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Among the Sea Birds off the Oregon Coast, Part I

BY WILLIAM LOVELL FINLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

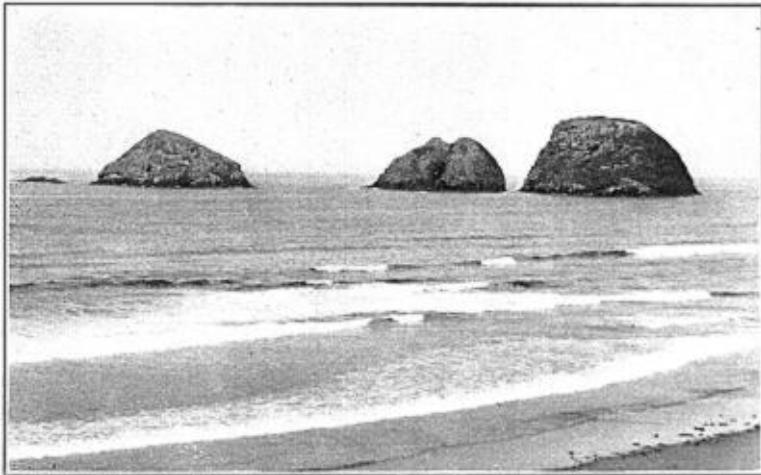
THE coast line of Oregon is rugged and very picturesque. It is interspersed with short sand beaches and jutting rocks, which have been left standing at intervals by the erosion of the sea. Sixty miles south of the mouth of the Columbia is the largest group, charted as Three Arch Rocks, so named because each has a great arch worn completely through its base. These great stacks of basalt are a mile off shore; the outer rock is 297 feet high and the inner rises 304 feet above the sea surface. In shore from Three Arch Rocks is a smaller broken group, some of which may be reached by wading out at extreme low tide.

Our plan was to make a careful study of the sea birds that lived on Three Arch Rocks, and picture them with our cameras. This could not be done in a day, nor in several hurried trips, so we intended to hazard a camp on the ledges of one of the rocks, where, with the least possible disturbance to the birds, we could watch them carefully for several days in succession and collect a good series of photographs.

How could we carry out these plans? The only way the rocks could be reached was by a small boat. We found no one along the beach who cared to take the risk of helping us. But we did find a small fourteen-foot, double-ended dory at Netart's, the only available craft along the coast. In point of necessity, if we camped on the rocks, we had to have a supply of fresh water, tenting and clothing for stormy weather, some fuel for cooking, and provisions enough for emergency. Besides this, we had a heavy camera equipment of two 5x7 long-focus cameras and about 150 plates.

We were in a dilemma. This boat was too light to carry such a load, to say nothing of passing the barrier of big breakers that never ceased to pound in along

the beach in rapid succession. Granting we could reach the smooth water beyond the high-rolling surf, the boat was then too heavy to hoist to a ledge high enough above the tide line to protect it from the lashing waves. The first difficulty we met, finally, by making two trips in succession with our equipment wrapped in water-tight bags. The second difficulty we overcame by taking a block and tackle and raising the boat to a ledge twelve feet above the water.



THREE ARCH ROCKS FROM SHORE

Our enterprise involved the landing upon a rocky shelf at the foot of a precipitous cliff in mid-ocean. It was necessary to wait until conditions were favorable to have a reasonable possibility of success. We expected to get on the rocks, when we caught a calm spell. We hoped to get off before our provisions were all gone.

We pitched our 4x7 tent on the beach among the drift, opposite the big rocks. Although it was the latter part of June, the sea winds were cold and the rain continuous. Occasionally, the sun would break from the clouds for a day and raise our hopes by diminishing the size of the rollers, but this was sure to be followed by a sou'wester that brought a steady pour of drizzling rain and lashed the white-caps as high as ever. We were wet half the time but didn't seem to catch cold. We soon got into a sort of amphibian state, where a condition of water-soak seemed part of our normal environment. When it rained all day, we sometimes went to bed and slept our clothes dry. It rains a good nine months out of the year and one of the natives said "it was a little apt to be showery the other three".



