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Wild birds on the Keeragh Islands

by Jim Hurley

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Most people know that the Keeragh Islands are an important place for wild birds. And, if asked, many people would be well able to rattle off the names of a few birds that are possibly found breeding or wintering there. That said, it is most unlikely that the Great Auk would feature in any such list produced.

Yet, there is possibility that Great Auks did breed on these two tiny islands lying 2km off Cullenstown. If these birds did breed there in the past, they certainly won't do so again as the species has been globally extinct since 1844.

The Great Auk was a penguin-like bird with a black back and a white belly. It stood some 70cm tall — about the height of a toddler — and had a mass of about 5kg. It lived on both sides of the Atlantic ranging from Newfoundland to Florida on the western side of the ocean and from Scandinavia to Spain on the eastern side.

It was flightless and it had the distinction of being the only flightless species of bird found in the Northern Hemisphere. It was also the only flightless bird known to Europeans until explorers saw penguins when they first reached South Africa and Antarctica in the early 1600s.

The Great Auk was a powerful swimmer. It dived from the surface of the sea and used its short penguin-like wings to 'fly' underwater in pursuit of fish. On land it had a slow, waddling walk and was unable to run.

Even though it was awkward on land it had to come ashore to breed. The mainland was unsuitable for breeding because of predators so it nested on offshore islands. And because of its limited ability to walk on land, and its total inability to fly or climb, it needed islands without tall cliffs. The species was also a slow breeder; females laid one very large, creamy-coloured, pear-shaped egg each year.

On land, the Great Auks were easy to catch so people hunted them for food, for feathers for bedding, and for oil for various domestic purposes. Apparently they were so slow-moving and placid that it was possible to walk up to one and catch it. It was claimed that the meat was good to eat. The choice bits provided human fare and the rest was used by fishermen as bait.

The bones of Great Auks have been found in archaeological excavations of kitchen-middens (domestic refuse heaps) in counties Waterford, Clare, Mayo, Donegal, and Antrim, so it is assumed that the birds had breeding colonies in Ireland in the past.

The first discovery of Great Auk bones in Ireland was made by Richard John Ussher (1841-1914) during an excavation in the sand dunes at Tramore, County Waterford. Ussher was born at Cappagh House in West Waterford, and in addition to being a notable figure in Irish archaeology he was a bird expert as well and was, with Robert Warren, author of *The Birds of Ireland* published Gurney and Jackson in London in 1900.

Ussher speculated that since Great Auk bones were plentiful in the extensive kitchen-middens excavated at Tramore, there must have been a breeding colony nearby. From his great knowledge of Irish seabirds and their breeding places he concluded that the Keeragh Islands, 25km east of Tramore, would have been "*.. eminently suited for such a bird to breed on ..*".

Ussher also collected details of the last Great Auk in Ireland. Coincidentally, the very last bird recorded in our green and pleasant land was found near Tramore in May 1834, seven years before Ussher was born.

The bird was spotted by David Hardy. It was swimming in the sea close to the cliffs between Ballymacaw and Brownstown Head. A fisherman named Kirby put to sea, observed that the auk was half-starved, enticed the bird to his boat by throwing Sprats to it, and caught it in his landing net. Mr Francis Davis of Waterford purchased the bird ten days later and sent it to Mr Jacob Goff of Horetown, County Wexford. Goff kept the bird in captivity for four months before the unfortunate creature died, the last Great Auk in Ireland.

One Captain Spence, when on an earlier visit to Horetown, suggested that if the bird should die its remains should be given to the bird expert Dr Robert J. Burkitt. This was done and Dr Burkitt duly presented the corpse to the museum at Trinity College in Dublin.

The bird, an immature female, was cured with arsenical soap, was stuffed, and was mounted under a glass shade in the museum's collections (see figure). Its lifeless eyes still stare out of its glass dome; the last Great Auk recorded in Ireland.

The last record of a Great Auk in Britain was in 1840 on Stac an Armin, St Kilda, six years after the last Irish one was caught near Tramore in May 1834. And, the last world record was at Eldey Island off Iceland when a pair of incubating birds was shot at the nest by collectors on 3 July 1844 and the egg was smashed.

A sighting of a live bird was claimed in 1852 off the Newfoundland Banks in Canada but the record was not authenticated.

