

BIRDS OF THE ISLAND OF STEEP HOLM

BY

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THE island of Steep Holm is a huge rock composed entirely of carboniferous limestone rising abruptly to a height of 250 feet out of and above the waters of the Bristol Channel, about five miles off the coast of Weston-super-Mare and three miles W.N.W. of Brean Down, Somerset. Its top surface measures about half a mile in length and three hundred yards in breadth, and is covered with grass well cropped by rabbits (and formerly by goats), while a rank growth of "Alexanders" is gradually spreading over the whole island, and is exceptionally tall and thick at the west end where gulls find shelter in it for their nests. There are a few stunted trees at the eastern end. Some seventy years ago the island was fortified and this involved a great deal of excavation for batteries, "powder house" and so on, while in addition a "barracks house" was erected and still stands. It seems probable that these operations affected the Puffins and other birds which are said to have bred there in large numbers in former days, but do not now.



Steep Holm, June 15th, 1930, showing Eastern landing beach and ruins of hotel as well as North end, where Peregrine and Ravens nest.

Photographed by W. C. TAUNTON.

A more recent important human influence on the bird population is that for many years eggs of the Herring- and Lesser Blacked-backed Gulls were collected for human food and since this practice ceased in 1922 these Gulls have shown

a steady increase. Under the present lessee, who protects the island, a still greater increase has taken place.

In this article I give a full list of the breeding birds and brief references to those which have been definitely recorded as visiting the island to the end of 1935. Birds seen near the island, but not actually on it, have been omitted.

The list below has been compiled from old records and from those of different individuals who have from time to time visited there. I think it only fair to say that the recent avian history of this island to the end of 1933 is practically the work of a few ornithologists who have made the birds of Steep Holm more or less their study; they are the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt, Mr. Geoffrey C. S. Ingram, Col. A. E. Lascelles, Mr. H. Morrey Salmon, Mr. B. W. Tucker, the late Dr. W. J. Wiglesworth, and myself. Probably I have visited the island most often, and I have most of the particulars relating to individual observations if they are required. Neither Thos. Sleeman nor Mrs. Smith and family, who resided on the island for many years, kept any bird records, and what they have to relate is purely from memory.

LIST OF BIRDS WHICH BREED OR HAVE BREDED.

RAVEN (*Corvus c. corax*).—One pair resident and breeding.

CARRION-CROW (*Corvus c. corone*).—About three pairs resident. During T. Sleeman's occupation it was a fairly regular breeder, I was once shown a nest by him containing young placed in the rocks on the north side; the unusual position was I presume due to lack of suitable accommodation, but Sleeman also found the nest in low bushes. On May 26th, 1929, Mr. B. W. Tucker saw an empty nest in a small sycamore. Two were seen round the rocks on the south side on May 5th, 1935, by Mr. H. H. Davis.

STARLING (*Sturnus v. vulgaris*).—Occasional visitor in small and large numbers, also summer resident for breeding purposes. Nest and young seen on May 26th, 1934, and another pair said to be breeding. Mr. H. H. Davis reports three seen on May 5th, 1935, one pair was breeding in the barracks buildings.

LINNET (*Carduelis c. cannabina*).—Found breeding by Col. A. E. Lascelles and myself; nest and four eggs May 17th, 1919, when both birds flew up from the ground in front of me.

SKYLARK (*Alauda a. arvensis*).—Spring and summer resident. Nests with eggs found and birds seen on several occasions by Mrs. and Miss Smith, T. Sleeman and myself: nests were found on the top of the island. Col. A. E. Lascelles also found it breeding.

MEADOW-PIPIT (*Anthus pratensis*).—Resident. I always found a few pairs breeding on the top of the island, and found nests with full sets of eggs, these were also found on many occasions by Mrs. and Miss Smith. Also found breeding by Rev. F. L. Blathwayt, Col. A. E. Lascelles and Messrs. Ingram and Salmon.

ROCK-PIPIT (*Anthus s. petrosus*).—Resident. Nests with full sets of eggs found by the Smiths, Dr. W. J. Wiglesworth, myself and others. I remember seeing a nest with eggs in a hole in the masonry of the barracks house.

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER (*Muscicapa s. striata*).—Spring and summer resident. Two pairs seen by Messrs. Ingram and Salmon on June 2nd, 1923. On June 21st, 1926, I saw a pair and found the nest almost completed in ivy growing thickly on the south side of the barracks house. A pair seen on May 21st, 1935, by Mr. H. Cox.

WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia c. communis*).—Spring and summer visitor in small numbers. Seen by myself on April 18th, 1919, also a nest with four eggs in the following May. Seen by the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt, April 20th, 1900, and by Mr. H. Tetley, May 26th, 1934.

SONG-THRUSH (*Turdus e. ericetorum*).—A common resident. Birds seen and nests with eggs found by several visitors to the island including Messrs. Ingram and Salmon and myself.

BLACKBIRD (*Turdus m. merula*).—A common resident. Building in holes in masonry as well as in bushes.

ROBIN (*Erithacus r. melophilus*).—Resident and breeding in very small numbers. I found an empty nest in 1919. Also recorded by Rev. F. L. Blathwayt, Col. A. E. Lascelles, Messrs. Ingram and Salmon Mr. H. Tetley and others.

WHEATEAR (*Enanthe c. enanthe*).—Occasional spring and summer resident for breeding purposes. I watched a pair for some considerable time on May 17th, 1919, on the sloping ground a little east of the barracks dwelling house: the hen carried nesting material down out of sight.

HEDGE-SPARROW (*Prunella m. occidentalis*).—A few pairs resident. Nests and eggs found by self, also recorded breeding by Messrs. Ingram and Salmon, and Col. A. E. Lascelles and others.

WREN (*Troglodytes t. troglodytes*).—Few pairs resident. Eggs were found by the Smiths and nests were found by Mr. H. Tetley and myself.

[LITTLE OWL (*Athene n. vidalii*).—One seen by me in May, 1925, and by at least one other. There seems little doubt that it breeds, but there is no definite proof.]

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco p. peregrinus*).—One pair resident and breeding.

KESTREL (*Falco t. tinnunculus*).—Two pairs resident and breeding. Eyries found with eggs or young on earth shoulder in the cliffs, once in an old Carrion-Crow's nest. Recorded by Messrs. Ingram and Salmon, the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt and others.

CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax c. carbo*).—Spring and summer resident for breeding purposes, its numbers augmented in autumn and winter by the arrival of birds that use the waters around the Holms as a fishing station. Recorded on numerous occasions for many years past, and breeding suspected. Although recorded by Wiglesworth as breeding in 1917, this was erroneous and due to a misunderstanding, the nest referred to being that of a Herring-Gull. On May 17th, 1919, I saw a party of ten leave the rocks on the north side and encircle the island. The first breeding proved, was on May 26th, 1934, when ten nests were seen on the north side. Two contained three and four young, and in a third the eggs were hatching. On June 23rd, 1935, about twenty nests were counted by Mr. H. Tetley and Mr. H. Cox.

SHELD-DUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*).—Numerous resident; breeding in rabbit holes and in shelter of rocks, ivy, and brambles, three and four ducks sometimes laying in the same nest.

MALLARD (*Anas p. platyrhynchos*).—I found a nest with hatched out eggshells on July 8th, 1929, in the shelter of some brambles on the south side. The down and feathers were clearly those of a Mallard.

OYSTER-CATCHER (*Hæmatopus o. occidentalis*).—More or less resident, has bred. A bird flew from rocks at the east end June 21st, 1926, and eggshells were picked up a week later and given to me. Six on the south side May 5th, 1935, Mr. H. H. Davis.

BRITISH LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus f. graellsii*).—Now breeding plentifully and still increasing. In 1902, Knight recorded few pairs breeding. In 1904 the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt stated that about 25 pairs of Herring and Lesser Black-backs were breeding together on the north face (*Zool.*, March 15th, 1904, p. 94). Eighteen years later in May, 1922, Col. A. E. Lascelles computed the number breeding at 30 to 40 pairs. On May 11th, 1924, my estimate of breeding pairs was 100. The above figures exclude immature and non-breeding birds. Thus in two years from 1922 when the island became uninhabited, a good increase was noticeable. In 1933 Mr. Harry Cox (the present lessee) put the number of Gulls breeding at 1,200 pairs, Herring-Gulls being greatly in the majority, so a fair computation perhaps would be 500 pairs. To-day both species are about equal. Formerly they bred in closely placed, but separate communities at the north-west end, but with the recent increase the Lesser Black-backed has spread along the west side and well towards the top of the island, and I have found nests on the very doorsteps of the barracks house. It is difficult to walk through the tall Alexanders (*Smyrniun olusatrum*) in June without stepping on eggs or young.