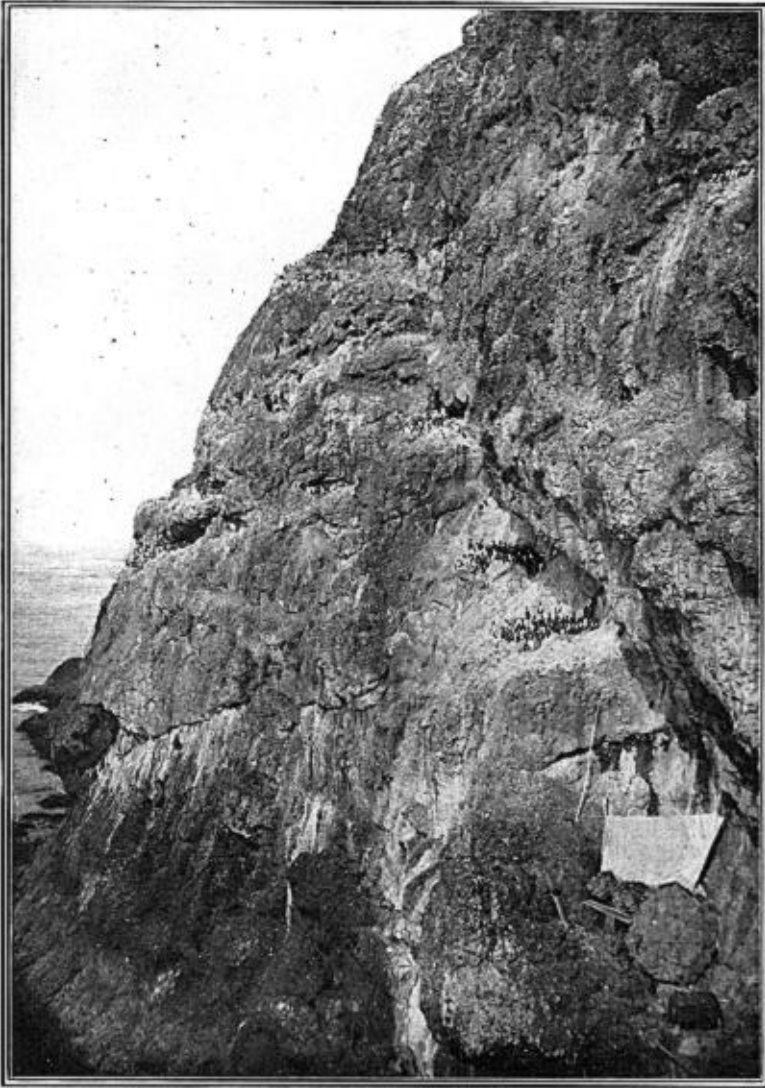
IN CAMP ON ARCH ROCK

Courtesy of The Pacific Monthly

For sixteen days we lay in camp, while the waves throbbed incessantly night and day like the pulse of a living world. Often, we lay awake at night feeling the rain beat on the canvas and listening to the wind, trying to imagine the growl

of the surf was growing fainter. In the gray light of every morning, we crawled out to see if we could detect a sufficient gap in the on-coming line of combers.

Then one morning, when we were impatient of waiting, we made a trial of driving our boat through the lowest place in the surf-barrier. We waded in with our little dory until she floated. Watching our chance, when the waves were



