

## NOTES ON THE GREAT AUK.

BY

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WE have been recently re-reading Mr. Gurney's *Early Annals of Ornithology*,\* and while fully conscious of the valuable work which that author has accomplished in compiling such an important and interesting book of reference to the "ancient passages about birds," we have also been astonished to find in the case of many of the species dealt with how much more remains to be added, and have been at some small pains to note certain references which Mr. Gurney has omitted either through want of space or because they have escaped his notice. We may return to this subject again, but for the purpose of the present article we will confine ourselves to references to the Great Auk, *Alca impennis*. This most interesting bird is but very briefly dealt with by Mr. Gurney, being but incidentally mentioned in quoting Cartier's account of the Solan Goose as given in Hakluyt's voyages (ed. 1904), and again in the mention of John Evelyn's visit to St. James's Park in February 1665, when the Diarist records that among the birds he saw there was "a small waterfowl not bigger than a moorhen that went almost erect like the Penguin of America," this Mr. Gurney concludes to have been the Great Auk, though as the northern continent is not specified, this is uncertain. The only direct reference to *Alca impennis* appears on page 193 of the *Annals* where, in mentioning the *Exoticorum Libri Decem* of Carolus Clusius (1526-1609), published in 1605, attention is drawn to the fact that the Great Auk is included in the figures "of about fourteen other birds [besides the Solan Goose] in this volume including the Dodo . . . but they are somewhat rudely done. The Great Auk is wrongly represented in the attitude of a Goose, but the Penguin from Magellan is correctly given an upright attitude." Although Symington Grieve has in his monograph on the Great Auk (*The Great Auk or Garefowl, etc.*, by

\* 1 vol. 8vo London, 1921 (Witherby).

Symington Grieve, 1 vol., 4to, London, 1885) referred to the above and other passages from Clusius dealing with the bird in question and has duly noted references from various ancient authors, he has made no attempt at translation, and as the Latin used by Clusius and others is of an obscure and difficult nature we have here ventured to give translations of these passages and briefly refer to others not quoted in the published literature dealing with the Great Auk. Space, however, prevents us from including the various mentions or descriptions of the Great Auk contained in the "Diaries" or voyages of those early travellers who encountered this bird—many of these are mentioned by Symington Grieve, and others are duly set out in *Relics of the Great Auk*, by John Milne, reprinted from the *Field*, 1875.

In order to avoid repetition we will here give in full the titles of the works to which we shall have occasion to refer:—

1. Clusius, 1605.  
Caroli Clusii Atrebatii [of Arras] Exoticorum Libri Decem :  
Quibus Animalium, Plantarum, Aromatum aliorumque  
peregrinorum Fructuum historiæ describuntur . . . . .  
1 vol. folio (Leyden).
2. Eusebius, 1635.  
Joannis Eusebii Nierembergii . . . . . Historia Naturæ  
Maxime Peregrinæ Libris XVI. Distincta . . . . .  
Antverpiæ (Antwerp) MDCXXXV.  
1 vol. folio, Antwerp.
3. Wormius, 1655.  
Museum Wormianum . . . seu Historia Rerum Rariorum . . .  
Adornata ab Olao Worm, Med: Doct: . . . . .  
Amstelodami (Amsterdam). (1655)  
1 vol. folio, Amsterdam.
4. Tradescant, 1656.  
Musæum Tradescantianum : or a Collection of Rarities  
preserved at South Lambeth near London by John  
Tradescant. London . . . MDCLVI.  
1 vol. 12mo, London.
5. Forges, 1665.  
"A Catalogue of many natural rarities with great industry,  
cost, and thirty years' travel in foreign Countries collected  
by Robert Hubert *alias* Forges, Gent. and sworn servant  
to his Majesty, and daily to be seen at the place formerly

called the Music House near the west end of St. Paul's Church, London. Printed by Thomas Ratcliff, for the Author, A.D. 1665."

