

## THE BIRDS OF SULE SKERRY.



**S**ULE SKERRY is a tiny, barren, surf-bleached islet, lying far out in the open ocean, thirty-two miles west from Hoy Head, about the same distance from Cape Wrath, and thirty miles from the nearest land, Farrid Head, in Sutherlandshire. The Skerry, roughly rhomboidal in outline, is about half a mile in length and a quarter of a mile in its greatest width, and attains a height of only forty-five feet in its central part. All round the shore is a belt of bare, jagged rock, where the wash of the great Atlantic waves prevents any vegetation from finding a foothold, and of the thirty-five acres or so which form the entire area of the island only some twelve are covered with a mossy, vegetable soil.

Lying, as it does, right in the track of trading vessels, this low islet, together with the Stack, which rises to a height of more than a hundred feet some four and a half miles to the south-westward, formed a death-trap to many a ship, which was, no doubt, afterwards merely reported as "missing," and its shores when visited were rarely found without some stranded wreckage to tell of the unrecorded tragedies

of the winter seas. It was not till the year 1892 that steps were taken to mark this dangerous rock, but three years later saw the completion of Sule Skerry Lighthouse, a massive tower of a hundred feet in height, with a powerful light visible for a distance of eighteen miles.

Sule Skerry is no longer either a dangerous or a lonely islet when compared with its former state. The three lightkeepers who are always on duty, together with their goats, poultry, and rabbits, give quite an inhabited air to the place—probably too much so for the comfort of the original occupants, the flocks of birds which find on it either a permanent home or a temporary dwelling-place. Sule Skerry is an ideal place for observation of the birds which frequent our islands, both from the



*Sule Skerry Lighthouse.*

immense numbers of them which nest there, and from the absence of high cliffs or inaccessible rocks. Luckily for us, one of the lightkeepers formerly on this station, Mr. Tomison, a native of Orkney, was a man unusually well qualified for such observation, and he has recorded much that is of interest regarding the bird life of the Skerry. From one of his papers on this subject we quote the following interesting pages.

## The Residenters.

The birds of Sule Skerry may be divided into three classes—the residenters, the regular visitors, and the occasional visitors. The class of residenters is represented by the great black-backed gull, the herring gull, the shag or green cormorant, and the meadow pipit.

The great black-backed gull is one of the handsomest birds of the gull family, but owing to its destructive propensities amongst small birds, rabbits, and occasionally young lambs, a continual warfare has been waged against it for years by farmers and gamekeepers, until now it is almost entirely banished to the outlying parts of the

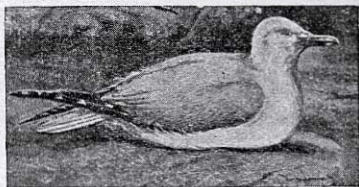


*Great black-backed gull.*

country. Before the lighthouse was erected on Sule Skerry, large numbers of this species frequented the island; but the lightkeepers found them such arrant thieves that they reduced their numbers considerably. There are still about twenty pairs resident on the island all the year round, and they seem to find plenty of food either on land or at sea. Their breeding-time is in May, and sometimes as late as June. When the young are hatched the parents are continually on the lookout for food, and I have often seen them swoop down and seize young rabbits. Frequently they make desperate

efforts to capture the old rabbits, but never successfully. They lay three eggs in a nest composed of withered grass, and the process of incubation lasts about four weeks.

A small colony of herring gulls stays on the island all the year round, but in summer vast flocks of them are in evidence when the herrings are on the coast.



*Herring gull.*

Only the residents remain to breed, and about a dozen pairs annually rear their young and spend their whole time in the vicinity. Some of the young must emigrate to a more genial climate, for although rarely disturbed their numbers are not increasing. They lay three eggs early in May, and sit about four weeks. When hatched, the young immediately leave the nest, and are so like the surrounding rocks in colour that when they lie close it is almost impossible to discover them. When hunting for food for their offspring, these gulls are almost as great a pest as their cousins, the great black-backed, and are more audacious thieves.

