

## THE GREAT AUK ON LUNDY: ITS POSSIBLE NESTING SITE

By

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The Great Auk (*Pinguinus impennis*), also known as the Gare Fowl, and formerly as *Alca impennis*, was a large flightless bird with a head and bill similar to that of a Razorbill. It was also of the same colouring but, according to a Lundy observer in the 1830s, differed in being, "so big, and stood up so bold like", and adding, "there were only two or three (of these birds) ever on the island" (reported in D'Urban and Mathew 1895). He knew no other name for them than 'King and Queen Murrs', a name which compares with 'King and Queen of the Auks' given them by the natives of Papa Westray (Buckley and Harvie-Brown 1891).

The bird is well recorded on St. Kilda, the Orkneys, the Faroes and on Iceland where the last Great Auk was 'obtained' in 1844 (Birkhead 1994,24), giving it the distinction of being the only bird whose extinction date is precisely known. However, the distribution was not confined solely to the Northern Isles, for early in the 19th century, examples of the bird were occasionally obtained along the French coast, three having been reported from the neighbourhood of Cherbourg and two more from that of Dieppe. As D'Urban and Mathew have noted, "there would be no inherent improbability that a Great Auk, in swimming south off our western coasts, should put in at Lundy (*ibid.*).

That Lundy was in fact more than just a resting place is shown by descriptions from Lundy of Great Auk eggs. These were large, "precisely like the Guillemot egg in shape, nearly, if not quite twice the size, with white ground and black and white spots and blotches" (*ibid.*).

Tales of the unusual bird on Lundy date back to 1695 when Celia Fiennes wrote: "I saw the isle of Lundy...which does abound with...all sorts of fowls - one bird that lives partly in the water and partly out and so may be called an amphibious creature; and it lays an egg in a place the sun shines on..."

The Rev. H.G. Heaven records that, "about 1838 or 1839", a large egg was brought to his father, the Owner, by a resident who had lived on the island for 25-30 years. The islander insisted that it was an egg of the 'King and Queen Murr', birds who nested just above high water, and which he thought could not fly as they always scuttled into the water when disturbed. He had never known more than one pair himself, and had not seen any for about fifteen years before his discovery of the egg (ie. c.1823). Others among the oldest inhabitants agreed that there had never been more than two or three couples. The old islander did not think these birds could fly as he never saw them on the wing nor high up the cliffs like the other birds, and that they, as he expressed it, scuttled into the water, tumbling among the boulders, the egg being only a little way above high water. He thought that they had deserted the island as he had not seen them (or an egg) for fifteen years. However, it is also recorded that the islanders sometimes saw nothing of them for four or five years, a fact which may be accounted for by the fact that the birds adopted a fixed spot for nesting inaccessible to the egg collectors from land (D'Urban and Mathew 1895).

The fact that the islander had not seen the bird for about fifteen years implies that he did see one in c.1823, a date whose significance appears below.

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\* Tony Langham died in May 1995, shortly before this year's report went to press. This was Tony's sixteenth contribution to the *Annual Report*, covering a variety of subjects. Its inclusion is a fitting tribute to the research undertaken by him over the years. A full obituary will appear in next year's Annual Report (ed).

Recently a Lundy map of unusual interest has come to light (Ref. British Library Pdd 40345/9/8852268; illustrated in Langham (1990,59)). Although undated it is marked as showing Lundy to be "The Property of Sir Aubrey de Vere Hunt", who was owner of the island between 1818-30. As the map marks Lamb Cove where a lamb was lost in 1822, but does not show Trinity House works dated from 1825, the map must date from about 1823-4. On the map one of the few coastal features marked on the West Side is Bird Island, the isolated rock of the NW coast (NGR SS12884734).

Just why this rock should have been called Bird Island in 1823 when the entire island appears to have been swarming with birds, whose plumes were being collected in their thousands and whose eggs were being taken in their hundreds for the Bristol Sugar Mills, is a mystery. Fowlers and eggharvesters would have had easy enough pickings from the plateau. The Great Auk, being flightless and easy prey, would naturally seek remote nesting sites that were both inaccessible to man and at the water's edge so as to provide ease of access to and from the sea.

Bird Island affords just such conditions. To acquire the name of Bird Island, the rock must have been exceptional. Both the site and the dates lead to the deduction that this was possibly, if not probably, the nesting site of some of the world's very last Great Auks.

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