

THE FIRST NESTING RECORD OF THE GREAT SKUA IN THE ORKNEYS.

BY THE
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HITHERTO the Great Skua (*Stercorarius s. skua*) has only been known as a rare straggler to the Orkney group. Messrs. Harvie-Brown and Buckley in their *Vertebrate Fauna of the Orkney Islands*, p. 237, mention only six or seven cases of its occurrence within their limits, and since that date (1891) there seems no reason to believe that its visits have become more numerous, judging from published records. In the Shetland Islands, there has been a distinct tendency to form new colonies of late years on other islands besides the historic breeding-places on Foula and Unst, so that such an extension of range as is implied by the discovery of a breeding pair on an island in the Orkney group need not be altogether unlooked for.

In the collection of the British Museum there are three eggs ascribed to this species from the Seebohm Collection, which are stated to have been taken in the Orkney Islands by "W. Dunn"; but there is not the slightest evidence in support of this statement, and no details of this supposed occurrence are known. Robert Dunn, the author of the *Ornithologist's Guide to the Islands of Orkney and Shetland*, says: "I never saw this bird in Orkney" (p. 112), and Seebohm himself (*History of British Birds*, III., p. 346) writes: "It appears never to have lived in the Orkneys." The presence of the entry in the Catalogue is only one instance of numerous similar errors to which I have already drawn attention. (See *Ibis*, 1913, p. 516.)

It is therefore with great pleasure that I am able to record an undoubted instance of breeding within the Orkney Group, although for obvious reasons it is impossible at present to give the name of the actual finder of the nest, who is however personally known to me, and who is an officer in the Navy. In order to give every chance for the bird to establish itself, it has also been decided not to disclose the name of the island on which the nest was found.

On June 30th, 1917, a party of three naval officers landed on one of the islands in the Orkney group with a view to exploring the interior. After a long and tiring walk through the heather they sat down to rest, when their attention was drawn to a large brown bird with heavy flapping flight

and short tail, which bore a curious resemblance to a fowl when in flight. My informant is quite familiar with the appearance of the Arctic or Richardson's Skua, and with the help of the glasses the bird was soon made out to be a Great Skua. A second bird now appeared, and the two circled round and round over a valley. As time was pressing and they had not reached their destination, it was decided to move on, especially as breeding was regarded as highly improbable, and when returning some time later, one bird alone appeared overhead. The fact that the bird kept in the vicinity made the finders decide to revisit the spot, in order to settle the point as to whether this pair of Skua was actually nesting or not. On the following day two of the former party set out for the place, the third being unable to come, and were accompanied by another friend. The following account is given in the actual words of the finder.

“On reaching a spot near the valley where we had seen the birds on the preceding day, we heard in the distance the harsh cry of the Skua, but with the sun in our eyes, did not actually see it till we were at the foot of the valley. Only one bird was in sight, and it appeared to be anxious, flying fast and not round and round in a leisurely way. We decided to search for the nest, but after half an hour's further effort, gave up the task as hopeless. It is a remarkable fact that the bird never attacked us while searching, though we must have passed quite close to the nest once or twice. We held a consultation and decided that I should lie down behind a mound near where we thought the nest was situated, while the other two would walk on out of sight. We found a good high mound and I lay down behind it, but with my glasses I could see everything without being seen. As soon as my two friends were out of sight the Skua came and settled on a mound not far from me. I could distinguish the dark bars on the wing and the light patch at the angle of the folded wing quite clearly. The bird turned round and round, eyeing everything most intently, and then flew to another mound. For the next half hour she did nothing but fly from one mound to another, but eventually having satisfied herself that all was clear, she flew to a spot barely a hundred yards from where I was lying. Here she again stopped and listened once more, ran on another yard, and then sank down in the heather till her tail was the only part visible. I had now no doubt that she had at last settled on the nest, and having taken careful note of the various mounds near the nest, I stood up and began to walk towards her,

but had hardly taken a step before the bird shot up into the air and came straight for me. Luckily I had a walking-stick with me, and struck out with it. The bird whistled past about three feet off and then rose almost perpendicularly. She made her next stoop at my head from behind, but was kept off by the stick. I then lashed my handkerchief to the end of the stick and waved it above my head continuously, while the bird made repeated stoops at it. Fortunately I had taken careful note of the position of the nest, and was able to walk straight up to it. The Skua then ceased her attacks, and flew to some distance away, flying uneasily round. The nest contained only a single egg, which had every appearance of being hard set."

Unfortunately the exigencies of the Service have prevented my informant from revisiting the spot, so that at present I have no further information with regard to these birds, but there seems to be no reason why they should not establish themselves here if undisturbed.