

## ALCA IMPENNIS.

### Great Auk.

*Alca impennis*, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 49.

*Garefowl*, Newton, Ibis, 1861, p. 374.

In giving a figure of the Great Auk in a work upon our native birds which closes its pages in 1873, I trust it will not be supposed that I for a moment entertain the opinion of the bird being still living in any part of our country, or that it even exists in any other portion of the globe. With the Dodo and Solitaire it must, indeed, be looked upon as a bird of the past, which, with many others, has lived its allotted time and then disappeared, leaving its skeleton as an evidence of its having existed. To attempt a history of the Great Auk would ill become me, were I inclined to do so. It has in fact already been done by very able hands; and additional memoirs are still being prepared for publication by such men as Professors Newton and Steenstrup. Mr. George Dawson Rowley is also engaged in gathering further information to render the history of the Garefowl still more complete; I therefore do not intend to interfere with such great authorities, but shall content myself with briefly stating that formerly this bird was plentiful in all the northern parts of the British Islands, particularly the Orkneys and the Hebrides. At the commencement of the present century, however, its fate appears to have been sealed; for although it doubtless existed, and probably bred, up to the year 1830, its numbers annually diminished until they became so few that the species could not hold its own.

Besides the British Islands the Great Auk formerly frequented the opposite countries of Denmark and Sweden, and probably the sea-shores of many other parts of Scandinavia; from these countries it was doubtless extirpated by the hand of man much earlier than with us. Further westward it was common and very abundant on the rocky shores of Newfoundland. Northward of these localities it does not appear to have been found, and probably was never known to breed within the Arctic circle; neither has any evidence been given that it existed further southward than the latitude of the Bay of Biscay. In size it almost equalled the Penguin, *Aptenodytes patagonica*; while its wings were still more diminutive, and perfectly useless as organs of flight. In its native element it swam deeply, and probably lived much on mollusca and other lower marine animals as well as fishes. In colouring there was no difference of sexes of the same age; but like the Razorbill the Great Auk was subject to seasonal changes of plumage, those parts of the throat and cheeks which were dark-coloured in summer being white in winter. Nidification was carried on by the deposit of a single egg on the sea-washed slanting rocks of the smaller islands, and probably upon the shingly ridges of the mainlands at a very early period.

Those who wish to know more of the Great Auk will do well to consult the writings of Professor Newton and Mr. Wolley in 'The Ibis' for 1860 and some of the following volumes; nor will they be disappointed by reading the account published by Mr. Robert Gray in his 'Birds of the West of Scotland,' of which I have only given a short extract.

So highly are the skins and eggs of this extinct bird prized that one hundred guineas would readily be given for any one of the specimens of the former now existing in the collections in Europe, and an egg would realize at a public auction at least half that sum; a perfect skeleton, or any portion of it, would bear a relative value.

Of perfect skins, there exist in Germany twenty, Denmark two, France seven or eight, Holland two, Italy five, Norway one, Sweden two, United Kingdom twenty-two, Russia one, Switzerland three, Belgium two, Portugal one, United States three; total, seventy-one.

Of skeletons, in Germany one, France one, Italy one, United Kingdom four, United States two; total, nine.

Of eggs, Germany eight, Belgium two, Denmark one, France seven, Holland two, United Kingdom forty-one, Switzerland one, United States two; total, sixty-four.

The following is from the pen of the late Mr. Wolley, and extracted from Mr. Gray's 'Birds of the West of Scotland,' p. 453:—"Whether, however, the species be extinct or not, the fate of the Garefowl has still much interest. If it still exists, its doom will probably be sealed by its rediscovery. For all practical purposes, therefore, we may speak of it as a thing of the past; and regarded in this light, the subject becomes even more than interesting, because, owing to the recent date of the bird's extirpation (whether completed or not), we possess much more information respecting the exterminating process than we do in the case of any other extinct species. Without drawing any over-strained inferences, we see how the merciless hand of man, armed, perhaps, only with the rudest weapons, has driven the Garefowl first from the shores of