

Ornithological Field Diary - Charles Gawen (1860-1940)

June 16th 1888

Owing to its being high water there were not many Gulls about Penzance harbour so a favourite mode of whiling away the time until the Scilly boat started was not available. One Gull, a Lesser Black back was rather prettily marked; it was I suppose a bird in its third or fourth year. The back was slaty and the tail had a dark bar at the tip; beak yellow with dark spot on either side near the tip; primaries dusky, no pattern; wing coverts and I suppose scapulars bright brown and grey, the former colour appearing quite fulvous in the sun. c.f. vol 1 p308 and 283 where birds in a similar stage of plumage are described.

There were many Gannets to be seen after passing the Wolf rock and thence to Scilly; very few were in apparently adult plumage by far the larger number being in the dark dress of first plumage.

Captain Ashford calls these "grey" Gannets and says he has never seen so many as this year. His ideas on the age at which they breed are elementary and he evidently did not believe me when I told him that they did not breed until 5 or 6 years old; he also thought that their eggs resembled those of the Gulls.

Jenkins has got me about 17 Terns eggs several rather large and round and some very handsome, but no eggs of the Sandwich Tern which seems to have now well nigh deserted these islands.

We walked out to "Trewillie Cove" this afternoon + I found two nests of the Ring Plover with 4 and 3 eggs respectively. These were large and handsome and had no appearance of being laid by birds which had nearly exhausted their powers of reproduction.

The nest holes had a few bleached fish bone fragments in which the eggs were laid, all the nests hitherto found by me have been destitute of this adornment.

I also found a clutch of very handsome Oystercatchers eggs. These and the eggs of the Ring Plover were quite fresh; what a late season this is!

A pair of Turnstones were observed by me in this locality and this is surely a very late stay for these birds which have never been found breeding in the British Islands.

We saw very few Shearwater, Razorbills or Guillemots on the voyage hither and actually not one Puffin.

June 17th

Many of the Tern's eggs collected by Jenkins were slightly incubated while of Oystercatcher's eggs similarly procured one clutch had large feathered young, others had young more or less formed, and many were nearly or quite fresh. This seems to show that the Terns are about normal in their breeding date this year whilst the earlier breeding birds are considerably later than usual. If correct this seems in accordance with common sense, for the earlier breeders must of necessity be more affected by the colder weather whereas birds which breed later encounter milder conditions at the time when they are usually ready for reproduction. The Nightjar's eggs procured for me by Hansells were slightly incubated and this is another case in point.

All the Ring Plovers eggs which I got yesterday were quite fresh and so was another clutch found by me today. The site in which I found the latter was somewhat curious; the eggs were laid in an ordinary nesthole beneath some fern which was quite a foot in height. As the eggs were not incubated it is clear that they were deposited in cover for protective purposes and not placed in situ before the fern grew up.

I noticed a Ring Plover run from close to where I afterwards found this nest and as I have never before seen a bird of this species in such immediate proximity to the nest it seems evident that in this case the cover and not the protective colouring of the eggs was relied on.

Ring Plovers which build on sand are surely easy birds to find for not only are the eggs conspicuous enough to sharp eyes but also the ground close to the nest is well padded by the tiny feet of these pretty birds.

They have at present at least no idea of flying up to and settling upon their eggs.

This island (St Mary's) is swarming now with young Wheatears and Stonechats, the latter beginning to shew white in their wing. There are also numerous parties of Linnets which appear to live during the day under the family system and to assemble for roosting in a congregation in the gorse on the Garrison; their chorus evening is very pretty to hear.

Rock Pipits are numerous but I saw no certain young birds. Of Meadow Pipits on the other hand I observed two or three family parties beyond Porthellick.

We noticed also a Turtledove fly from one of the high gorse bushes on the N E side of the island but could find no nest. Curlew and Whimbrel have disappeared and there are no traces of any Sand Grouse here.

Cuckoos fill the land with their song and two or more roost I believe in the bushes beyond the hotel as nearly every evening they turn up cuckooing + bubbling.

