

ON THE NESTING OF THE STORM-PETREL.

BY

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ON July 2nd, 1919, after waiting many days for the weather to moderate sufficiently, a companion and I sailed out to one of the smaller islands of the Inner Hebrides group and remained there till July 15th. This particular island is about one and a half miles long and half a mile broad, and rises to a height of 300 feet. It is composed of terraced basalt, and the coast-line is much indented with not too precipitous cliffs, forming an ideal nesting haunt for all kinds of sea birds.

On July 2nd, about half the Storm-Petrels (*Hydrobates pelagicus*) had laid, but all the eggs I found were evidently quite fresh. A great many pairs seemed to be still mating. They were present in all suitable situations all over the island—old broken walls, among big boulders and under heaps of round sea-worn stones, in some places a few feet above high tide mark, and in others as much as 100 feet above the sea. The easiest way to find the birds is by their strong peculiar smell, quite different from the smell of Puffins (*Fratercula a. grabæ*), which are occasionally found nesting among the Petrels.

On bright, sunny days the birds rarely make any noise in the nesting holes, but on dark, cloudy or misty days one can often locate them by their purring note, "Purr-r-r-r-ree-ka" repeated incessantly; I heard this note kept up without a break one night for over an hour. I think there is no doubt this is the mating song, although it is apparently made by both cock and hen. During the first week of July I frequently found both birds together in the nesting crevices, and often both "purred."

Our tent was pitched close beside a long beach of piled up round stones, under which some twenty pairs of Petrels were nesting, or about to nest, so we had a good opportunity to observe their nocturnal habits. They usually appeared first about 10.30 p.m. G.M.T., having gradually become more noisy from sunset onwards. On calm nights they did not call at all while flying, but on dark and stormy nights, or if misty, the noise of their calls was most weird. This fighting note is entirely different from the "purring" note—it is very loud for the size of the bird, and is quite unlike the sound produced by any other bird, as far as I am aware. The nearest rendering I can give in words is—"Cuch'-ah, cuch'-ah, coo'-ah," the accent being on the first syllable. It is very husky, and sometimes ends in a sort of shriek on a high note. As far as

one could make out in the uncertain light, the birds uttering this cry did not fly out to sea, but simply circled round the nesting area, at a great pace, like nocturnal Swifts. It is probable that this flight, accompanied by this queer cry, forms the display of the cock bird, and while it is going on, the hen bird remains in the rocky crevice and keeps up an incessant "purring." The period of greatest activity was about 2.30



STORM-PETREL WITH YOUNG ABOUT 3 DAYS OLD.

(*Photographed by Mrs Gordon.*)

a.m G.M.T. As soon as it began to get lighter, the Petrels all returned to their holes, the activity ceasing very abruptly, but they continued "purring" for some time longer. On one occasion, at night, I disturbed a pair of Petrels close together on an open ledge of rock, both "purring." Possibly mating was taking place.

None of the eggs were hatched by July 15th, but most of the birds had laid by that time.

On August 23rd I again visited the island, on a perfect summer day. A nest found with the bird sitting on July 8th was found to contain a young one, which I estimated to be about ten days old. In a crevice in which an adult had been found without an egg on July 3rd, there was a chick apparently not more than three days old. These dates tend to confirm the belief that the Petrels sit for not less than thirty-five days; assuming that in the first case, the bird had been sitting for a day or two on July 8th and that the young one was nearly a fortnight old on August 23rd; and that in the second case the bird had begun to sit on July 16th or before, and the young one was three days old on August 23rd. On this date some birds were still sitting, but in every case the eggs looked near hatching. On another island I examined several more chicks of various ages, but none appeared to be more than about sixteen days old. I did not once hear the "purring" note.

On August 27th and 29th I visited another island, and found young ones varying from three days to about four weeks old. In one nest there was an unhatched egg of last year, showing that they use the same nesting crevice every year.

From the examination of all the chicks found, I made the following observations:—

Down about half an inch long, of a slate-grey colour. A very conspicuous bare circular patch on the top of the head. Bare white skin round the base of the bill, giving a vulture-like appearance. Skin white all over the body. Bill and legs and feet white in the newly-hatched chicks, except for the tip of the bill, which is black. They gradually get darker till at about four weeks old they are quite black like the adult. The feathers begin to appear at about this time.

The chicks keep up an incessant cheeping, something like the note of a young Oystercatcher, and they are consequently easy to locate. The egg-shell seems to be always left in the nest.

In shallow nesting places where there is dead grass and other debris among the stones, a sort of rough nest is made, but in the deeper crevices where no material is handy, no nest is made, and the egg is laid on the bare ground. The parent birds brooded the smallest young ones of only a few days old, but no parent bird was ever found with the older ones. It would be interesting to know whether the adults go a long way out to sea during the day, and then feed the young at night. But as I was unable to remain on the island this time, I could not ascertain this or whether the "fighting" is still carried on at night after the young are hatched.