

OBSERVATIONS ON MANX SHEARWATERS AND
STORM-PETRELS AT THE SCILLY ISLES.

BY

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ON June 18th, 1912, I visited Annet, Scilly Islands, to observe the Manx Shearwaters (*Puffinus p. puffinus*) and Storm-Petrels (*Hydrobates pelagicus*) breeding there. I hoped to stop the whole night, but unfortunately, starting in a hurry, a very insufficient supply of refreshment was taken, and I was obliged to leave with the boatman at 11.15 p.m. The whole island is undermined by the burrows of Shearwaters, and one's foot often accidentally broke through a thin roof, sometimes on to a sitting bird below. In this way many birds were captured and ringed. The eggs seen were evidently hard set, but only one young bird was found. There were also numerous Puffins on the island, but these invariably occupied burrows on the side of a distinct slope, generally close to the sea, or were nesting under large boulders on the beach.

The sun set at about 8.17 p.m., after which time I waited close to a ridge of large boulders, where a few Storm-Petrels were known to breed. At about 9.30 a peculiar purring noise, which I at first mistook for a distant Nightjar's song, was heard. This proved to be the note of a Storm-Petrel nesting under the boulders. It was rather more highly pitched than the Nightjar's, and ended abruptly after a few seconds in a higher note resembling "Wit." In a short time birds were heard uttering this and another sharp double-note at a distance of every two or three feet of one another, under the boulders of the whole ridge. At about 10 p.m. the first Storm-Petrel was seen on the wing, and a few were observed to creep up from among the boulders and flutter off. By 10.30 there were numbers flying up and down this boulder-ridge, keeping fairly strictly to its limits, the flight reminding one most forcibly of that of the Swallow.

The flight was curiously silent, and no note was uttered, although there were still numbers of birds "singing" under the boulders. It was hard to believe that they were not taking some insect on the wing, as they darted about so rapidly, but I heard no snap of a beak. We



BOULDERS UNDER WHICH STORM-PETRELS BREED, WITH
TWO SHEARWATERS' HOLES IN THE FOREGROUND.

tried to capture a bird, with a rather cumbersome beetle "sweeping net," but although many times they passed within a foot of our heads we failed to secure one.

The following quotation from the *Birds of Devon* (p. 402) is of some interest here: "Mr. E. H. Rodd also states that on fine summer evenings at sunset small flocks of Storm-Petrels may be seen five or six miles out in Mount's Bay, flying and hawking about in pursuit of small insects, in the manner of the Swallow tribe." The Storm-Petrel has a wide gape to its mouth which of course would help it greatly in the capture of a flying insect.

The next day a few nests with quite fresh, or slightly incubated eggs were examined, and old birds were found to utter a shrill, screeching note when handled. About 10.40 p.m. a Shearwater was seen to pass, and we then turned our attention to the burrows close by. As there was no moon, it was of course by then quite dark. With

the help of an "electric torch" and the beetle-net we captured and "ringed" about twenty-five birds in as many minutes, as they fluttered along the ground before rising into the air. It was most unfortunate that I had to leave the island then, as I wished to observe when the Shearwaters and Petrels returned to their nests. Mathew writes (*op. cit.*, p. 405): "At the first streak of dawn the noise of the birds (Shearwaters) gradually ceased, and when the sun was up silence again reigned, and all had returned to their burrows." The sun rises at 3.44 on July 19th. The Shearwaters did not come out of their burrows until two-and-a-half hours after sunset, so that if we suppose they return one-and-a-half hours before sunrise, they only have about three-and-a-half hours to obtain their food, a time which would be still more restricted further north. There is evidently a very good reason why the Shearwaters do not leave or enter their nesting-holes during the daytime, although they are certainly not inconvenienced by sunlight. On one occasion I took a Shearwater, which I had extracted from its burrow, down to the sea to watch its action on the water. On returning to the neighbourhood of its burrow a short time after, I found a quite freshly killed Shearwater with a wound in its side, which had no doubt been inflicted by a Lesser Black-backed Gull. The Manx Shearwater is so clumsy and defenceless when on land, that were it not entirely nocturnal during the breeding-season, it is certain that it could never have established itself on an island like Annet, where Gulls abound. Puffins are suffering severely here from the attacks of Lesser Black-backed Gulls, which Mr. Dorrien-Smith tells me are much on the increase, and they would undoubtedly suffer more if they nested in burrows on flat ground more than a few yards away from the sea, as most of the Shearwaters do.

I have to thank Mr. Dorrien-Smith for kindly allowing me to examine the birds' nests, as Annet is strictly preserved.