Beyond Porthellick we noticed a large Great Blackback perched on the highest part of a rock which was being gradually submerged by the flowing tide. He sat quite still, for the most part on one leg, and would not allow any other Gull to come at all near. One Herring Gull ventured nearer than the rest and had a stroke aimed at him which compelled to take the lower room. The Great Blackbacked Gull is the monarch of this archipelago whatever he may be elsewhere.

After a while this bird left and after having a bath far out at sea betook himself to the Eastern Islands.

Both he and a Herring Gull in washing bathed themselves like ducks i.e. not by splashing with their wings as our Gulls, do, but by dipping under water and allowing the water to run off. A Herring Gull on a rock near frequently uttered a note like "Keogh" - very similar to a note occasionally uttered by Rooks.

June 18th

Today we paid a flying visit to Annet in order if possible to secure what few Terns eggs might have been laid there. Very few Terns - not more than 5 or 6 - were to be seen, among them at least one pair of Arctic Terns, and we only found 2 eggs which from their shape and number probably belonged to the latter species. It is pretty plain that Terns in the Scilly isles will soon be a thing of the past, owing to the persistent way in which, all season through, the eggs are robbed or destroyed. Jenkins informed me that years ago the eggs lay so thick on Annet, i.e. in the particular spot affected by the Tern colony, that it was difficult to avoid treading upon them and that he gathered on one occasion no less than 150 eggs. The Sandwich Tern or Great Tern as they here call it seems to have quite disappeared; some of the eggs gathered by Jenkins he called those of the Great Tern but they certainly did not deserve that appellation.

There were very few young Gulls at Annet, and indeed the nests and eggs were much fewer than last year owing no doubt to persecution. I took one very finely coloured clutch of Lesser Blackbacks and one curious clutch of Herring Gulls' eggs - 3 in each clutch.

One of the latter was a clear blue with two or three almost black markings; the second had one or two large suffused blue blotches on light brown ground and the third was in a sense intermediate between this and an ordinary type of egg. Last year Jenkins got me a pair of eggs like number one of this clutch from near to or the same place. It is probable that in a few years

only Puffins and Shearwater will be found breeding on Annet, if indeed the latter will not be driven away by persecution. Last year vast numbers perished owing to the cattle from the wreck treading in their burrows. Fewer Puffins were visible than in May this being due to the fact that those not sitting or covering newly hatched young were probably away catering for the offspring.

Gorrigan was the island nest visited by us. Here there were far more Kittiwakes breeding than was the case last year. I should judge their numbers at from 80 to 100 pairs. As we anchored off the island for luncheon I had a capital opportunity of watching + observing these sweet little Gulls. They were but slightly alarmed at our proximity, the majority not leaving their nests; a single bird or so as if to protest would occasionally fly around saying "Getaway Getaway". In many cases two birds would appear to be sitting on the same nest; this appearance was probably due to the male of a pair keeping his mate company. A considerable number of birds were on the wing or seated at a short distance on the water. These were probably males and they did not disdain to partake of our luncheon if thrown or floated to a safe distance. The position in which incubation is performed is, so to speak, face to the wall in every instance. This attitude enables the bird to mute [?] without any change of position or defiling the eggs, and the reason why is plainly seen by a glance at the face of the rock immediately beneath each nest. It is literally caked and coated with dung.

Nor is this attitude in any way prejudicial to the maintenance of a good look out, for the flexibility of the birds' necks enables them to look behind them + on either side with consummate ease. Seebohm says this is also the attitude of Guillemots + Razorbills and I think attributes it to protective purposes but in my opinion it is more far-fetched and less probable than the above "cleanliness" solution. Besides, black or brown against white chalk would be very conspicuous.

Bye and bye we landed and then began confusion for the poor Kittiwakes, who could not at first make out what it all meant. One bird on one of the lowest ledges still sat on her eggs while I stood below and did not take wing until I raised my arm to reach the eggs. We took as many eggs as we wanted; there were some very pretty ones with small spots on a bluish ground and one or two vermiculated and miniatures of a variety of Lesser Blackbacks' eggs. In most cases there is a strong family resemblance between eggs of the same clutch. Two was the number almost invariably, I only saw but one clutch of three; this bears out last years experiences. Only in instances of single eggs was there no trace of incubation, some were considerably incubated. A few Herring and Lesser Blackbacks breed here.

