A Journey to Iceland.

By

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We three of us of all from Cambridge namely L. J. Turtle and John Cadbury, of Caius and myself from Magdalene planned to visit Iceland to explore the interior where its avifauna still wants through study in the summer of 1925.

My friends arranged our sea passage and engaging a guide for our interior journey also our necessary equipments for the expedition and I have obtained a letter of recommendation from the British Museum of Natural History to the Authorities of Iceland for this connection we wish to express our worm thanks to Dr. P. R. Lowe of the Bird Room.

Besides our clothe, cigarettes, chocolates and such other importance which we reduced to our minimum calculation, we brought all the necessary things for the collectings viz:—12 and 410 bore double barrel guns about 300 of each cartridges, four cameras, two egg boxes of each holds a gloss also two fishing rods. Thus our journey was materialised in the summer of 1925.

On the 9th of June, our fourth day at sea (out from Leith), we had our first sight of Iceland at Vestmanneyjer. We saw myriads of sea fowls nesting on the cliffs of the island. Kittiwakes and Fulmars were common, but we had not see many thing of the former on any previous occasion during the voyage.

A pair of Great Skua and odd Iceland Gulls pleased us very much.
Redshank, Red-necked Phalarope, and Wheatear were common near Reykjavik. One must not expect too much at the Museum, but there were a number of rare visitants caught in Iceland there. They are all stuffed, and public inspection is allowed a few days each week for one hour, and the curator Herr Saemundsson is always there to explain or answer any questions.

Herr Saemundsson was so generous to us and he obtained me a special shooting licence from the government during my stay at Reykjavik where the boat only anchored two days. The Crown Prince of Denmark was being an officer on board a Danish gunboat just anchored in Reykjavik at about the sametime when our S.S. Island entered.

Herr Saemundsson kindly asked me to coffee and introduced me to his wife and two daughters. He is the only biologist in fact as a scientist in Iceland and quantities of books he has and amount of the up to date knowledge he possess was amazing.

Flowers are all grown in doors in this country and pots of roses and chaffinches in a cage could be counted as treasures of a family.

The slow coasting voyage along the West coast to the North was interesting.

Myriads of sea fowls guillemots, puffins, and many species of gulls were seen all along the coast they go out to fish for the youngs some considerable distance out on the sea. There were no sail on water and no wheels on the cliff but this world is entirely rained by the sea birds.

At Isafjord we saw three Arctic Terns of first year plumage which we did not see anywhere else. Two pair of mallard feeding at the side of the fjord were ridiculously tame.
The discovery of the beautiful Harlequin Duck gave us great delight.

It breeds only at the bank of a quick stream of icy cold water.

The drake in blue, white, and orange dress on a green grass shore at the stream, is one of the most beautiful natural sights of the island.

It is a very familiar bird to me in Japan, where it is represented by a very closely allied form. It ranges through the New World, and only appears at either extreme end of the Palearctic region.

We met borken ice unexpectedly in the North and we were obliged to change our course temporarily. It was such a rare occurrence in this time of the year.

The sea was calm, the sun was low. Aisy looking seals were resting on the ice, Gulls were not active, the noise of the bump between the boat and the ice was the only struggle of life we could observe. We arrived at Akureyri on the 25th and met a guide as arranged.

He was called William Palsson amiable hearted youth. His father was too, when he was young acted as a guide and especially William knows some of our ornithological friends who have been to Iceland.

He made a journey to London a few years ago and his devotion to birds lead him straight to the South Kensington Museum. Besides our own ponies.

We put our luggages into two pack ponies and then we started on our inland journey the next day.

Redwings were not uncommon in the birchwoods, but as these woods are infrequent, the total number of this Iceland Redwing cannot be very great. We took two days getting to
Reykjahöfu, which we made our centre for collecting at (Jahi) Mijvatn.

We were put up in farmer's house, where under one turf growing roof there were four familiers were living and every day we met strange children running about whom we never saw before, their number I believe reached quite up to a dozen.

