

The Quest For the Leach's Petrel - Joe Moran Part 1

This is a follow-up article to the talk, given to the Group in March 2009. It was first published in 'Scotland's Magazine' in 1961 and reprinted here by kind permission of the author.



The Leach's Fork-Tailed Petrel is not a bird with which anyone is likely to become over familiar. The rarest of the four British nesting pelagics, this obscure Petrel is also probably the rarest of our nesting sea-birds, whose choice of habitats during the time it spends ashore, and its strictly nocturnal habits when on land, make it a little known, or completely unknown bird to most naturalists.

The only known strongholds of this bird in Britain, and indeed the whole of Europe, are the St. Kilda and Flannan archipelagoes, the island of North Rona and its adjacent sea rock, the

Sula Sgeir, three of which are only accessible during long spell of clam weather, particularly the last named, and none of which can be reached without a long rough voyage in a small fishing boat. It will be appreciated then that a visit to the remote breeding ground of the fork-tails is usually a difficult undertaking, occasionally dangerous and invariably quite expensive, with the additional risk that a sudden change in the unpredictable Hebridean weather can easily bring to nought a well planned and provisional expedition.

With the possible exception of St. Kilda, taking the chance of landing on any of the Outliners and setting up camp involves, of course, taking the chance of being stranded by bad weather for an indefinite period, and extra provision must be transported against this risk. In spite of these difficulties, however, a great deal of painstaking work has been done by a band of very competent ornithologists to give us a clearer picture of the status of this fascinating bird on the British list. Detailed reports and pictures have been published from time to time, dealing with its strange habits and environment, to be keenly read and studied by an ever increasing number of amateur ornithologists, but as far as my associates and I were able to ascertain, no picture had ever been published showing the Leach's Fork-Tailed Petrel actually on her nest.

This was hardly surprising since the enterprising bird burrows deep into the peaty turf before excavating a nesting chamber where the female lays her single white egg, and the difficulties of photographing her in this chamber seemed at first to be insuperable without the aid of costly and elaborate electronic apparatus. Desiring very much to meet *Oceanodroma leucorhoa leucorhoa*, and needing only an excuse, we gave the matter much thought and eventually came up with a semi-automatic device, which progressed through experimental stages with the assistance of a local Sand Martin colony, until we were convinced that given dry weather and beginners' luck the first success might be our should we manage a landing.

Obeying the instructions chalked on the lid, the large plywood packing case was indeed handled with care during the long ride to the Kyle of Lochlash. We guarded it constantly against the pitching and rolling of the *Loch of Seaforth* as we crossed the stormy Minch and sat on it firmly as we drove in a fish lorry from Stornaway to our first camp site on Lewis. By dinghy, the great box progressed a day later, across the bay at Kirkibost to the lobster boat *Mairidhonn*, where, buried under a mountain of lobster creels with the rest of our gear, it began the long journey out to Eileen Mor, the largest of the Flannans group. An angry rising sea, however, gave our skipper second thoughts and we ended the day camped on the inshore island of Little Bernera to await calmer weather.

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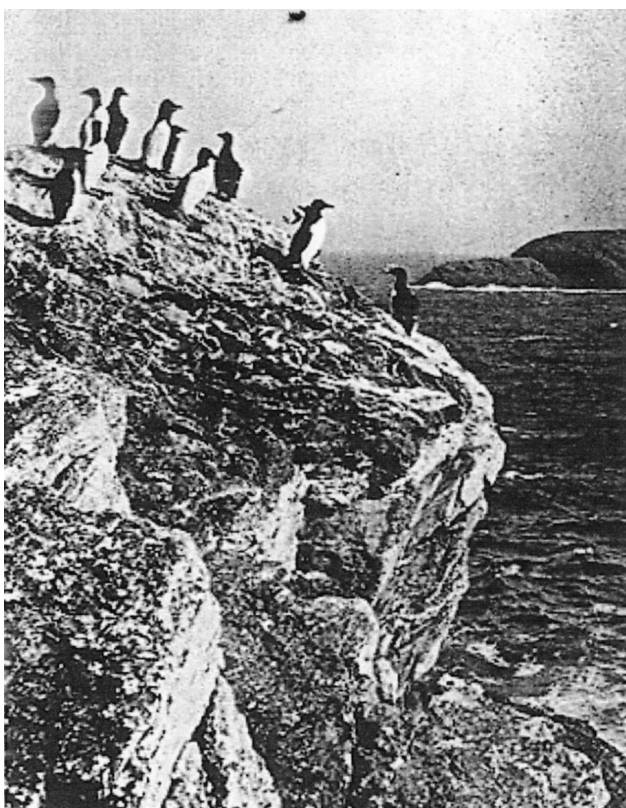
As darkness descended a tiny pin-point of light reached us from the horizon far to the west- the lighthouse of ill repute at Flannan Isle. Perhaps the Fork-Tails were flickering through those beams as that very moment?