The most numerous of the residents are the scarfs. In summer and winter they are always on the island, and apparently there is an abundant supply of suitable food in the vicinity, for they never go far away. During winter they congregate on the rocks in large flocks or colonies, and they have become so accustomed to man's presence that they fly only when one approaches within a few yards of them. In very stormy weather they seek refuge in some sheltered spot, far enough away from the coast-line

to be safe from the encroaching waves, and only when frightened by any one approaching too near do they choose what is, in their opinion, the lesser of two evils, and seek safety in flight. With the advent of spring they, like all other birds, turn their thoughts to love. Their comparatively homely winter dress gradually changes to one more appropriate to this sentiment and more in harmony with the imposing surroundings. Early in the year their plumage assumes a greener tint, and the graceful tuft or crest on the top of the head becomes more and more prominent. This crest practically disappears about the end of June, and seems to be a decoration in both sexes only during the nuptial season. Usually they manage to get through with their love-making and selecting of partners by the middle of March, after which the operations of nest-building are undertaken.

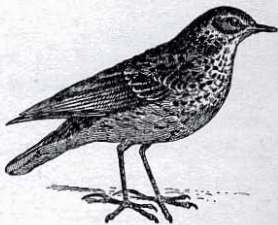
In Orkney we associate a scarf's nest with some almost inaccessible cliff, but such is not the case on Sule Skerry, for the simple reason that there are no cliffs. The nests are built all over the island, but principally near the coast-line; and the sociableness of the bird's disposition shows itself in this fact, that they tend to crowd their nests together in certain selected spots, to which they return year after year. One place in particular, a patch of rough, rocky ground from forty to fifty yards square, I have named the scarf colony on account of its numerous population during the breeding season. Here in 1898 I counted fifty-six nests.

As to the materials used for nest-building, these are principally seaweed and grass, but the scarf is not very particular as to details, and uses anything that

will suit the purpose. I have found pieces of ordinary rope, even wire rope, and small pieces of wood used, and a very common foundation is the skeleton of a rabbit which has died during the winter. During building operations I have observed that one bird builds and the other brings the materials. After all has been completed, three, four, and sometimes five eggs are laid. Three is the most common number; five is rare. During incubation the one bird relieves the other periodically. It is a common sight to see one come in from the sea, sit down at the edge of the nest, and hold a long palaver with its mate. The sitting bird then gets up and flies out to sea, the other taking its place.

When the young come out of the egg they are entirely naked, of a dark sooty colour, and particularly ugly. Towards the end of the first week of their existence a coating of down begins to grow, followed by feathers in about three weeks. As near as I can judge from observation, the bird is fully fledged in five weeks from the time of hatching.

The only other residenter is the meadow-pipit, titlark, or moss-cheeper. It is the only small bird that remains on the island all the year round. It nests generally in May, and lays five or six eggs. It is said that two broods are raised in the season, but I have never noticed that here. Towards the end of summer they are to be seen in considerable numbers, but in September and October the island is visited by kestrels, who soon thin them down.



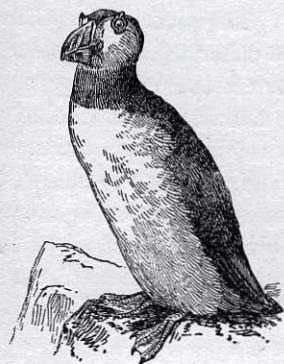
*Meadow-pipit.*

## The Regular Visitors.

The regular visitors are puffin, razor-bill, common guillemot, black guillemot, oyster-catcher, tern, eider duck, kittiwake, stormy petrel, curlew, snipe, turnstone, and sand-piper. In this list I have advisedly placed first the puffin, or tammynorie, or bottlenose, or coulterneb, or pope, or sea-parrot, for it is a well-known and well-named bird. In point of interest it undoubtedly takes the first place among all our

feathered friends. Its remarkable appearance, its activity, its assertive disposition, and the regularity of its habits, compel the attention of the most careless observer.

At one time puffins were much in demand for food. An old history of the Scilly Islands tells us that in 1345 the rent of these islands was three hundred puffins. In 1848, on account of the bird having got scarcer, and consequently



*Puffin.*

more valuable, the rent was fifty puffins. We are also led to understand that the young birds, being plump and tender, were more highly esteemed than their more elderly and tougher relatives.

The most remarkable feature of this curious bird is its beak, the peculiarities of which are its enormous size compared with the size of the body, and its brilliant colours—blue, yellow, and red. For a long time it was a puzzle that occasional dead specimens

found washed ashore in winter had a beak very much smaller and destitute of bright colours. It has now been ascertained that the outer sheath is moulted annually, being shed on the approach of winter and replaced at the return of the breeding season.