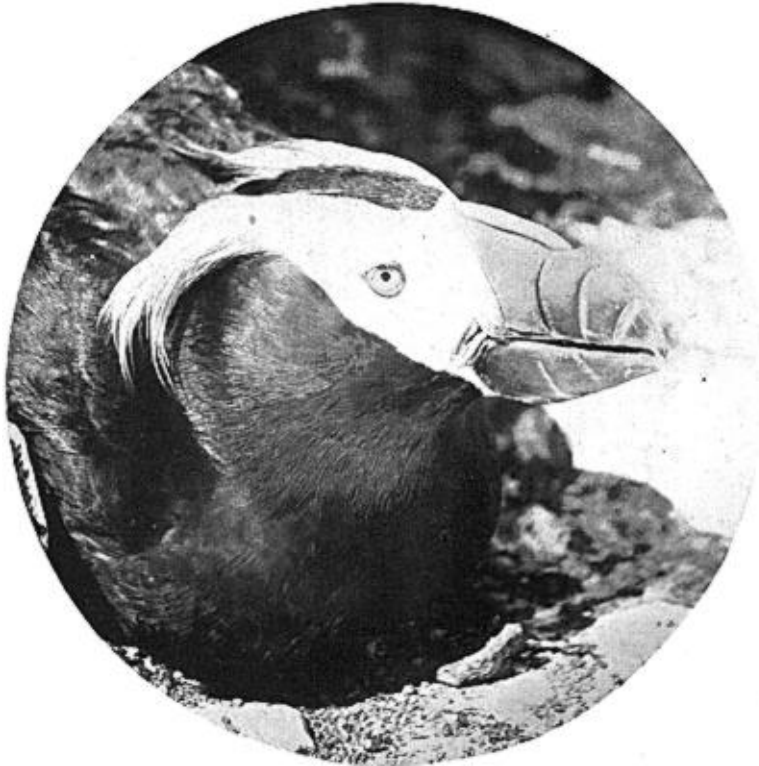
SIDE OF ROCK SHOWING CAMP ON LEDGE, AND WAY TO SUMMIT

Courtesy of The Pacific Monthly

smallest, we jumped to our oars. The nose of the boat plowed through the foam of the first and second breaker, but they tossed her like a toothpick. She shot at the third like a hunter at a fence, but failed to reach the top before it combed. Crash! came half a ton of green, foaming water down my back. We swerved a little to the right, and another monster grew up like magic. Biff! came ten tons

of the next wave piling over us, and the third tossed us shoreward like an empty cracker-box. We dried out the rest of the day, and went at it again the following morning with about the same success. The fourth day, the surf dropped lower and we reached the smooth water beyond.

As the most "climbable" and "campable" looking rock, we selected the one farthest out at sea. This rock was 600 feet in length and rose in abrupt cliffs from the sea, but the south side was well ledged. It was not an easy task to land on the rock itself. The steady ground-swell of four or five feet would not let the boat touch the rock. We found a place on the south side where the rock shelved down to the tide-level. As the wave receded, we backed the boat in and one of us landed in a flying leap from the stern, while the other pulled away to keep from being dashed against the jagged rock by the next breaker. Provisions had



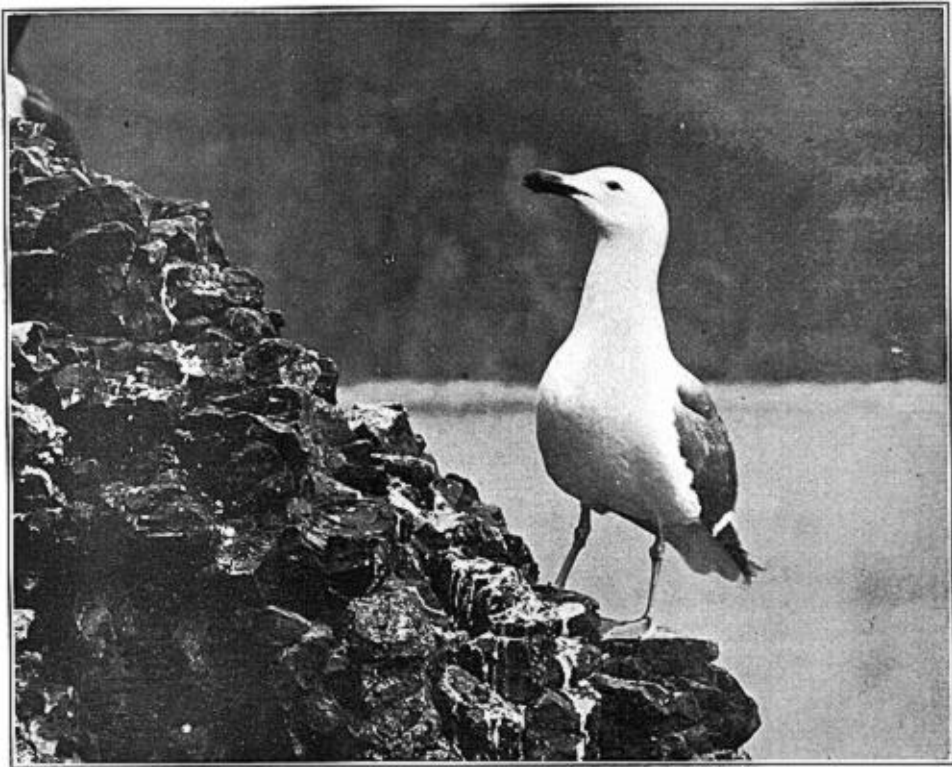
TUFTED PUFFIN AT ENTRANCE TO BURROW

to be pitched out and some of our bulkier belongings barely escaped a watery grave. It was a much more difficult task "ledging" our boat, as it weighed over five hundred pounds. We had to swing her well in on the crest of a big wave and spring into the water and hold her as the wave receded, then work her up with block and tackle to a twelve-foot table away from the lash of the waves.

