

THE BRITISH BREEDING STATUS OF LEACH'S FORK-TAILED PETREL.

BY

ROBERT ATKINSON AND JOHN A. AINSLIE.

PRESENT STATUS.

RECENT visits to all of the four remote islands now occupied as breeding stations by Leach's Fork-tailed Petrel (*Oceanodroma l. leucorrhoea*) enable us to set down the present status of this bird with more accuracy than heretofore. Estimates of actual numbers will always be difficult, if not impossible, because of the exclusively nocturnal habit of the species on land and the inaccessibility of its island breeding stations.

Probably a minimum number in the region of 2,000 pairs of Leach's Petrels now nest annually in Britain, the birds being unevenly distributed among the following four islands :
(1) NORTH RONA. 300 acres. Lat. 59° 7' N., Long. 5° 49' W.
40 miles NNW. of Cape Wrath. Uninhabited since 1844.

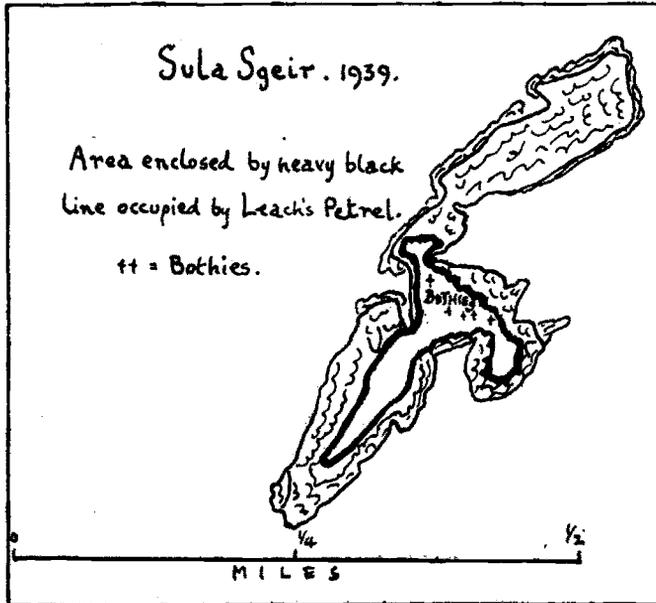
In 1936, 327 pairs were nesting within the village area on Rona and at least 50 pairs elsewhere in the island giving a minimum population of some 380 nesting pairs. We have already given a full description of this colony [1].

(2) SULA SGEIR. 30 acres. Lat. 59° 6' N., Long. 6° 9' W.
34 miles NNE. of the Butt of Lewis. Always uninhabited.

The first suggestion that Leach's Petrels might be nesting on Sula Sgeir came from Malcolm Stewart, "rudely awakened by cries and considerable commotion issuing from the walls of the buildings" on the night of July 23rd, 1932 [2]. These buildings, five in number, are large drystone bothies inhabited by Lewismen during their annual plunder of the gannetry. We were able to prove the fact that Leach's Petrels actually nested on Sula Sgeir on August 3rd to 4th, 1939, when we examined in the hand adult birds, nestlings, and an adult bird caught in the act of incubation.

The birds now nest over all the available ground on the island. The impression given by a night spent in the colony was that they were at least as numerous as on Rona ; a figure in the region of 400 pairs is probably the present breeding population of the species on Sula Sgeir. Small numbers have no doubt nested on this island for many years but the present large population must be of recent increase. In the past (1932 and before) Gannets (*Sula bassana*) occupied a much larger area than they now cover, and they left only the small environs of the bothies as suitable Petrel ground. As the Gannets have receded they have left a rich soil debris, rapidly colonized by orach, thrift and mayweed, and as soon occupied by Fulmar (*Fulmarus g. glacialis*) and Leach's

Petrels. Annually, then, the Gannets' retreat has opened new ground to the Petrels. They have taken full advantage of it. In places the Petrels' nesting ground abuts on to the very edge of the gannetry.

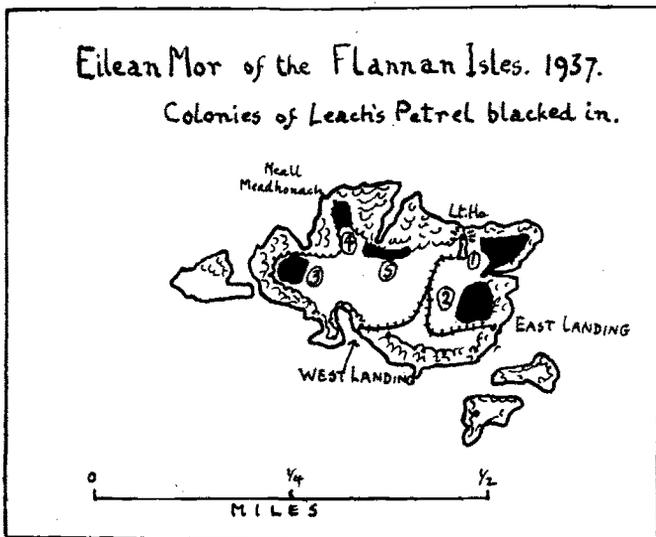


In the daytime there is literally no trace of the Petrels' habitation; whereas in the village on Rona burrow entrances are often obvious.