To give any idea of their numbers on Sule Skerry is an almost impossible task, for when they are on the island they are hardly ever at rest. The air is black with them, the ground is covered with them, every hole is tenanted by them, the sea is covered with them. They are here, there, and everywhere.

They first make their appearance early in April, and spend from eight to twelve days at sea before landing, coming close in round the island in the forenoon and disappearing at night. Before landing they fly in clouds round the place, and after having made a survey to see that all is right, they begin to drop in hundreds, till in half an hour every stone and rock is covered. They do not waste time, but start at once to clear out old holes and make new ones, and for burrowing they can easily put a rabbit in the shade. Those who are not engaged in digging improve the shining hour by fighting, and for pluck and determination they are hard to beat. They are so intent on their work that I have often seized the combatants, and even then they were unwilling to let go their hold of each other; but when they do, it is advisable for the person interfering to let go also, if he would avoid a rather unpleasant handshake.

After spending a few hours on the island they all disappear, and do not usually land again for two days; but when they do come back the second time there is no ceremony about their landing. They come in



straggling flocks from all points of the compass, and resume their digging and fighting. They continue in this manner, never remaining ashore all night till the first week of May. They spend very little time on the construction of their nests, which consist merely of a few straws. The greater number burrow in the dry, peaty soil, and their holes will average at least three feet underground; but there are also an immense number that lay amongst loose rocks and stones on the north side of the island. The eggs laid there are always clean and white until the young bird is hatched; but those laid underground in a day or two become as brown as the soil, and seem more like a lump of peat than an egg. During the time of incubation, which lasts a month, those not engaged in hatching spend their time in fishing and resting on the rocks, and as a pastime indulge in friendly sparring matches.

One easily knows when the young are hatched by seeing the old birds coming in from sea with herring fry or small sand-eels, which are carried transversely in their bills, from six to ten at a time. The sole work of the parent birds for the next three or four weeks is fishing and carrying home their takes to the young. Very little time is given to nursing. They remain in the hole just long enough to get rid of their burden, and then go to sea again. As the young ones grow, the size of the fish brought home increases. At first it is small sand-eels from one and a half to two inches long, but at the end of a fortnight small herrings and moderate-sized sand-eels are the usual feeding. I noticed an old bird fly into a hole one day with a bigger fish than usual, and, to see

what it was, I put in my hand and pulled out both birds. The tail of the fish was just disappearing down the young one's throat, but I made him disgorge his prey, and found it to be a sand-eel eight inches long. How that small bird could find room for such a dinner was really wonderful.

At first the young are covered with a thick coating of down, and probably their appearance at this stage has given rise to the name "puffin," meaning a "little puff." In a fortnight the white feathers on the breast begin to show, and the birds are fully fledged in four weeks, when they at once take to the water. As soon as they go afloat, young and old leave the place, and about the middle of July one can easily see that their numbers are decreasing, the end of August usually seeing the last of them.

There is a considerable colony of razor-bills on the island. Their time of arrival is about the same as that of the puffin, but they make no commotion when they come. They seem to slip ashore, and always keep near the coast-line, ready to fly to sea when any one approaches. They begin laying towards the end of May, and lay one egg on the bare rock, usually under a stone, but in some cases on an exposed ledge.

During incubation one bird relieves the other, for if the egg were left exposed and unprotected the black-backed gull would very soon appropriate it. Some authorities say that the male bird brings food to its mate; but I have never observed this, though I have watched carefully to see if such were the case



*Razor-bill.*

The young remain in the nest, or, to speak more correctly, on the rock, for about two weeks if not disturbed, and I have seen a young one remain ashore until covered with feathers, which would mean about four weeks from the time of hatching. They all, young and old, leave early in August. I am sorry to say they are becoming scarcer every year, chiefly on account of their shyness and fear of man.

The common guillemots are scarce. Their great haunt in this vicinity is the Stack. There they are to be seen in myriads on the perpendicular side of the rock facing the west. Only two or three pairs take up their abode on the island; in fact their numbers scarcely entitle them to be called Sule Skerry birds. The few young ones I have seen are carried to the water as soon as they are hatched—at least they disappear the same day.