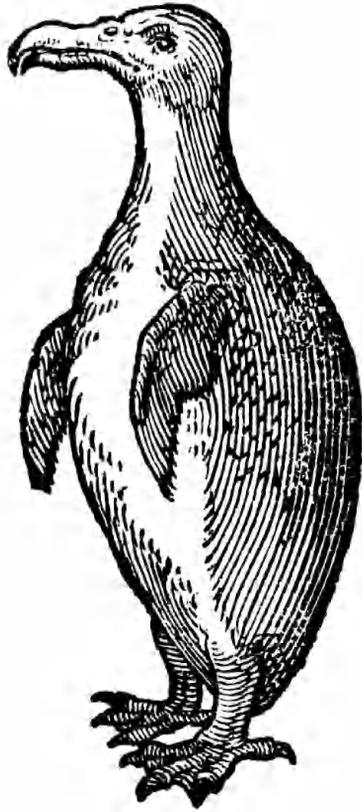
1 vol. 12mo, London.

(This was the second edition of the work, the first with a similar title having no date.)

6. Willughby, 1678.  
"The Ornithology of Francis Willughby of Middleton in the County of Warwick, Esq. . . . . By John Ray, Fellow of the Royal Society . . . . London . . . . 1678."  
1 vol. folio, London.
7. Holme, 1688.  
"The Academy of Armoury or Store-house of Armoury and Blazon, containing the general variety of created beings and how borne in Coats of Arms both Foreign and Domestic by Randle Holme of the City of Chester Gentleman, Sewer in Extra-ordinary to his late Majesty King Charles the Second, Chester 1688."  
1 vol. folio, Chester.
8. Sellers.  
"The English Pilot for the Northern and Southern Navigation London 1728." Seventeenth Edition.  
1 vol. folio, London.  
(NOTE.—We have not seen this work and give the title from Lowndes and the quotation produced below on the authority of Miller Christy *cf. Zoologist* 1894.)
9. Edwards, 1750.  
"A Natural History of Birds . . . . By George Edwards, Library-Keeper to the Royal College of Physicians, London . . . . MDCCL."  
Vol. I.-Vol. 1V. 4to, London.

The first so-called "scientific" reference to the Great Auk as distinguished from those contained in early voyages and travels is that made by Clusius. On page 101 of his above-mentioned work, under the heading "Anser Magellanicus," Clusius gives the figure (here reproduced) and description of the South American Penguin. The translation of the passage is as follows:—

"This is a sea fowl of the Goose kind, though unlike it in its bill. It lives in the sea, is very fat, and of the bigness of a large goose, for the old ones of this kind are found to weigh thirteen, fourteen, yea and sometimes sixteen pounds, the younger eight, ten and twelve. The upper side of the body



ANSER MAGELLANICUS OF CLUSIUS.

is covered with black feathers, the underside and belly with white. The neck, which is short and thick, hath in some as it were a ring or collar of white feathers. The skin is thick like a swine's. They want wings but instead thereof they have two small skinlike fins hanging down by their sides like two little arms, covered on the upper side with short narrow stiff little feathers, thick set—on the underside with lesser and stiffer and these white, wherewith in some places there are black ones intermixed, which although unfit for flight are such as by their help the birds swim swiftly. I understood that they abode mostly on the water. and go to land only in breeding time, and for the most part lie three or four in one hole. They have a bill bigger than a Raven's but not so high (elated) and a very short tail; black flat feet, of the form of a goose's foot but not so broad. They walk erect with their heads on high, their finlike wings hanging down by their sides like arms, so that to them who see them afar off they appear like so many diminutive men or Pigmies. I find in the Diaries [or journals of these voyages] that they feed only upon fish, yet is not their flesh of any ungrateful relish, nor doth it taste of fish. They dig deep holes in the shore like Conyburroughs, making all the ground sometimes so hollow, that the seamen walking over it often sink up to the knees in these vaults."