So, the intriguing question remains: did the Great Auk breed on the Keeraghs? Did groups of these big, flightless birds waddle about on the lonely shores of these two tiny islands within sight of the mainland? While Ussher and Warren certainly though the islands were "*.. eminently suited for such a bird to breed on ..*" we may never know for sure if Great Auks bred on the Keeragh Islands.

The Great Auk is extinct and, unfortunately, extinction is forever.

Some birds that many people take for granted today have an uncertain future and may face extinction unless action is taken to protect them. The European Commission keeps a list of birds that are part of the common heritage of the European Union and that require special conservation measures to ensure their survival. The list — called Annex 1 of the Birds Directive — features all five species of terns that regularly breed in Ireland: the Common Tern, Arctic Tern, Sandwich Tern, Little Tern and Roseate Tern.

The Roseate Tern is the rarest of the group and is, in fact, the rarest breeding seabird in Europe. When William Thompson wrote his three-volume *Natural History of Ireland* (1849-1856) he knew of three breeding colonies in the country, one in each of counties Down, Dublin and Wexford. Shortly afterwards the Roseate Tern became extinct in Ireland and there was no evidence of it breeding anywhere in the country during the latter half of the 19th century.

However, the birds colonised Ireland again early in the 20th century. In 1917 the largest breeding colony of Roseate Terns in Ireland was located on the South Wexford Coast. To protect the colony from egg collectors its whereabouts were kept secret but, in a book review in the issue of *The Irish Times* dated 18 June 1974 George Humphries revealed that the 1917 colony of rare terns was, in fact, on the Keeragh Islands.

Terns bred intermittently on the Keeragh Islands up to 1984 when twelve pairs of Arctic Terns successfully nested there. Since then terns have failed to breed even though a tern restoration programme was operated by BirdWatch Ireland in the mid and late 1980s.

Today, the biggest mixed tern colony in Ireland is located at Lady's Island Lake. Some bird experts believe that since Lady's Island Lake has several problems associated with it that prevent the terns from reaching their full potential, that the Keeragh Islands are the ideal location for these rare birds.

While the Keeraghs do not support terns at present the islands are of international importance for another species of seabird: the Great Cormorant. In 1987 the Keeragh Islands held 239pairs of Cormorants, about five-percent of the Irish population, and one of the biggest colonies in the country at the time.

In addition to the Cormorants the islands support breeding gulls and other seabirds and shore birds in summer. In winter the islands become important as a roosting place for wildfowl such as the Light-bellied Brent Goose, for flocks of Wigeon and Teal, and for smaller numbers of Mallard and Shoveler.

In recognition of their importance as both a breeding site and a winter roost for wild birds, the Keeragh Islands were classified a Special Protection Area (SPA) with effect from 30 December 2004. The 22-hectare protected area includes the two islands, the associated rocky shorelines and reefs, and the surrounding marine area to a distance of 200 metres.

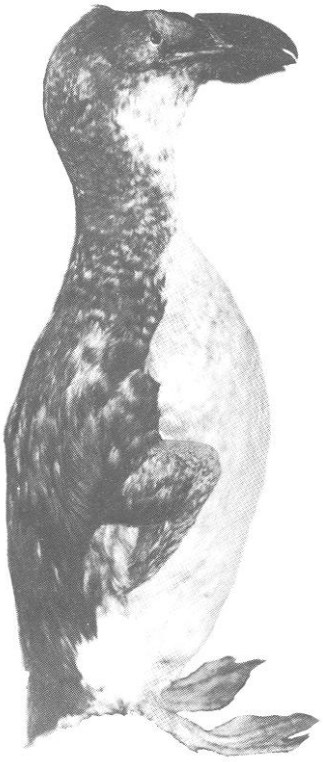
The SPA Regulations make it an offence to disturb the birds or to cause any deterioration of their habitat. Those found guilty of contravening the Regulations are

liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding €3000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or both.

It is hoped that with appropriate protection the islands will continue to be attractive to wild birds, and that they will be a safe place for both seabirds to breed in during the summer and for wildfowl to roost in during the winter.

Hopefully, terns will colonise the Keeraghs again and these two little island gems will grow in conservation importance.

Unfortunately, it is too late for the Great Auk.



The Great Auk caught in Waterford in May 1834 preserved in the museum of Trinity College, Dublin.