Black guillemots or tysties are plentiful. Their time of arrival is about the middle of March, but they are rarely seen ashore before the end of April. Their nests are to be found in out-of-the-way crevices or under stones, and are not easily discovered on account of the extraordinary watchfulness of the birds and their care not to be caught on or near their nests. They lay two eggs, and the young are fully feathered before going afloat. They remain about the island till the end of September.

The first of all the visitors to arrive are the oystercatchers. They first put in an appearance about the end of February, when their well-known cry denotes that the long, dreary winter is over. They spend their time till the end of March chiefly feeding along the coast-line; but after that time they pair, and are

seen all over the island. About the end of May they lay three eggs in a nest composed of a few small stones; and when the young are hatched the noise of the old birds is perfectly deafening on the approach of an intruder, and even when no one is annoying them the clamour they make almost amounts to a nuisance. On calm, quiet nights it is hardly possible to sleep for them, and one feels inclined to get out of bed and shoot them down wholesale. The young leave the nest as soon as hatched, and are rarely seen, for on hearing the warning cry of the parent bird they at once hide among the long grass or under stones, and on one occasion I found a pair some distance underground in a rabbit's hole. They all leave the island during the first half of September.

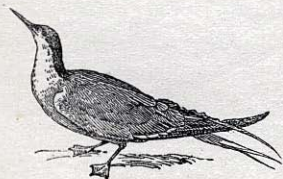


*Oyster-catcher.*

Next to the puffins in numbers are the terns—the Arctic terns. They are also like the puffins in the regularity of their arrival at the island. When first seen they are flying high up, and they continue doing so for a day or two, only resting at night. There are several varieties of terns scattered all over the British Isles, but in the north the most numerous are the Arctic and the common tern. The latter rarely visits the island.

There are certain localities where the terns take up their abode, and they stick closely to the same ground year after year, never by any chance making a nest twenty yards outside their usual breeding ground. They begin to lay in the first week of June, but I

have found eggs on the last day of May. They lay two eggs, and sometimes three. When the young are hatched the parents are kept busy supplying them with food, which consists chiefly of sand-eels and herring fry. Their method of fishing is to hover over the water, not unlike the way a hawk hovers when watching its prey, and when they see a fish to make a



*Arctic tern.*

dart on it, rarely if ever failing to make a haul. They also prey on worms when it is too stormy for fishing at sea. On a wet evening, when the worms are having an outing, the terns are to be seen in hundreds all over the island, hovering about six feet above the ground, every now and again making a dart down, and, when successful, flying home with their catch to the young. No time is lost, for the old bird seldom alights when handing over the worm. It swoops down to where the young ones are standing with outstretched necks and bills gaping, screaming out to let their whereabouts be known, and then flies off again for more. When the young are able to fly they accompany their parents over the island, and occasionally do a little hunting on their own account.

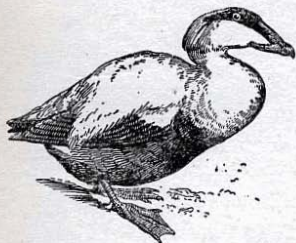
About the first of August the young are fully fledged. Young and old then assemble from all parts of the island to a piece of bare, rocky ground on the north-east corner, which they make their headquarters for about ten days, flying out to sea for food, but always returning at night. About the fifteenth of August they all disappear, and are seen no more till the following May.

The island is the headquarters of a large colony of stormy petrels. It is not an easy matter to fix the exact date of their arrival, for they are never seen during the day, and only come out of their holes at night. They are first seen in the latter end of June, when on a fine clear night one can see them flitting about close to the ground, very like swallows in their movements. They begin to lay in July, and their nests are to be found under stones and in rabbits' holes.



*Stormy petrel.*

Almost the only way to find them is to listen for their peculiar cry, which they keep up at intervals the whole night through. If captured during the day, they seem quite dazed when released, and at once fly into some dark place. The date of their departure, like that of their arrival, is not easily fixed, but I think it is during September. Young birds have been got on the lantern at night as late as the end of September, but never in October.



*Eider duck (male).*

The eider duck is a regular visitor, and a considerable flock make Sule Skerry their headquarters for about eight months in the year. They are first seen in March fishing off the island, but they very rarely land before the end of April. In May they may be seen ashore every day, but always near the water,

ready to pop in if alarmed. They are very shy and difficult to approach. In June the duck and the drake both come ashore and select a place for their nest, and that is the only occasion on which the drake takes a part in the hatching process. So far as my observation goes, I have never seen him approach his mate during the month of incubation.