A great number of Razorbills were breeding here but there was nothing very remarkable in their eggs; some were rather pretty with small spots and bluish underlying markings. Puffins breed sparingly.

Several Guillemots breed at Gorrigan and I got two extremely handsome eggs one profusely blotched with reddish brown. They were extremely dirty and had to be washed, this doubtless destroying some of their richness of colour. The Guillemots eggs were laid not on ledges on the face of the rock but in large crevices at some distance from the outside similar to places beloved of Razorbills. This seemed to me to be an unusual position for the eggs of this bird.

On the top of the rocks here is a good breeding place of Cormorants from which I took several undoubted eggs. There were besides many young from naked and blind to nearly full fledged. Cormorants and Shag seldom loiter in the vicinity of their nests and the close approach of the boat is usually enough to drive all off the nests. In this they differ much from rock birds and also, according to all accounts, from their allies the Gannets.

Having done with Gorrigan we proceeded to Meledgan on young Great Blackbacks intent. We had seen several old birds of this species on the way out and again as we neared Meledgan but

no young could we find on the latter although we found one nest with 3 magnificent large eggs. These we left as a reserve in case we should fail to obtain any young elsewhere. The nest was large and deep, placed by itself apart from those of the vulgar herd of Lesser Blackbacks and Herring Gulls. *Larus marinus* is quite the lord of the sea fowl here. When he perches the highest spot on the rock is the only place good enough for him. If the seat is occupied the occupant makes haste to descend on the approach of the great man, and take it all in all if you see a large bird on the very tip of a rock you may lay 10 to 1 on that bird being a Great Blackback without much fear of losing your money. These tyrants seem to have considerably increased in numbers since last year or else we have better eyes to see them.

G. picked up on Meledgan the dried up skin of a magnificent Great Blackback which from the size of its beak must have been of exceptionally large size. We ought to have kept its head.

I should have said that on Annet we saw a good many Meadow Pipits and one Kitty Wren.

Near the harbour I observed a very curious Gull which was neither a very pale Lesser Blackback, or very dark Herring Gull, or a hybrid between the two. Its mantle was very light almost as light as that of the hybrid *L. cachinnans* + *L. dominicanus* at the Zoo.

The legs so far as I could see were not bright yellow but merely yellowish.

We saw very few Shearwater on our way back and none at all going out.

To-day confirms me in saying that the Lesser Blackback is far and away the most numerous Gull in the W. part of the islands and it must outnumber the Herring Gull by 20 or 25 to 1. What is the case I don't know.

June 19th

Roseveare was the main object of our attention today for it is the island on which the Stormy Petrel is supposed to breed. We made a lengthened survey of the smaller boulders on the NE, NW, + W sides but whether because we did not know the proper mode of searching or because the Petrels had not begun to breed we found nothing. Another party, of whom one had taken Fork-tailed Petrels from the Island of Rona, was equally unsuccessful.

This island as mentioned in vol I is a large Gull colony but whereas last year Herring Gulls largely exceeded Lesser Blackbacks this year almost the reverse is the case, Herring Gulls although in large numbers being in a considerable minority. Some Great Gulls were to be seen but no young or eggs. There were a large number of young Gulls, mostly of small size and also a good many eggs. We took one chick, for want of a better, which was larger than the rest and less spotted, with large thick legs. It was not however sufficiently little spotted, nor was its head large enough to make us hope that it was the young of the Royal Gull.

This chick had incipient feathers on back and wings, was very morose and savage, and disgorged a young Puffin or Pope as the fishermen here call them, about a quarter its own size. The Gulls here are very tame; kak-ak-ak is the predominant cry on the invasion of their stronghold.

Numbers of Puffins and Razorbills were, as last year, breeding here, and in most cases had young.