The farmers are now facing to the busiest time of the year and taking the advatige of no darkness, they work any time of the day. Sheep must be wooled, goats have to be milked, besides these, fishing and collecting of ducks' eggs must not be neglected. Fishing nets are arranged and repaired during the night these are all womens' job. and men are busy hay cutting even late till two or three in the morning.

The sight of the nesting ducks was worth making a special voyage to see. In fact, we were about two weeks late for the best time, and the eggs of the Golden Plover, Whimbrel, Ptarmigan, and Duck were nearly all hatched out. We saw Long-tailed Ducks courting when we first arrived, but by the middle of July, when we left most of the drake Scaup, Barrow's Goldeneye, Long-tailed Duck, Harlequin Duck, and Mergansers had made off to the sea. It is a wonderful sight to see thirty or more Long-tailed Ducklings accompanied by a female, skilfully riding on a choppy water. In the middle of July the Golden Plover, Dunlin, and Red-necked Phalarope started flocking, yet at the same time we found some of their young ones unable to fly. I have examined the stomach contents of a number of trout which I had the opportunity of handling, and was much surprised to find birds inside. The stomach of one fish contained a quantity of primary and tail feathers of a phalarope, and another weighed more than ten pounds. I found three ducklings rather too badly decomposed to determine the species, but probably they were two Long-
tailed and one Scaup. I do not consider this to be a mere chance, but more or less a regular phenomenon. The Iceland Falcon was pretty common, although we did not meet any white specimens. Through the scattered legs and feathers round one nest we approached, we judged that they must prey on the wretched ptarmigan. Ptarmigan were extremely common as the result of five years complete protection. At Husavik we found a nest only a few minutes walk from the village, so that they are nesting at the sea level in this country. A specimen of Dunlin that I shot was peculiar in that it only possessed ten tail feathers, and its size was approaching that of Tringa a. pacifica, whilst the plumage was strictly Tringa a. alpina. The wren was my chief objective in Iceland.

My endeavours were in vain. It was only heard twice, and seen once. This bird is, nevertheless, common and tame, quite the opposite of another which, lives in the lava beds and has a very shy disposition.

One day we were told that a great meeting would be held within a few days.

It was a great gathering of North Iceland which only takes place once in five years.

This is a well known historical event called . . . .

I read it in a book and heard a great deal about it but we were lucky enough to have our headquarters actually within a few miles from the place. It took us two hours by pony, every member of a family except infants went.

The narrow path is familiar to the animals and about forty of us all marched crossed the high plateaux where the clouds were low and on a few occasions we forded rivers. The Laxa was the largest, the water was very high just that time, long ponies' tails were flowing on the icy cold water, its level reached the middle of the saddle. The meeting was
opened by the service in a church, then speeches by a well-known popular man from Reykjavik followed. The whole programme consisted of athletic competitions and ladies singing in between.

There were no conspicuous foreigners or tourists except our Cambridge party. I was greatly interested by them, it was a most peculiar sensation to me to be photographed and interviewed by press men as being a rare specimen of the human race, and they considered me as the first Japanese that had ever visited North Iceland.

They showed specially for us their national wrestling. Its method is quite different from any I ever knew.

We left there at midnight. It was a cold night and a watery mist was thick over our winter coat and it was covered by big drops of shining dew, and cavalier in front of me looked like a silhouette picture. It was the thirtieth of July when Londoners are anxious to escape from heat waves to the water's side. The most interesting thing to me as a zoologist on that day was hundreds of ponies all left out near the village. What struck me was the great proportion of white and piebald ponies amongst them.

They have no superstition or any saying to protect white animals, but a good proportion of the latter are born.

They were originally introduced from Norway in only years have elapsed since, and the animal shows a distinct geographical difference. It is distinguished by its tail being.

White animals are more commonly found among the domesticated species than their wilds.