(3) THE FLANNAN ISLES OR SEVEN HUNTERS. *Collectively 92 acres. Lat. 58° 17' N., Long. 7° 35' W. 20 miles W. of Gallan Head in Lewis. Uninhabited until 1899; since by three lighthouse keepers.*

On Eilean Mor (39 acres, the lighthouse island) Leach's Petrels nest in three large and in two small colonies. 200 pairs is a guess at the minimum population now breeding on Eilean Mor, visited by us in 1937. Of the five colonies, the first is on ground regularly swept by beams from the Lighthouse. It is an area of turf and thrift, honeycombed by Puffin, rabbit and Petrel burrows and extends from the lighthouse flagstaff down over the slope of the north and east facing cliffs. The second colony is the largest of all and is spread over all the mayweed-grown "puffin slopes" above the east landing. The third colony is on high ground on the western promontory of the island, centred about two tumbledown

stone bothies whose bare dry stones are exclusive to a colony of Storm-Petrels (*Hydrobates pelagicus*). The remaining two colonies are small—one on the NW. promontory, Meall Meadhonach, and the other east of it, along the cliff edge leading back to the lighthouse.



In these colonies the underground honeycomb is definitely shared among rabbits, Puffins and Leach's Petrels; the Petrels excavate their own nesting chambers as diverticula from the general labyrinth. But there are many small Petrel-excavated burrows as well, exclusive to Petrels; rabbit and Puffin burrows are told from them easily, rabbits' by the droppings and fresh earth, Puffins' by the puddled mud, and both by their larger size. The entrances to Eilean Mor Petrel burrows usually look unused, and are commonly overgrown, particularly with mouse-eared chickweed.

- (4) ST. KILDA GROUP. Collectively 2,088 acres. Lat. $57^{\circ} 50' N.$, Long. $8^{\circ} 38' W.$ 34 miles WNW. of N. Uist. Hirta uninhabited since 1930, except during summers. Subsidiary islands always uninhabited.

Although the St. Kilda group is quite the most accessible of all the British breeding stations of Leach's Petrel, less information is available about these colonies than about any others. The only estimate of numbers is that of T. H. Harrison (1931) in an unpublished note: "At least a thousand pairs—certainly many more than on North Rona." There are, or were, colonies on Dùn, Boreray, Soay, Levenish and on the

main island, Hirta. The most recent records of these colonies appear to be: Dùn, 1931, Harrisson and Lack [3]; Boreray, 1928, Seton Gordon [4]; Soay, 1902, "plentiful," Wiglesworth [5]; Levenish, 1902, a small colony hitherto unknown, and Hirta, 1902, "breeds sparingly," Wiglesworth [5].

PAST STATUS.

Leach's Petrel was once more widespread as a British breeding species than it now is. In addition to the present distant stations, it once bred on Mingulay and Barra of the Outer Hebrides [6] and on Rum of the Small Isles [7]. Less definite references have been made to Mingulay by H. J. Elwes [8], probably referring to 1868, and to Rum by R. Gray [9]. Eggs have been taken from islands off the west coast of Ireland but of the present time Mr. G. R. Humphreys writes: "It may be that the species breeds off the coast every year but if it does apparently it is only odd pairs among many Storm-Petrels." The old records substantiated by eggs are as follows: *Tearaght*, July, 1886, June, 1887, July, 1888—a total of four eggs; *Inishnabro*, May, 1889, one egg; *Black Rock*, *Mayo*, August, 1899, one egg [10]; *Duwillawn Beg*, *Mayo*, June, 1906, three eggs (G. R. Humphreys, *in litt.*).

R. M. Lockley failed to find the species on Inishnabro, Inishtooskert, Inishwickillaun or on Great Basket in August, 1937. He did not visit *Tearaght* but stated that the islanders did not know the bird [11].

The colonies at present extant are probably immemorial. The first records are as follows:—

NORTH RONA. 1883. John Swinburne. "Numerous." [12].

SULA SGEIR. First suggested 1932. Malcolm Stewart [2]; proved by ourselves, 1939.

FLANNANS. 1904. W. Eagle Clarke. "On Eilean Mor they are abundant" [13].

ST. KILDA. 1818. Bullock. "The first British and third known specimen of this bird was obtained at St. Kilda by Bullock who described it in the sale catalogue of his collection as an undescribed Petrel with a forked tail, taken at St. Kilda in 1818. At Bullock's sale, in 1819, the specimen was purchased by Dr. Leach for the British Museum; and in 1820 it became the type specimen of *Procellaria leachii* of Temminck." [14].

FUTURE STATUS.

From a wider distribution Leach's Petrel has receded to the extremest fringe of the British Isles, outside even the main line of the Outer Hebrides. But its British history shows that remote, oceanic islands, to which it is now exclusive, are not essential for breeding stations; nor need the islands be uninhabited, as the colonies flourishing round the Flannans

Lighthouse testify; a feature of the Petrels' nocturnal activities on land is their indifference to human beings.