Rosevean is a rocky island close to Rosevean but it is much higher and rockier than the latter. As we approached a pair of Great Blackbacks became much disturbed, "Kaouking" repeatedly and raising our hopes to a high pitch. It was not however until we had almost abandoned the search that Jenkins hit upon a splendid young bird whose parents as though to put all doubts of its identity to rest repeatedly swooped about overhead with agonized "Kaouks". This chick had a great big head and beak with correspondingly large legs but the first is the best test for a Great Blackback.

The dark spots on the down are much larger, more distinct and less in number than in the Herring + Lesser Blackbacked Gulls.

Gulls of the two latter species also nest sparingly on Rosevean and Jenkins got me two very dark and handsome eggs, probably Herring Gulls'.

On top of the rocks a number of Shag breed and there were many nearly full fledged young which I had some difficulty in saving from Jenkins who was about to attack them rigorously with stick + stones.

A few Razorbills were also nesting here.

I was much astonished to see here a pair of House Martins which flew to + fro along the eastern face of the rock. At the first blush I thought they were Stormy Petrels but I soon saw that they were nothing but the pretty little Martin in a place where few would have expected to see them. Favoured by a nice breeze we were able to make a long run across to White Island on which we flattered ourselves we should find Terns eggs in case the rats had left us any. Nearly a quarter of a mile however before reaching the island we were greeted by the agitated cries of first one and then a pair of remarkably fine Great Blackbacks.

When we landed these cries were still more agonizing and more still when G. found skulking in some rocks, a splendid young bird bigger than the one from Rosevean. Like the latter this chick was feathered on the back with dark brown with buff tips, and in the wing were budding feathers so far as could be seen of an uniform dark brown. Unlike "Rosevean" this bird, whom we at once christened "Captain White" after the name of the islet and of our old friend (or enemy) of last year, was excessively savage and bit to the utmost of his power. I let him run once + then pursued and caught him again when he uttered a feeble "chak-ak-ak-ak. Our other captives never utter this note which is I suppose a note of maturity and also of extreme youth.

During all this the cries of the parents were heartrending "Kaouk" being varied by kuk-uk-uk-uk, this latter having a distinct a sound in it and being usually in four syllables, sometimes five. This cry with other gulls is in general trisyllabic and not nearly so deep.

In addition to this piece of good fortune I found at the other or N part of the island a Great Blackbacks nest with 2 splendid large eggs; the birds belonging to this nest were also about and much agitated. Needless to say there were no traces of Terns on White Island and the only traces of rats were a jawbone + some other osteological remains in a pellet presumable the former property of a Royal Gull. These and all the other Gulls are apparently now in full moult; all the colonies yet visited are strewn with feathers.

The parents of our young bird pursued us quite half way on our voyage to St Mary's with melancholy cries. They are evidently most attached and devoted parents as are so many of the most savage animals. Solicitous as they were however I cannot say that they approached nearer than the limits of a good long shot. Our young birds were very sulky and refused food when we got them home so, as there appeared little chance of their eating that night, I pinioned them all at the metacarpophalangeal joint. Little blood was lost and the blow was soon staunchd by a tobacco bandage.

Thus ended a very successful day for, although we failed with the Stormy Petrels, I was beginning to fear that owing to the lateness of this season we should have to return to the mainland without any young Great Blackbacks.

June 20th

This was rather a day of pleasure boating than one of regular ornithological object. What with success in getting our complement of Gulls, failure in procuring eggs of the Stormy Petrel and a fair amount of luck with Terns' eggs through Jenkins' industry, Scilly seems pretty well done. With regard to Terns Jenkins brought me this morning a fair number, with some very fine ones among them, which he had collected from Puffin and Merrick Islands. By the way, the Scillonian name for Tern is Merrick, and the Ring Plover is more often called Kerwillie than Trewillie.

On our way out to Mincarlo we had to pass near White Island and we felt rather guilty when our acquaintance of yesterday afternoon came forth and complained long and loud of the cruel rapine of the previous day.