The Albinos are certainly the first and the commonest variation among domestic animals. I do not know why this variation is found more commonly or has more chance of surviving in Iceland! I have carefully examined the colour
of the iris of white ponies, a good many are normal but some are a beautiful pink and others are white what we call "wall eye."

The natives found no difference in any way between the ordinary varieties and the albinos, only that the latter does not stand the heat so well as an ordinary pony. It is also true that white birds are not rarely found among the wild in Iceland. Sea fowl, for instance white Guillemots and Razorbills are found on very many occasions. This leads me to think that the environment of Iceland gives more chance for them to turn into white. It means that white animals which can not stand a strong sun have a chance to survive in foggy Iceland.

It is true that white animals are found very rarely in the tropics while if they are bred in a zoological gardens in Temperate zone some are born white. The Pink eye is caused by the absence of pigments in the iris and blood shines through, therefore it is natural to think that is would be a disadvantage against the strong ray of the sun.

Returning the old question of Iceland. It seems to me without much doubt that the albino can stand the boreal climate better and some seem to have more advantages in their daily life.

The fox, the hare, the ptarmigam, the falcons, are good examples.

Zoologists often make correct this with the snow and its protective colouring. One knows that the Arctic hare in south Ireland often does not change into white in a mild winter, also an Arctic fox in a 300 yearly loses the habit of complete change of the fur in winter, it certainly does not receive enough climatical stimulation to its body.
I have examined a small collection of Birds at Husavik, which was shot by Wm. Palsson, our guide.

Perhaps the following will be of interest:—

Rook, Starling, Ivory Gull, Snowy Owl, Coot and American Brent. Among these he did not get more than one specimen of White-bellied Brent. William Palsson is a good field ornithologist, and some of the stories he told me were quite interesting as giving hints for a future study of Icelandic avifauna.

“Farmers at Myvatn notice two kinds of Widgeons he told me. One is ordinary, and the other has bright colouration. Both breed there and are quite common. If this statement is true, it is quite interesting. The brighter coloured bird may be *Anas americana*. He also knew of a teal which is abnormally coloured—whether it was blue or green I do not know, but this also makes me suspect the occurrence of American Teal. At Grimsey there are colonies of Ringed Guillemots which are said never to mix with the others, and to keep to their own quarters. If, however, on rare occasions they mix with the Brünnick’s Guillemots the eggs are indistinguishable until blown, when the colour of the yolk is different from that of the eggs of the ordinary guillemots. One is thicker and paler than the other. This made me still doubt whether the ringed guillemot is only a variety of the ordinary guillemot or not. All these statements gave me seriously to think.

One afternoon we saw a full plumaged Black-headed Gull at Myvatn. I believe this to be the second time this gull has been seen in the North of Iceland. Snipe were well distributed, and also redshank in a lesser degree.

We left Myvatn on July 16th and stayed three days at Husavik. Ringed Plovers were common at the sea side as well as on the high plateaux. Arctic terns were common every-
where, often very far from the water. They feed till 12 o’clock at night, and later.

The number of flying terns at the seaside was just the same at any time in twelve hours while gulls, kittiwakes, and Arctic skuas are sometimes quite absent at midnight.

Eider Ducks were common along the shore. A dozen to twenty birds were feeding along the beach among offal cod-heads. This sight is a sign of a boreal country.

S. S. "Godafoss" left Husavik on the 21st of July. We stopped at Saidesfjord and then sailed to Thorshavn, the capital of the Faeroes. We were so pleased to meet unexpectedly the French explorer Dr. Charcot on board "Pourquoi pas?".

The weary note of a solitary Golden Plover, a Whimbrel perched on the apex of a rock and screaming at the passer-by, or an anxious hen Ptarmigan running from beneath your Ponies hoofs are the only sounds round the wild mountain tracks of Iceland; the bugle-call of the Long-tailed Duck heard in the oppressive silence of the lake district is a treasured recollection from Iceland congenial to my ears.