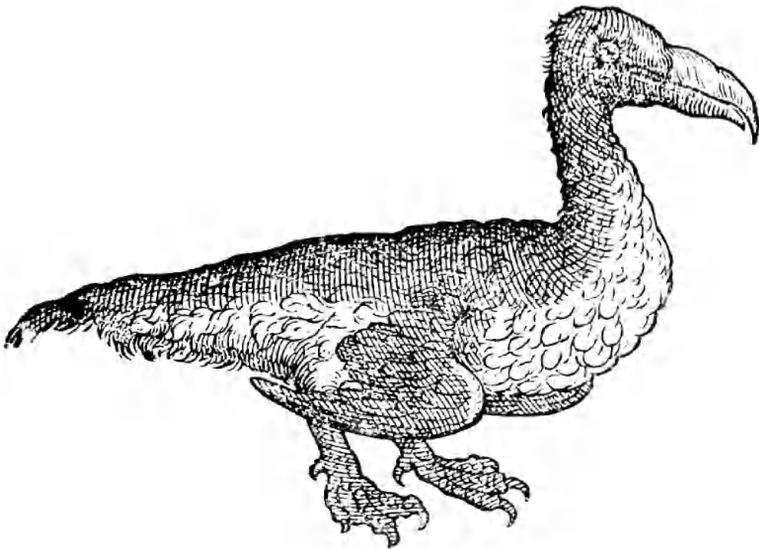
So much for the South American Penguin; it has been necessary to give the passage at length since as we shall see other authors following Clusius have described the Great Auk under this title, *i.e.*, *Anser magellanicus*.

The Great Auk, Clusius deals with on page 103 under the heading "Mergus Americanus," and gives the figure (here reproduced) which, as Symington Grieve correctly observes, is not a good one, and appears to be a rudely executed drawing of some kind of Diver and moreover, strangely enough, in no way corresponds with Clusius's written description which he tells us he derived from a picture. The translation of the passage is as follows:—

#### MERGUS AMERICANUS.

"There is also a foreign bird of which we here give an illustration. Jacobus Plateau, that most distinguished scholar, writes that it was brought from America. He has sent me a picture of the bird done in colour and expresses the opinion that it ought to be classed among the Divers, as far as he could

gather from the description of it by the sailors from whom he received it. And as in none of the former writers on Birds, at least in none of those whose works I have had access to, is a similar bird to be observed, I have thought that it would in no way be displeasing to those who study the birds of foreign lands if in reproducing it in a picture I should place it under this heading. But any further account of the bird I cannot give beyond that which I have been able to gather from the mere picture just as it is with not a few of these birds that follow of which I have only seen the picture, and



MERGUS AMERICANUS OF CLUSIUS.

I therefore trust that the kindly reader will take in good part that which I have to offer. I gather then that this bird is somewhat smaller than a goose or equal in size to a wild goose, having a long body but small and short wings out of all proportion to the size of its body, and on that account I opine not very well suited for flying. Its head, neck and back are as I gathered from the picture covered with black feathers, there are black feathers also in its tail and wings. On its breast, however, and the whole of its stomach they are white. It has a sharp beak (or a beak which is eagle-like) fairly large and not flat in which no traces of teeth are shown. The beak

curves downward and has certain grooves running obliquely across. It is shown by the picture also that the front part of the head a little above the beak is marked with a white spot, if the painter has made a faithful representation. Clearly also its legs are short and black, its feet are also black and flat in shape as is the manner of web-footed animals, it has three claws and a short spur such as ducks have."

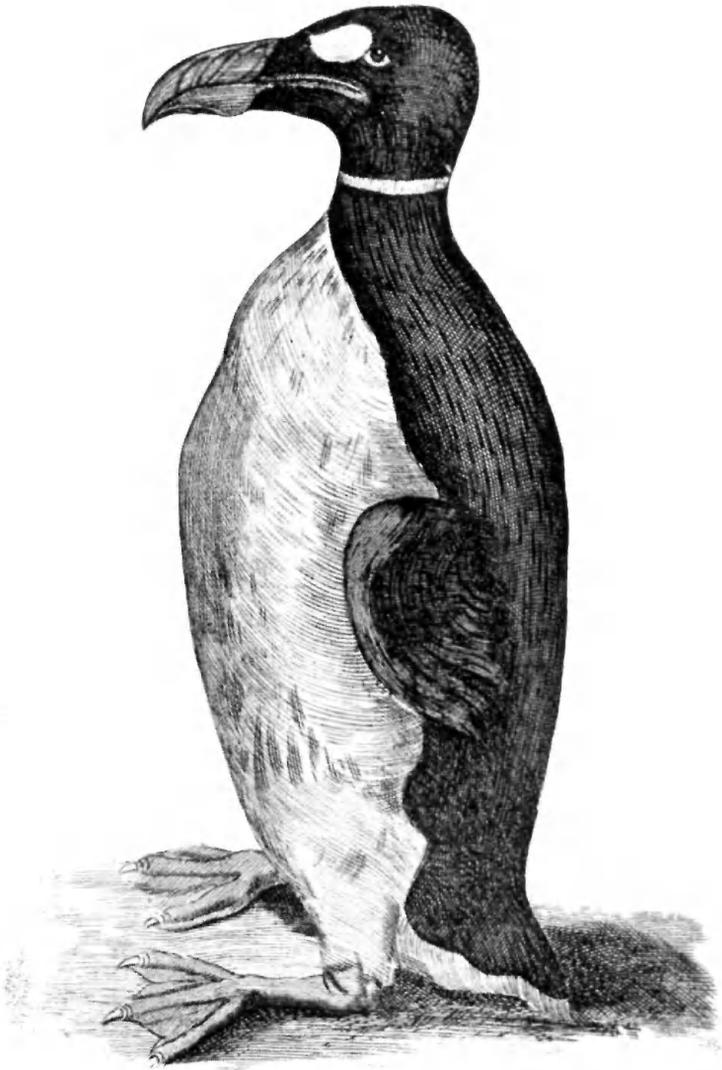
On page 367 Clusius gives a further reference to a bird which may or may not have been the Great Auk, but as it is described as a Goirfugel, *i.e.*, Garefowl, the translation of the passage is here included.