The nest is built sometimes on a bare rock, but more commonly among grass, and consists of coarse grass for a foundation, the famous down being added only as the eggs are laid. Five or six is the common

number found in one nest. From the time it begins to sit until incubation is completed, the duck never leaves the nest unless disturbed, and will only fly to sea if driven off. If approached quietly, it will allow one to

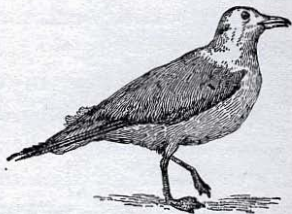


*Eider duck on nest.*

stroke it, and does not seem afraid. There are always one or two nests close to the house, and though I have watched them closely at all hours, night and day, I have never seen the birds go away for food, nor have I seen their undutiful spouses bring any to them. I will not venture to say that the duck lives a month without sustenance, but I am strongly inclined to that belief. When frightened away, it goes only a short distance, and returns immediately as soon as the cause of its fright has been removed.

The whole inside of the nest is lined with down, which seems to be intended only for the purpose of

keeping the eggs warm. It is certainly not intended to form a cosy nursery for the young, as they leave for the sea a few hours after birth and do not return. Unless the down is removed before the young are hatched it is useless, for it gets mixed up with the egg-shells, which are always broken into very small pieces. After leaving the nest the young birds rarely come ashore again, but remain afloat, feeding along the edge of the rocks on mussels and crustaceans. The old birds disappear in October, but some young ones remain till the end of November.

*Kittiwake.*

Few kittiwake gulls visit the island, but these come regularly, and take up their abode on the same ground year after year. They arrive in April, and about the first of May begin nest-building, a work which keeps them employed for about three weeks.

They begin laying about the end of May, and lay three eggs. The young are fully grown before leaving the nest, and are fed by both the parent birds. They all leave the island about

*Curlew or whaup.*

the end of August, and not even a straggler is seen till the following spring.

I have now gone over all the birds that breed on Sule Skerry, and come next to the regular winter visitors, consisting of the curlew, the snipe, the turnstone, and the common sandpiper.



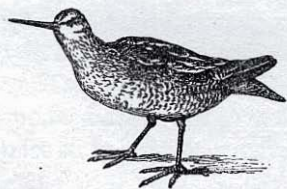
About a dozen curlews or whauphs make the island their home for about nine months of the year. They leave about the end of May and return in August, remaining on the island all winter. Their number always keeps about the same—twelve or fifteen. They have the same characteristics as those found elsewhere—their extraordinary alertness and their peculiar cry—but they are distinctly less shy than is usually the case in other parts of the country. They are never disturbed in any way, and the result is that, if any one wished, it would be an easy matter to get within gunshot of them. Their chief food is worms and insects, of which there is a plentiful supply on the island.

When the curlews leave the island, a few whimbrels take their place, and remain about six weeks. They breed in Orkney and Shetland, but though they remain on the island most of the breeding season I have never yet found a nest. I have spent many an hour watching them from the light-room with the glass to see if they were sitting, and have gone over the ground where they are most frequently seen, but

could never find an egg or any attempt at nest building. They are very much like the curlew in general appearance, only much smaller.

The snipe leaves the island in May, and is absent about four months, usually

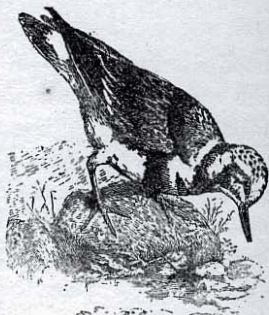
returning in October. None, so far, have ever nested on Sule Skerry, and they all go elsewhere for that purpose. There is a considerable number of them resident



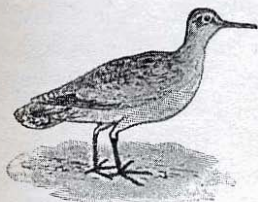
*Snipe.*

during the winter, larger in some years than in others. They sometimes get killed by dashing against the lantern at night, but it is not often they fly so high.