We had the consolation of feeling that we had stuffed our small prisoners pretty full of limpets before leaving; their appetites and spirits are good and their maimed arms droop but little. Rosevean and the (probable) Herring Gull were pinioned on the right, Capt. White on the left wing. Pinioning at the first phalanx is far more merciful in several ways besides the obvious one; i.e. the bird can still maintain a fair balance instead of being more or less lopsided as is the case with wrist pinioning; then when the bird falls + puts out its wings to break its fall it has a sound, not a poor maimed wrist to come in contact with the ground and the maimed joint is thus able to heal over quickly; lastly the mental part, the bird being little maimed feels its loss of flight less acutely: I can see that our Gulls do feel this loss bitterly as when they spread their wings as if to fly and no result is obtained. But this is a long digression.

The effect of plundering was evident in the small number of Gulls eggs and young at Mincarlo an isle which last year we found crowded with both. Lesser Blackbacks were here as usual in the enormous majority and a few Herring Gulls but no Royals were on view. I am rather disposed to think that young in down of *L. fuscus* may be distinguished as soon as the down is dry from those of *L. argentatus* and *L. marinus* by the blue colour of the grey down. That of *L. marinus* and *L. argentatus* is less pretty, has no blue but rather a drab tinge.

As in first plumage, so in down *L. marinus* and *L. argentatus* are the most difficult to distinguish. I observed several Kittiwakes about Moncarlo but I could discover no nesting places of this bird in a chamber round the rocks although I saw many likely places. Among the crowd of Gulls which took wing on our approach I distinguished one palpably immature bird, I should say in its 3rd or 4th spring. What business had it in a breeding colony? George saw a Gulls' nest (with ordinary eggs) which was almost entirely composed of feathers.

Puffins and Razorbills were in great numbers, the former growling and the latter grunting savagely at too close an inspection of their valuables. I caught two Puffins and a Razorbill and killed them as the men wanted some. The Puffin is much the most savage and I think hard-bitten bird of the two; the Razorbill nips hard but does not wrench your skin + flesh about as the Puffin does.

Puffins have lost much of the brilliant colour about their beaks now but Razorbills seem as handsome + sleek as ever which says a good deal for they are at best very pretty the white + black being well proportioned and definitely marked off from one another.

Here also were a few Guillemots breeding - say 8 to 10 - Their eggs, which were green and of poor quality, were placed as at Gorrigan in large rock crevices.

I was able by shouting and arm waving to confuse and catch a poor Guillemot. There was no bite in this gentle modest looking brown + white bird with its somewhat weak bill and full dark eye, although I repeatedly moved my finger against its bill giving it an opportunity which no Pope or Razorbill would have neglected to use. Then I tossed it up and down it flew headlong in safety to the sea.

The next rock we visited was Scilly where it is usually difficult to land and where accordingly the birds seem to have been little molested. Here many Guillemots breed more by a great many than I have seen elsewhere in these islands, perhaps from 20 to 30 pairs at the time of which I write. Here also they lay their eggs - many almost touching each other - in large rock crevices, although there appear to be suitable ledges on the face of the rocks. I caught one here, and shame to say, killed it as the men begged me to get them one. It was like the Mincarlo bird quite gentle and

harmless never attempting to peck or bite. Some of the eggs both green and white were rather handsome, one especially being almost a clear blue.

Scilly is a splendid rock; rugged and steep at the sides the top is a comparatively flat plateau a paradise for Shag and Cormorants, both of which breed here, and in a less degree for Gulls.

We found a few Gulls nests, all Lesser Blackbacks to judge from the birds, besides one nest with 3 Great Blackbacked eggs rather small but undoubted eggs of that species. There is on them a peculiar reddish brown spotting which I cannot see on any Herring or Lesser Blackback's eggs in any collection. A great number of Razorbills breed on this fine rock. It was well worth coming to see.

Shipman Head was our next point and we found it thoroughly robbed and destitute of eggs; very few Gulls eggs and no young to be seen although many Lesser Blackbacks were about and more or less alarmed.