"Another bird is the Goirfugel, in the colour of its body not dissimilar to the *Alka* though much bigger in the body. Its beak is very broad and curved; its head inclined to be long and black, its eyes at the edges are tinged with a white vein. Its feet are black and of no use for walking on, nor indeed are its wings of any help to the bird, they are so very slender. As a matter of fact it has never been seen either to walk or fly. But indeed the bird is very rarely seen at all—never in fact but in particular years. As to where it breeds no one has discovered. This species I should also be inclined to classify among the Divers."

The next author to mention the Great Auk is Johannes Eusebius of Neiremberg, who reproduces the figure of *Mergus Americanus* from Clusius but omits that author's account, and gives no distinctive description of the bird in his own text.

In 1665 Olaus Wormius, the Hellenist, produced his celebrated work, on page 300 of which he gives the best of all the early descriptions of the Great Auk, and on page 301 he figures the well-known picture of the bird (here reproduced), one of the most remarkable features about this excellent representation being the white ring shown round its neck, which was no doubt intended to represent an artificial attachment, either as Professor Steenstrup suggests (*cf.* Symington Grieve, p. 74) for the purpose of bearing a name or description, or probably, as Wormius kept the bird alive in captivity, for the purpose of tethering it.

Wormius curiously enough gives his own description of the Great Auk under the title of "*Anser Magellanicus seu Penguinis*," and after quoting the account of the South



ANSER MAGELLANICUS *seu* PENGUINIS OF WORMIUS.

American Penguin as given by Clusius under that heading, goes on to say that he himself had in his possession three specimens of the Garefowl, one of which he kept alive ; his words are :—

“ This bird was brought to me from the Fëroe Islands, I kept it alive for some months at my house. It was a young one, for it had not arrived at such bigness as to exceed a common goose. It would swallow an entire herring at once and sometimes three successively before it was satisfied. The feathers on its back were so soft and even that they resembled black velvet. Its belly was of pure white, above the eyes it had a round white spot of the bigness of a Dollar that you would have sworn it were a pair of spectacles (which Clusius observed not)\* neither were its wings of that figure he expresses, but a little broader with a border of white.”

It will be noted that Wormius makes no mention of the white ring round the bird's neck, this may be from the fact that it was artificial, as above suggested, or that he added it to the picture out of deference to Clusius's description of the South American Penguin : “ *Albis pennis, tamquam torque cinctum* ” (a collar of white feathers).

The mention of the Great Auk in John Tradescant's account of his famous museum is but of the briefest ; it runs as follows : p. 3. “ Penguin which never flies for want of wings.”