The turnstone always spends the winter on the island, arriving about the end of August or the first of September, and from then on till April it spends its time feeding on insects. On Sule Skerry it is in no way afraid of man, but rather the opposite, for it depends a good deal on the lightkeepers for its livelihood in stormy weather. Whenever the lightkeepers go to feed their hens, the turnstones gather from all parts of the island and sit round at a respectful distance—about a dozen yards—waiting for their share, which they receive regularly every day, and they seem to enjoy it very much. The lightkeepers



*Turnstone.*



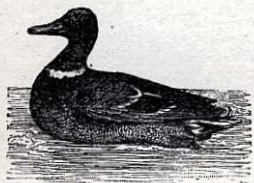
*Sandpiper.*

-often turn over big stones to enable the hens to feed on the insects which are there in immense quantities. The turnstones have learned the meaning of this operation, and whether the hens are present or not, they soon gather round for a feast when one retires a short distance. A few specimens of the common sandpiper always accompany them, but they feed more amongst the seaweed along the coast-line, and are more afraid of the approach of man.

## Occasional Visitors.

We now come to the third class, the occasional visitors. These are the wild goose, the mallard or stock duck, the teal, the widgeon, the Iceland gull, the Slavonian grebe, the heron, the kestrel, the hooded crow, the rook, the lapwing, the golden plover, the redshank, the corncrake, the water rail, the field-fare, the redwing, the snow-bunting, the starling, the song thrush or mavis, the blackbird, the water-wagtail, the stonechat, the woodcock, the skylark, the twite or mountain linnnet, the robin, the swallow, the black-headed gull, and the little auk.

Wild geese pass the island on their way south in October, but very rarely rest. Occasionally a flock will hover round for some time, but the sight of a human habitation scares them away, and they continue on their way in the direction of Cape Wrath. Last October half a dozen were seen resting on the island one morning about eight o'clock. They seemed to be feeding in one of the fresh-water pools, but all they would find there would not fatten them. Sule Skerry is a very likely place for them to call at, as it is right in their track when on the way to and from Iceland and Faroe, but perhaps the island being inhabited causes them to give it a wide berth. At any rate very few of them ever honour it with a visit.



*Mallard.*

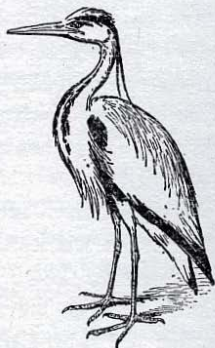
The mallard pays the island frequent visits during the winter, two and three at a time. They never stay long, for there is very little

feeding for them. They are particularly shy, resting only on the most outlying parts, and seeming continually on the watch. Teal and widgeon are not common. Of the former one sees a specimen or two every winter, while of the latter only two have visited the island, and that was in March 1897, when they stayed a few days.

In November 1895 an Iceland gull arrived on the island, and remained to the end of February following. It became fairly tame, sitting the greater part of the day near the house on the watch for any scraps of meat that were thrown out. Hopes were entertained that it intended remaining permanently on the island, but on the approach of the breeding season it departed. In 1898 one stayed for a week in November; in the following year another was seen on the 23rd of November. This one was fishing in company with some common gulls, and occasionally flew over the island quite close to the tower; but I did not see it alight, nor was it seen again on any of the following days.

The common heron every year spends a day or two on the island, generally in October or November, but it never seems at home. They wander about in search of food, but apparently do not find very much. When leaving the island they always, without exception, fly in the direction of Cape Wrath, but where they come from I cannot say, never having noticed them arriving.

The hooded crow is an annual visitor, generally in



*Heron.*

November, and it sometimes comes for a short visit in April. Two or three is the common number at one time. There is, however, not much food for them, and on that account their visit is soon over. A few rooks call about the same time.

Every year in April the lapwings make the island a resting-place, staying from a week to a fortnight. The place does not seem to suit them for nesting purposes, for I have never seen them make any attempt at nest-building. After resting and renewing their strength, they seek out some more hospitable part of the country. Small flocks of the golden plover also rest on the island on their passage north in March and April, and again on their way south in October and November, staying from eight to twelve days. There are also a few straggling visitors during the winter.