G. found 2 Oystercatchers' nests each with 2 eggs.

Hence we went to a sand beach on Bryher itself and here I took a Kerwillies nest with 4 eggs; the hole was lined at the bottom with what seemed to be bleached and rounded fragments of bones. On the way home we saw a large congregation of both Common + Arctic Terns which were apparently feeding on a reef which is covered at high water or less. Here also we saw a fine large immature Royal Gull - perhaps a year older than "Gulliver"

June 21st

To-day we landed at Menawawr, or Menawore, or Men o' War as the various spellings and the language of the boatmen have it. We were not able to land here last year and I was rather anxious to see what birds actually bred on this rock. It is a splendid mass of granite divided into three by narrow gullies, very high and steep and on two if not three sides actually precipitous.

We landed on the large or outer rock; the division is not frequented by birds while the middle is said to be inaccessible. This it may be but I think from the point at which we essayed it, it would be climbable with difficulty and on the N or ocean side with ease if a landing could only be effected. Many birds therefore may have been breeding on the middle Man o' War without our being much the wiser. Kittiwakes there certainly were not, neither did there appear to be many rock birds of any sort. On the big rock we saw a few Gulls eggs and there were many Puffin's and Razorbills with but few eggs or young.

The place has evidently been much robbed, indeed I know as a fact from Jenkins that it has been. I observed but very few Guillemots and only one or two eggs so that it is now very plain that this species is far from numerous at Scilly, all the rocky islands with the exception of one or two of the eastern group having been visited by us, and on them they are said not to breed. By the way, these birds and Razorbills are all called Guillemots here. Scilly rock + Gorrigan are the true Guillemots chief breeding haunts.

There is a small colony of Kittiwakes which has its nests on the ledges of the big rock facing the gully which divides it from the middle rock; no nests are placed on the latter. I suppose the place is not very suitable for otherwise there would be a larger number of nests as they are quite secure from molestation. No Scillonian, and it shows their sense, has the least inclination to risk his neck for a bird's egg or two.

Menawawr and Gorrigan therefore are apparently the only rocks on which Kittiwakes nest; the eastern islands though swarming with other gulls do not afford them the necessary nesting places.

Instead of making a détour and making for its own island it made quite straight for Roseveare, about 1/2 a mile distant, disdaining some unsubmerged rocks which were in its way. The grief and rage of the old parents and the surprise of the other Great Blackbacks + Herring Gulls were most interesting - heartless as it is to say so.

The parents screamed + swooped around their errant young, now mounting to considerable heights, now stooping close to the water, frequently fighting with the attendant Herring Gulls + their own species and performing the most marvellous feats of aerial agility by turning over and over in the air. Childe Harold swam with ease and power and when lost to view must have been not far off his goal for when last seen he was going well and strong. What astonished us all was that the parents never once showed the least desire to settle on the water and accompany or support their young in his perilous journey. Taken all together this was a most interesting sight.

This morning before starting we saw a fine game between some Lesser Blackbacks. One had a piece of food in his beak and about 15 others were chasing him to make him drop it. Another Gull caught it most beautifully in the air as it was falling but not being able to swallow it was in turn compelled to leave go and another caught it only to be served in like manner. This time however the catcher managed to swallow the bone of contention and the incident terminated amid cries of arkyarkyark.

The young Great Blackbacks at Crebawethan were not so large or forwards as ours from Rosevean + White Island. As before remarked this species seems to be more abundant here than last year. The statement of Rodd that the Great Blackbacked Gull "breeds on the highest rocks" conveys a wrong impression viz that it does not breed on the low rocks. Whether this impression is the one intended to be conveyed by the words or not it seems that this bird prefers the flat low islands, at least in the western + north western islands. Thus, Meledgan, White Island, Crebawethan + the lower part of Mincarlo against Menawr and Rosevean tho' the latter can hardly be called a high rock.

June 24th

Owing to fog there was nothing to be seen on the crossing until near Penzance where I saw a party of about 12 Blackheaded Gulls. Also some way out an assemblage of Shearwater numbering quite 100 were seated on the water. Many were flying around the main body while some of the latter occasionally took wing and resumed their flight. I have never seen these birds on the water before but I daresay it is a common habit. It is impossible to detect the gathering of any food while they are skimming the water.