Both the Great Auk and the Penguin may have been in the collection and, as we shall see later, Francis Willughby was of the opinion that he had seen the former among Tradescant's treasures. The reference in Forges's *Catalogue* is, however, far more explicit. Who Robert Hubert *alias* Forges may have been we are unable to discover, but he appears to have been an able showman, and he certainly leaves us in no doubt as to the identity of the bird which he describes as :—

“ A strange sea fowl as big as a goose. It is called the Sea Penguin, it cannot fly for its wings are like pinnes and it is so thick of feathers that one cannot shoot him unless behind because of the growth of his thick down or feathers. He is found three score leagues from the Coast of Canada.”

\* Clusius however did, but described the Garefowl under “*Mergus Americanus*.”

Next in order comes the reference to the Great Auk contained in the *Ornithology* of Francis Willughby. This work which was edited by Willughby's friend and companion, John Ray, gives on Plate XLII. a figure entitled "Mergus Americanus," closely resembling that given by Clusius, but has no text referring to the bird, while on Plate LXV. he figures "Penguin Worm," after that author, and after quoting Worm's description says—page 323—"Whether it hath or wants the back toe neither Clusius\* nor Wormius in their description make any mention. In Wormius's figure there are no back toes drawn." On page 322 of the *Ornithology* Willughby refers to "The Bird called Penguin by our seamen, which seems to be Hoiers Goifugel" and goes on to say:—

"In bigness it comes near to a tame goose. The colour of the upper side is black, of the underside white. Its wings are very small and seem to be altogether unfit for flight . . . . From the bill to the eyes on each side is extended a line or spot of white, it wants the back toe and hath a very short tail. I saw and described it drfed in the Repository of the Royal Society I saw it also in Tradescant's Cabinet at Lambeth near London."

The next account of the Garefowl we have to mention is that contained in the work of Randle Holme, 1688. This remarkable book deemed by Moule (*Bibl. Heraldica*) to be a most "extraordinary composition" and one "of the most scarce of heraldic books," contains on page 293 the following information:—

"He beareth argent a Penguin proper borne by the name of Whitehead. I have before given you the form and description of it as I then understood the bird but since being better instructed take this further true draft of the fowl which comes near the bigness of a goose, the upper side all black, the underside all white, the wings are small and seem to be unfit for flight. The bill is dark and dusky, having furrows graven on both the mandibles. From the bill to the eye is a white spot and a white ring about its neck. It hath no back toe, they walk erect with their heads on high and their tails down."

From this description it would appear that Holme had seen both the bird itself and Worm's picture of it.

\* Clusius, however, under "Mergus Americanus," says (wrongly) "it has a spur or back toe like a duck."

For the following passage we are indebted to Mr. Miller Christy's researches. In the *Zoologist*, 1894, p. 142, he draws attention to John Seller's *English Pilot*, in the seventeenth edition of which, and the fourth book, page 17, appears together with two figures of *Alca impennis*, the following passage :—

“ There is also another thing to be taken notice of by which you may know when you are upon the Bank [of Newfoundland] . . . you may know this by the great quantity of fowls upon the Bank, viz. Sheerwaters, Willocks, Noddles, Gulls, and Pengwins, etc., without making any exceptions : which is a mistake, for I have seen all these fowls 100 leagues off this Bank, the Pengwins excepted . . . The Pengwins . . . are always on the Bank, several of them together . . . never less than two . . . They are fowls about the bigness of a goose, a coal-black head and back, with a white belly, and a milk white spot under one of their eyes, which Nature has ordered to be under the right eye . . . for my part I never saw any with such a spot under the left eye, the figure of which I have here set down to facilitate the knowledge of them.”

We must conclude these extracts with the following remarks of George Edwards who, on page 147 of his third volume under heading “ The Northern Penguin,” after an excellent description of the bird, says :—

“ This bird I procured from the Master of a Newfoundland fishing-vessel, who told me it was taken with their fish-baits on the fishing-bank of Newfoundland . . . This bird hath already been figured and described : but the figure has a ring round the neck in Willoughby which is not found in the natural bird, and the descriptions are not clear, it is also confounded with the Southern Penguins, and Mr. Willoughby seems to think them and the Northern the same birds, but I who have seen several both from the North and the South . . . should rather make them two distinct tribes of birds.”

In conclusion, we would refer those of our readers who desire more information on this fascinating subject to the MS. “ Garefowl Book ” of the late Professor Newton, now in the Newton Library at Cambridge, a work which we hope may some day be duly edited and published.