When we began looking for the best camping spot on the rough, jagged side of that cliff, it was a good deal like hunting for a lodging on a winding stair-case. There wasn't much choice. There was only one landing that was wide enough to stretch out, and that looked as couch-like and comfortable as the top of a broken picket fence. It was a good deal more dangerous in case one took to perambulating in his sleep, as the edge broke abruptly off to a reef forty feet below.

It took us, in all, about a day's work with a small rock-drill and axe to level off a space wide enough for a bed. For all our attempts at breaking the boulders fine enough to make them as soft as possible, the jagged points annoyed us somewhat during the first night, and occasionally we had to reach under and shift the larger ones. This bed worked a trifle on our nerves, and the second day, we took the pains to pull a couple of sacks of the watery weed that grew on the roof of the rock, and spread it for a mattress. This native bedding was soft but brimful of wetness. We dropped to sleep readily, but always awoke about midnight, when the mattress began to steam, and there wasn't a night when I didn't feel the sensation of getting a third-class Turkish bath.

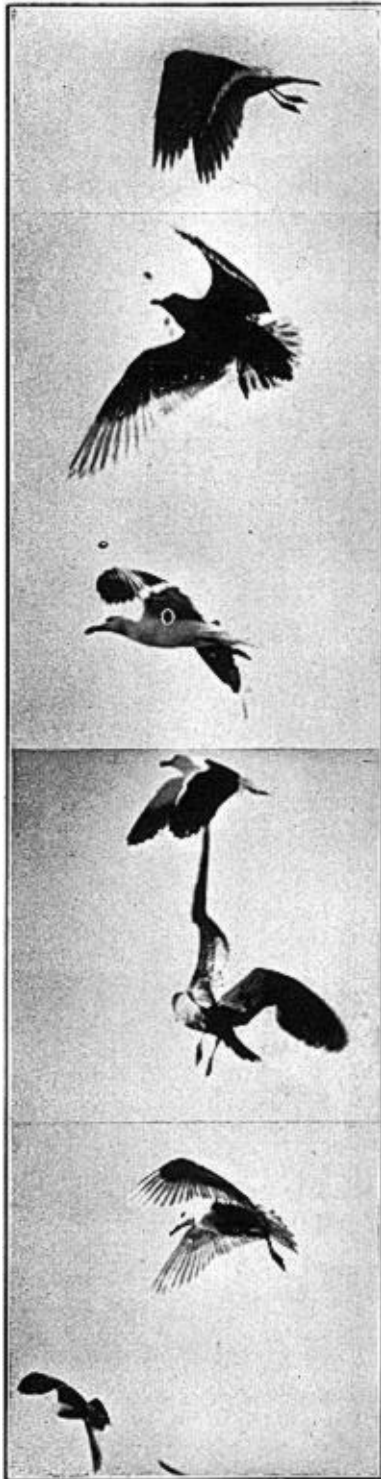
Just on the next two flats above our roof, were two large "chicken yards" of



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murres. Although everything was open about our camp, the ventilation was vile. Sleeping next that chicken yard on the floor above, was worse than a room with the doors and windows opening into a pig pen. But what could we do? The whole island was rancid, from the sea-lion bath-tub at the bottom, to the cormorant collection at the very tip, in spite of the airing it got from every wind of heaven.

After breakfast, we started out. Robinson Crusoe-like, to explore the island. We found the only path to the top was working along and passing from ledge to ledge. This was rather difficult in three places. Just above the tent was a wall twelve feet high, that had to be scaled with a rope or pole. Crawling along through the two murre rookeries under the over-hanging rocks, one had to ascend



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a slippery place to the next colony. At this point, there was a projecting knob, where one could look straight over the drop for a hundred and fifty feet, and around which one had to edge his way. A piece above that was a portion of the rock that was broken and crumbling, up which we had to scramble, climbing from the nest of one cormorant to another, till we reached the slope, and then clamber on up to the pinnacle of the rock where we could get our first conception of what the island really was.