The common redshank is a frequent visitor, staying perhaps a week at a time, but it never nests on the island. In 1896 a corncrake's well-known song was heard during the greater part of June. It was heard again the following season, but never since. The bird, however, is occasionally seen in summer. The only way I can account for its silence is that the goats and rabbits never allow the grass to grow to any length, and thus there is no cover for it. I think most ornithologists are now satisfied that this bird migrates to a warmer climate every year on the approach of winter. Whether such is the case or not I do not feel prepared to say, but from my experience of Sule Skerry I am quite satisfied it is only a summer visitor there, and does not remain on the island all winter. The water-rail pays the island a visit every winter,

but I do not think there is any danger of its being mistaken for the corncrake. They are a little like one another in shape, but they are two distinct species, and easily recognized.

In October and November the island is visited annually by considerable numbers of fieldfares, redwings, blackbirds, rock-thrushes, starlings, and woodcocks. They generally stay from a week to a fortnight, and are more numerous some years than others. Waterwagtails are rare visitors, seen at various times of the year. Stonechats are also rare visitors, only staying a few days in May. The skylark, so common everywhere else, is a very rare visitor, and is only seen or heard once or twice during the summer months. Robin redbreast is always seen in the autumn, and generally stays a few weeks if the weather is moderate. The twite or mountain linnet pays an occasional visit in summer, and stays for some time; but I have never yet found a nest, and cannot say if it breeds on the island. In June every year a few sparrows spend a fortnight on Sule Skerry. Snow-buntings almost deserve the name of regular winter visitors, for from October to March they are seldom long absent.

Last September I got a bird which I knew to belong to the grebe family, but I could not be sure of its proper name, and I sent it to Mr. Harvie Brown for identification. He informed me it was a Slavonian grebe, a bird not very common in this part of the country. In November 1897 I found a dead specimen of the little auk.

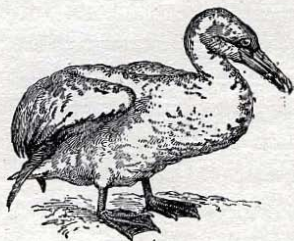
Though not a Sule Skerry bird, the solan goose



*Water-rail.*

deserves notice in this paper. The Stack, distant four and a half miles, has been their chief breeding place in Orkney for ages, and every year it is tenanted by immense numbers. The rock is 140 feet high, rising perpendicularly on the west, but sloping gradually from the water to the summit on the east side. It is on this slope that the solans congregate, and no other bird is allowed to trespass on their preserves. In May, June, July, and August their numbers are so vast that any one seeing the rock at a distance would imagine it was painted white or composed of chalk. Sule

Skerry, however, is too far distant to allow of one forming any idea of their numbers, but looking at them with the glass one sees the rock simply covered, and apparently as many flying about as resting. Lewis men visit the place annu-



*Solan goose.*

ally in August, and carry away a boatload of young birds. Last year they came up to the rock, but there was too much surf for a landing, and as the weather was threatening they headed for the Sutherlandshire coast. That night the wind blew half a gale, and fears were entertained that it would prove too much for them, for their boat was small and hardly powerful enough to be so far from home; but a few days later they again approached the rock. They again failed to negotiate it, and after waiting for about an hour they made sail for home, and did not return. The weather certainly favoured the solans on these occasions.

I have never seen a solan resting on Sule Skerry; they even carefully avoid flying across the island, though they fish in immense numbers all round, and sometimes within forty or fifty yards of the shore. They usually begin to arrive in the vicinity about the end of January, and their numbers continue to increase until the end of April, when they take possession of the rock, and from then until the end of August their name is legion. When the young are fledged, they gradually disappear, and from the first of December till the last days of January they are not to be seen.

Thus they go on year after year, a fraction of that great feathered multitude which has come and gone since the earliest ages, and will probably continue to come and go as long as the world lasts, some arriving and departing in silence, others heralding their coming and going with the wildest clamour. On this subject, and speaking of the northern isles, Thomson the poet says:—

“Where the Northern Ocean, in vast whirls,  
Boils round the naked melancholy isles  
Of farthest Thule, and the Atlantic's surge  
Pours in amongst the stormy Hebrides;  
Who can recount what transmigrations there  
Are annual made? what nations come and go?  
And how the living clouds on clouds arise,  
Infinite wings! till all the plume-dark air  
And rude resounding shore are one wild cry?”

J. THOMSON (“*Orcadian Papers*”).