HERRING-GULL (*Larus a. argentatus*).—This has a similar history to the preceding species, but in numbers, while formerly it was always in the majority, at the present day the two species are about equal. Always considered to be the commonest bird on the island, its numbers in various years have been estimated as follows: Knight, 1902, fifty birds: Col. A. E. Lascelles, 1922, fifty pairs: an increase of 100 per cent. in twenty years; but during this time no protection whatever was afforded them and the eggs were collected for food. Lewis, 1924, one hundred and fifty pairs: Cox, 1933, seven hundred pairs. The birds now nest practically over the whole of the island accepting any port of shelter, and often on the bare soil.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*).—Less than six pairs more or less resident and breeding. It is given as breeding in *Montagu's British Birds*, in 1813, and T. Hayward wrote in 1858: "Used to breed, but now only rarely." While in 1869 Cecil Smith in *The Birds of Somerset*, stated: "Used to breed but do so no longer." The first definite record of its breeding in recent times was in 1923 when on May 7th Col. A. E. Lascelles found a nest containing eggs; another nest was found on May 14th with three eggs, these being taken; while on June 2nd Messrs. Ingram and Salmon photographed a nest containing three chicks, so two pairs were "definitely" proved to be breeding. From then to the present day three pairs have bred regularly and possibly more occasionally.

RAZORBILL (*Alca torda*), SOUTHERN GUILLEMOT (*Uria a. albionis*), SOUTHERN PUFFIN (*Fratercula a. grabe*).—These three species no longer breed, but were no doubt amongst those which once populated the island in great numbers and whose eggs were collected and sent to sugar refineries in Bristol. In 1829 Rutter refers to "vast numbers of sea birds which resort to the ledges and crevices of the rocks for the purpose of incubation . . . the eggs being sometimes collected as a source of profit." J. Hayward writing in 1858 states that the Guillemot is found "in considerable numbers" and is more common than the Razorbill, which breeds in company with it. Of the Puffin he writes

that it may be found "in the greatest abundance" in the breeding season but is not seen after that time. He also remarks "It is easily shot as by making a noise it comes out of its holes in great numbers." Hayward is, however, the only writer who gives definite information as to which species made up the great numbers of birds breeding on the island in remote times. Nor is it known to me when they ceased to breed. A very old resident of Weston-super-Mare assured me that sea birds had their eggs on the ledges in 1880. It seems likely that the Puffins did not survive very long after the construction of the batteries in 1867, but the Guillemots and Razorbills may well have continued until later.

OCCASIONAL VISITORS.

The following is a list of birds which have been noted as visitors to the island:—

JACKDAW (*Colæus m. spermologus*).—Occasionally seen, but no proof of breeding.

ROOK (*Corvus f. frugilegus*).—One which came to the island became tame and lived there several years. It was seen by Messrs. Ingram and Salmon in June 1911.

HOUSE-SPARROW (*Passer d. domesticus*).—One was seen in June, 1911, and T. Sleeman informs me that a flock appeared in the summer of 1917 during a plague of caterpillars and remained for some time feeding on them and then disappeared as suddenly as they had come.

GREENFINCH (*Chloris ch. chloris*).—Twice observed.

TREE-PIPIT (*Anthus t. trivialis*).—Occasional visitor, e.g., May 17th, 1919, and June 21st, 1926, but no proof of breeding.

GREAT TITMOUSE (*Parus major*).—One May, 1926.

COAL-TITMOUSE (*Parus ater*).—One April, 1898.

PIED FLYCATCHER (*Muscicapa h. hypoleuca*).—One reported April 29th, 1934.

BLACKCAP (*Sylvia a. atricapilla*), **WILLOW-WARBLER** (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), **CHIFF-CHAFF** (*Ph. collybita*).—Spring and summer visitors in small numbers, and satisfactorily identified on various occasions.

REDSTART (*Phænicurus ph. phænicurus*).—Occasional visitor—one May 11th, 1924, several males April 20th, 1900.

CUCKOO (*Cuculus c. canorus*).—A male heard and seen by me on May 11th, 1924.

SHAG (*Phalacrocorax g. graculus*).—I saw three sitting on the rocks on May 17th, 1919, and so far as I know this is the only definite record, though doubtless it fairly frequently visits the island.

WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba p. palumbus*).—Once seen in June, 1935.

TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia i. turtur*).—A pair reported in May, 1935.

REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*).—One seen by me in 1928.

DOTTEREL (*Charadrius morinellus*).—One shot on May 1st, 1869, was identified by Murray A. Mathew.

WHIMBREL (*Numenius ph. phæopus*).—Seven seen by me on May 11th, 1924.

LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*).—One on May 11th, 1924.