The different nests that we found on these rocks may be divided into three classes: the grass nests, burrow nests, and nests that were no nests at all. Under the first group would come the western gull (*Larus occidentalis*) and three kinds of cormorants, Brandt, Baird and the Farallone (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*, *Ph. pelagicus resplendens*, *Ph. dilophus albociliatus*). In the second class would come the tufted puffin (*Lunda cirrhata*), Kaeding petrel (*Oceanodroma kaedingi*), and the forked-tail petrel (*Oceanodroma furcata*). Those having no nests at all would be the California murre (*Uria troile californica*) and the pigeon guillemot (*Cephus columba*). Of the last bird, we only found a few pairs nesting on the rock. The forked-tailed petrels were rather rare on the rock, where we camped, but a little more common on the middle rock where they nested right in among the Kaeding petrel, but not so common. There were also a few pairs of black oyster-catchers (*Hamatopus bachmani*) nesting among the ledges. There were no ash petrels or Cassin auklets as on the Farallones.

One of the prettiest sights about the rock was the gulls that filled the air like so many feathered snow-flakes. Their immaculate white bodies and soft, pearl-grey wings, tipped with black, are as catching as music strains wafted over the river. I liked to watch them, because they were masters of the air. There was a constant adjustment of the wings to meet every air current that swept the rock, but in a steady breeze the movement was too slight to see, and they hung as motionless as if painted in the blue. They tacked straight into the teeth of the wind. I saw one retain a perfect

equilibrium and at the same time, reach forward with his foot and scratch his ear.

But what is beauty, if it is 'only skin deep? A gull is not the white-winged angel that the poet sees. A gull, in his own country, will steal like a politician and murder like a pirate. They swarmed about us like vultures after a battle. The minute our approach drove a murre or a cormorant from its nest, the saintly-looking scalawags swooped down to eat the eggs and young. The gulls are freebooters and robbers on the island, but it is only when the other birds are frightened from their nests that they have a chance to carry out their nefarious trade. Eternal vigilance is the price the cormorants and murrens pay for their eggs and young. Their possessions are never left for an instant without a guard unless on account of a person. But the fittest manage to survive on the rock, and these gulls are the most useful birds to man in the bays and rivers about the water-fronts of our cities. They are valuable as scavengers and should be protected in every way possible. Three of them are equal to a buzzard. Ten of

these gulls are equal to a pig.

The gull picks out a comfortable spot and builds a respectable nest, and that is about the only creditable thing he does on the rock. The grass-covered roof of the island is his favorite nesting place, although many select the niches in the bare rock on the face of the cliff. The gull's eggs lie right out in the open and never seem to be bothered by other birds; they, themselves, do not ravage the homes of their own kindred. The eggs are of dull earthy and chocolate-brown tints, with darker blotches, matching their surroundings so perfectly, that we had to be constantly on the lookout to keep from stepping on them. When the eggs were hatched, we found the nestlings were protected by equally deceptive clothes of a mottled grey color.

The old gulls were very solicitious for their young. The minute you go about their homes, they hover over you with loud, warning calls, watch-



YOUNG GULL FEEDING
Courtesy of The Pacific Monthly

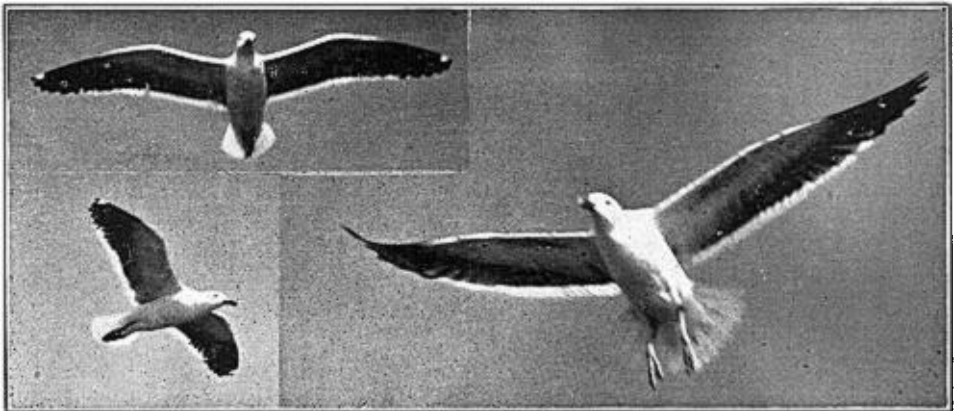
ing every move you make. They teach their young to keep hidden and to lie close. I have seen more than one gull impress this upon her children. One day I was walking along a ledge and came abruptly to a place where I could look down the top slope. Below me a few yards, I saw two half-grown gulls; one crouched beside a rock, but the other started to run down the ridge. He hadn't gone two yards before the mother dove at him with a blow that knocked him rolling. He got up dazed, and struck off in a new direction, but she swooped again and rapped him on the head till he seemed glad enough to crawl in under the nearest weed.

