished there from *Puffinus anglorum* until Dr. Moore published his 'Catalogue of the Birds of Devon.' The latter is not a very common bird there, which may have been the cause of such a mistake.

"*P. major* is very well known to the Scillonians, by whom it is called *Hackbolt*. They inform me it is a constant visitant in the latter part of autumn, and represent its manners on the water as resembling those of *P. anglorum*. I recollect seeing four last year through a telescope in Mount's Bay. It was late in the afternoon, the wind blowing hard from S.S.W., which accounted for their being so far inshore; they are generally deep-sea-goers. They had exactly the flight of *P. anglorum*, and kept so close to the water as almost to skim the tops of the waves. Mr. Clement Jackson told me last spring that some autumns they appear off Looe and Polperro in thousands."

To this account of the bird as seen on our shores, the notes by Mr. Thompson on those which have occurred in Ireland will form an appropriate pendant. "Our observation of this species as Irish is chiefly due to Mr. Robert Davis, of Clonmel, who kindly furnished me with the particulars of two examples, which he procured in different years. Mr. Davis remarked of the first specimen:—"This was taken near Dungarvan, county of Waterford, and sent to me alive. It was apparently in good health, but would not eat any thing, and died after being in my possession for about ten days or a fortnight. It had an extremely rank, fishy, or oily smell at all times; but I never saw any appearance of oil being discharged from its mouth or nostrils. It seemed unable to walk, but scrambled along with its breast about an inch from the ground. Although its wings were perfect and uninjured, it made no attempt to fly, but, if let fall from a height, dropped heavily to the ground. It showed an inclination to climb, having several times mounted up the handle of a long spade that rested against the wall of a yard in which it was kept. It did not ramble about, nor care much for water, but, when put in a large tub, very dexterously pulled itself up by the hooked bill until the claw got on the edge. When handled, it bit severely. The second specimen was captured one or two miles outside Dungarvan, by a person fishing for hake (*Merluccius vulgaris*), with a hook and line, it having taken his bait. I kept it alive for about a week; it was more lively than the former one, and ran along with the breast about an inch from the ground. Having on one occasion placed it on a roof, it seemed to be more at ease on the inclined plane afforded by that situation than on a flat surface, and mounted rapidly to the top, though on reaching the edge no attempt was made to fly, and it fell heavily to the ground. It rarely stirred at all during the day, but kept itself as much out of view as possible, and, if the body could not be concealed, would endeavour to hide its head. This species is never seen near the shore, but only far out. The fishermen sometimes keep them for weeks about their houses; and in some instances they have become tame: they never attempt to fly. I cannot hear of this species ever being shot or otherwise taken than on a hook. It is commonly known by the name of *hagdown*."

The egg of this species figured by Mr. Hewitson in the third edition of his 'Coloured Illustrations of the Eggs of British Birds' was brought from the Desertas, a group of four sterile rocky islands which lie about twenty miles south-east of the town of Funchal, in Madeira; it is represented of a creamy white, and nearly two inches and three quarters in length by two inches in breadth.

The figure is as near the size of life as may be.

Gould, John. 1873. "Great Shearwater, *Puffinus major* [Pl. 83]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324127>.

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

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324127>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/324127>

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>.