A sunny sky and calm sea rapidly changed to a murky drizzle as our lobster boat ploughed noisily along through the rising swell round Gallan Head. Eventually into our view came a group of black specks on the skyline, which represented our goal but which were continually disappearing behind squalls of rain. We spent the day being sick or wondering whether to be sick and the whole point of the expedition seemed to have been lost when at last the *Mairidhonn* brought us between the black over-hanging crags, gloomy and filled with the cries of Kittiwakes. Our crew looked dubiously at the two landing places and the turmoil of water around them. They looked at us, "Perhaps another day?"

There was an unspoken mutiny. The prospect of another hellish journey back to Lewis in rain, cold, sea-sickness and misery was unthinkable. "Would you like to risk it?" There was scramble for the dinghy.

The oarlocks creaked and we pulled away from the *Mairidhonn*, the dark dripping wall loomed ahead. Seals abandoned their slabs with extravagant wiggles and splashed into the sea all round us while countless Shags left their slimy terraces in wild alarm. Soon the water was filled with bobbing heads and curious eyes, the dinghy lifted alarmingly in the swell, would we shortly join them? Raindrops pattered on the dark swirling water and Kittiwakes called endlessly as we rode up to the landing. A swift manipulation of the oars, instructions shouted uselessly in Gaelic, a series of desperate scrambles, and one by one we were safely ashore. The dinghy disappeared into the gloom to bring our gear.

Our precious plywood box tumbled without ceremony into a large net with the rest of our sodden crates, a length of sticky black rope thrown up to us and eventually we stood on the landing among our possessions, successfully ashore on an Outlier! An unintelligible shout came from somewhere below and the boats departed for the safety of the open water.



The coldness and unpleasant after-effects of the long cramped journey were rapidly forgotten in transporting our gear up the two hundred and forty-seven steps leading to the top of the rock and pitching tents by the ancient chapel of St. Flan. With clothes changed and a primus roaring in the shelter of the local chapel things began to take on a more cheerful aspect. Presently we stood before the "Black sun-blister'd lighthouse door," of Wilson Gibson's poem but in our case it did not stand ajar and all three keepers were safely at home. We exchanged greetings, begged fresh water and returned to camp across an area of shabby thrift. Rabbits swarmed in the twilight and Puffins stood watching us in hundreds, heedless of the weather.

Rain thundered on the flysheet for most of the night but above the hubbub of the storm strange cries filled the night sky. The lighthouse beams stabbed out into the swirling mist and shadowy outlines flickered over the turf. The Petrels were in!

Eilean Mor is girt with crags the whole way round, some rock faces falling almost three hundred feet sheer to the sea. Worn, cracked and

pitted by the Atlantic weather, the rock affords ideal nesting situations for countless sea-birds and the ceaseless outcry of squabbling Auks, Shags and Kittiwakes came up in waves from the sunlit

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precipice, to where we warily trod the steep turfy slopes along its rim. The Puffins were incredible, constantly whirring in from the sea to augment the thousands already thronging the grassy slopes over the top of the island, to stand around for hours holding the same half dozen small fish in their bills with an air of great importance.

Stiff-winged expressionless Fulmars were the only other sea-birds to frequent the top of the island, and these perhaps carried up unwillingly by rising air from the cliff, except for the inevitable Oystercatcher and of course our Leach's Petrels.

The turf which covers Eilean Mor is semi-hollow. Being only a matter of a foot thick and harbouring immense numbers of rabbits and Puffins, there remains scarcely a square yard of surface still unburrowed. In this labyrinth of dwellings we sought Petrels but met with little success. A search of the ancient bothies on the western promontory, however, was more rewarding. Both Leach's and Storm Petrels were in residence among the litter of fallen stones; we could hardly wait for nightfall. Part 2 will appear in the next issue of Lapwing.