



# LETTERS

## GEESE AND GULLS IN ICELAND.

*To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.*

SIRS,—As reported by me in the *Field* a few weeks ago, in reference to the hybridization of Grey Lag and domestic Geese, I saw a large number of Grey Lag-Geese (*Anser anser*) at Heradsfloi on the north-east coast of Iceland on August 3rd, 1911.

The surf prevented my landing, and the high beach obstructed the view, but upwards of one hundred Grey Lags ran along the beach in front of my launch. They were unable to fly, and when hard pressed some disappeared over the bank and others took to the sea. I shot one of these in order to see the condition of the flight-feathers.

I take this opportunity of saying that I saw a Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) on the north coast of Iceland, a few days earlier, and was also shown one in the possession of the Danish Consul at Akureyri which he had shot a few days before my arrival. As the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*) appears to be considered a rare bird, and only to have been reported once, it may be of interest to mention that I saw these birds on the East coast both in 1910 and 1911.

M. BEDFORD.

## THE GEESE OF ICELAND.

*To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.*

SIRS,—I am obliged to the Rev. F. C. R. Jourdain for his editorial note to my letter (*supra*, pp. 286-7), but I am afraid, interesting though his remarks are, they do not tend to get us much forwarder. When speaking of the "down" I should perhaps have said "nest" for I naturally included "feathers" in my use of the word "down." I gather from Mr. Jourdain's remarks that he can readily find differentiating characters between the "nests" of *Anser brachyrhynchus* and *Anser f. fabalis* when comparing "nests" which are authentically known to belong to these two species respectively—by authentic I take it Mr. Jourdain refers to cases in which the parent bird was shot from the nest or identified in some other equally satisfactory way, and in which no shadow of doubt could creep in. If this be so, then I take it Mr. Jourdain should, by means of these differentiating characters, be able, at once, to identify any "nests" of these two species of goose in which no authentic record of the bird is known. Surely Mr. Jourdain is somewhat unhappy in speaking of "flank-feathers"! All the feathers I have seen in "nests" have been much smaller than any flank-feather, and appear to me to be plucked,

together with the down, from the regions of the belly. There are other points which should be taken into consideration and investigated : e.g. does the male goose contribute any down or feathers to the nest ? does he take any active part in the duties of incubation ? and are there any known differences, however slight, between the plumages of male and female " Grey Geese " ? If there are any sexual differences in the feathers I should like to know them, for at present I am inclined to think that there are none. F. W. SMALLEY.

SIRS,—The question of the breeding species of Geese in Iceland has never been definitely settled, but in my opinion the Grey Lag, Pink-footed and White-fronted all nest there. A breeding-place of the White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) was discovered in June, 1911, almost in the middle of the country, and eggs were obtained from this locality again in 1912. During the past 15 years I have received from Iceland a number of sets of eggs of *A. brachyrhynchus*, and also obtained about three sets of *A. albifrons* about six years ago. R. PLUMB.

[Although the term "flank-feathers" has been very generally applied to the small feathers found among the down, there seems to be no justification for its use, and feathers taken from nests of geese appear, as Mr. Smalley rightly says, to be plucked from the belly. Once or twice I have found a genuine flank-feather present, but this is probably merely accidental. Mr. H. F. Witherby informs me that he has never seen a flank-feather in a duck's nest.

The only nests of *A. brachyrhynchus* which I have been able to examine closely were all obtained on Spitsbergen, and were undoubtedly authentic, as no other Grey Goose breeds on that group. Probably a few also nest in North Iceland, but I have not been able to examine any nests from this locality critically. The few authentic eggs and nests of *A. fabalis* which I have seen were obtained in North Russia and the interior of North Scandinavia. Many nests of so-called "Bean Goose" from Iceland and the coasts of Norway and the Gulf of Bothnia (usually if not unauthenticated in any way) have proved to belong to *Anser anser*. The most useful distinction between the nests of the two birds lies in the eggs, but the feathers of *A. fabalis* (and probably the down also) are appreciably darker, and *A. brachyrhynchus* makes a much more substantial nest than its ally.

In practical work these distinctions are not of much use, for the simple reason that the locality alone is enough to separate them. The two birds do not only do not breed in the same districts, but do not nest within six hundred miles of one another.

In Iceland on the other hand it is necessary to be able to distinguish the nests of *A. anser*, *albifrons* and *brachyrhynchus*, and in North Russia and Scandinavia we have *A. anser*, *albifrons*, *fabalis*, and *finmarchicus* breeding. Mr. Smalley speaks of the down of *A. fabalis* as being "light, like that of *A. anser*." As he includes feathers in his use of the word "down," and the nest-feathers of *A. fabalis* differ widely from those of *A. anser*, it would be interesting to know the locality of the nest to which Mr. Smalley refers, and whether it is authenticated in any way. I am not aware of any evidence that the male goose shares in incubation, but with regard to the other points, definite information would be very acceptable. F. C. R. JOURDAIN.]

## SENSE OF SMELL IN THE STONE-CURLEW.

*To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.*

SIRS,—In reference to Dr. Penrose's "Field-Notes on a Pair of Stone-Curlews," in the last number (pp. 266-9), I had a somewhat similar experience to the author's one day when photographing a Stone-Curlew's nest on the Hampshire Downs. My camera was hidden in tufts of grass and was provided with an electric release leading fifteen yards away to a blind or hide composed of branches where I lay hidden for a considerable time, with the wind blowing from the camera towards me. One of the parent birds returned and began the usual wandering around the nest-area, and was about to settle on her eggs when the wind suddenly changed, as it often does on the Downs, and blew directly from me towards the bird. She suddenly straightened herself and cautiously approached my blind, somewhat after the manner of a pointer dog drawing on a point. She came close up and actually peered through the leaves in front of my face, then flew off uttering startled cries. I am quite sure the bird scented me.

In my opinion birds, as a rule, have very weak olfactory powers. Dr. Penrose mentions ducks as having this power fairly developed, but in my experience their sense of smell is not acute. For instance, I have drifted in my punt before the wind within forty or fifty yards of a flock without being detected.

J. E. H. KELSO.

## THE SWALLOW RECOVERED IN NATAL.

*To the Editors of BRITISH BIRDS.*

SIRS,—If there was no other result of the Scheme for Ringing Birds organised by Mr. Witherby, the Swallow record from Natal is sufficient reward. May I, in this East African connection, draw attention to the Swift which was found dead in New Ross, co. Wexford, in May, 1886, with a piece of paper tied to it bearing the inscription "Mary Elsam, Suakin, Egypt, 10.3.86"? As I interviewed the man who found the bird and am satisfied the occurrence took place as above-stated, it may do no harm to mention this event, though already recorded in the *Birds of Ireland*, p. 103.

RICHARD M. BARRINGTON.

[We have always regarded the record of the Swift with a piece of paper "tied under its tail" as having origin in a practical joke, perhaps perpetrated by a soldier recently returned from the Soudan. Is there any proof that the piece of paper was not tied on after the Swift's death? What proof is there that it was tied on at Suakin? As the Mahdi was in possession of the Soudan at the time and had advanced not far from Suakin, it may have been a clumsy attempt to make people suppose that one Mary Elsam was imprisoned there. But such "records," being of no scientific value whatever, should not be seriously considered.—EDS.]