It may be that the species is now gradually increasing again; the *Sula Sgeir* colony, as explained, is of very recent and rapid increase. In any case islands either suitable for future colonization or possibly now supporting undiscovered colonies can be considered together. In view of the species' history only west coast islands are at all likely sites. Broadly, islands which suit Fulmar Petrels are liable to suit Leach's. If Leach's Petrels are founding new colonies or have colonies as yet undiscovered, the following islands are worth consideration. They would come next in the path of any eastern expansion, yet are well within the species' one-time range.

SULE SKERRY. 35 acres. Lat. 59° 4' N., Long. 4° 24' W. 33 miles NE. of Cape Wrath. Uninhabited until 1895; since by three lighthouse keepers.

Mr. H. W. Robinson reported a single pair of Leach's Petrels as having bred on Sule Skerry in 1933 [15], but the record has not been confirmed, nor have any further records been forthcoming.

SULE STACK, a rock a few miles SW. of Sule Skerry, is well situated for the species but has no soil or vegetation and is thus at present unsuitable.

FLANNANS. Leach's Petrels have only been reported from the main island, Eilean Mor; but one or more of the even less accessible islands of the group—Eilean Tighe, Soray, Roareim, Eilean à Ghobha—may very well now contain colonies.

GASKER, a possible islet, uninhabited, about eight miles off the west coast of Harris.

HASKEIR, a group of small uninhabited islands eight miles west of North Uist. Fulmars nest at any rate on the main island. A promising place. It has been described by Seton Gordon, after a short daytime visit [4] but, nocturnally, is virgin ground for naturalists.*

MONACH ISLES, a group of low, sand-dune islands four to seven miles off the west coast of North Uist. Two of the five islands are still inhabited. We found no sign of Leach's Petrels when we were there in 1938.

VATERSAY, SANDRAY, PABBAY, MINGULAY AND BERNERAY are the line of small islands, mostly uninhabited and teeming with bird-life, which make a southern tail to the Outer Hebrides; and of which Mingulay has old records of Leach's Petrel.

In addition, any islands outlying from the west coast of

*Note: A single Leach's Petrel has now been reported as found in a hole in the breeding-season on Haskeir. (See R. B. Freeman, *Brit. B.*, Vol. XXXIII, p. 331.)

Ireland, especially those once colonized by Leach's Petrels, are possibilities.

The widespread increase of the Fulmar may stimulate further research into the distribution of Petrels generally; it is hoped that this statement of present knowledge may focus attention particularly on Leach's Petrel. Even negative evidence would be valuable.

Of all British islands geographically possible for Leach's Petrel, Rockall, 150 miles west of St. Kilda, must approach perfection; but it is entirely bare and thus unfortunately ineligible.

REFERENCES.

- [1] AINSLIE, J. A., and ATKINSON, ROBERT. "On the Breeding Habits of Leach's Fork-tailed Petrel." *Brit. B.*, Vol. XXX, January, 1937, pp. 234-48.
- [2] STEWART, MALCOLM. *Ronay; a Description of the Islands of North Rona and Sula Sgeir*, etc. (London, 1933), pp. 45-6.
- [3] HARRISON, T. H., and LACK, DAVID. "The Breeding Birds of St. Kilda." *Scott. Nat.*, 1934, p. 66.
- [4] GORDON, SETON. *Islands of the West*. London, 1933, pp. 109-10 and pp. 87-92.
- [5] WIGLESWORTH, J. *St. Kilda and its Birds, an ornithological expedition in the summer of 1902*. Liverpool, 1903.
- [6] HARVIE-BROWN, J. A. Preface to *The Fauna of the Outer Hebrides*, 1889.
- [7] MACPHERSON, REV. H. A. *British Birds with their nests and eggs*. (Vol. VI, Order Tubinares).
- [8] ELWES, H. J. "The Bird-Stations of the Outer Hebrides." *Ibis*, 1869, p. 28.
- [9] GRAY, R. Quoted in Henry Seebohm's *A History of British Birds*, Part VI, 1885.
- [10] USSHER, R. J., and WARREN, R. *Birds of Ireland*.
- [11] LOCKLEY, R. M. Information printed for the first time, by permission.
- [12] SWINBURNE, JOHN. "Notes on the islands of Sula Sgeir or North Baita and North Rona, with a List of the Birds Inhabiting Them." *Proc. Roy. Phys. Soc. of Edinburgh*, 1883-4, pp. 51-67.
- [13] CLARKE, W. EAGLE. "The Birds of the Flannan Islands, Outer Hebrides." *Annals Scott. Nat. Hist.*, 1905, pp. 8-19 and pp. 80-86.
- [14] CLARKE, W. EAGLE. *Studies in Bird Migration*. Vol. II, pp. 244-5.
- [15] ROBINSON, H. W. "First Nesting of Leach's Fork-tailed Petrel in Orkney." *Scott. Nat.*, 1934, p. 93.