Occasionally we found the gulls very pugnacious. There was one mother that had a nest of three young birds on a narrow ledge, and every time the pho-

tographer approached her nest, she would dart at him. She swooped at his head with a loud bark, something like a watch-dog; at six or eight feet distant, she dropped her legs and took him a sharp clip with her feet. Twice she knocked the hat from the intruder's head. We tried several times to get her picture but were only partially successful. It was not a highly pleasing experiment to try on the edge of a ledge that broke so abruptly off.

I have often seen the western gull act in ways that speak well for his sagacity. On several occasions, I watched him open clams and mussels at the seashore. His bill is unfitted for crushing the hard shell. I saw one gull grasp a clam in his bill, rise to a height of thirty feet and drop it to the hard sand and gravel below. He followed it up closely, but it didn't break. He repeated the same performance over fifteen times before he was successful.

Our camp was partly protected from above by the over-hanging rock, which we thought would be fortunate in case of a storm. As we discovered later, this ledge was rather a dangerous protection, because disintegration was constantly going on. The movements of the birds on the cliff above often dislodged pieces of the basaltic structure. When we were in the midst of a meal, or sitting enjoying



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a few minutes of rest, we were often startled by an avalanche of pebbles. Dropping everything, we would jump for the safer retreats under the ledge, until the rain of stones, often as large as a good sized egg, had ceased.

The roof of the rock is covered from one to three feet with a loose coating of friable earth, composed of rotten rock and the guano of countless generations of sea-fowl. From this sprouts a luxuriant growth of grass and weeds; rich patches of chick-weed, clover, and other varieties. The whole surface is so perforated with the burrows of puffins and petrels, that one cannot walk any distance without sinking into a nest. The tufted puffins dig in from two to four feet, and a burrow will often have two or three openings. The petrel most always uses the door of a puffin's nest and digs himself a kind of side bedroom off the main corridor. It is not unusual to find one or two puffins along the main hall-way and a couple of petrels lodged in the attic, as it were.

The tufted puffin always impresses me as being more of a beast than a bird. Its huge, strikingly-colored bill, long, yellow curls and roll-shaped body give it the queer appearance. One look at that bill shows that according to Lamarck's

theory, this bird has done nothing since creation but sit around on the rocks and bite open mussels.

Some of the puffin nestlings we found in the burrows were as interesting as their parents were vicious. Two of the jet-black, fuzzy youngsters, we had taken on the in-shore rocks and kept with us for two weeks, soon became domesticated. They were fearful gluttons; they would eat till their crop bulged out as big as their bodies and they couldn't waddle. Then they would sleep off the effects of the meal and soon call for more in a peeping whistle.

One afternoon, I hauled one of the little brats out of a hole hanging to my finger. We lay on the grass on the edge of the cliff, played with him for an hour and doubled up in laughter at the way he would fight. He would jump clear off his feet for a chance to bite your finger. If he caught it, he would hang like a parrot; if he missed, he went with such energy, that he turned a complete somersault before he landed in the soft grass below. Time and time again, he would hurl himself at the challenging finger and go rolling like a ball down the steep incline unable to stop. The instant you assisted him to his feet, he was ready to fight anything that approached within six inches of his nose.

I guess my first experience with the old puffins prejudiced me. I wanted a puffin's egg, so I dropped on the ground, thrust in my arm to take one, but was somewhat taken in myself. The odds are always against your getting the egg, if there is an old setting puffin-hen in the hole. I thought at first I had run my hand into a beaver trap, and I couldn't get loose till I had dug the beast out and pried her jaws open. She had cut through the flesh of my little finger to the bone.

We might have lived on the rock for a month and climbed over it every day and not known a petrel was there, if we had not found their hiding places. They were never seen flying about the rock in the day time. By digging in the soft earth, it was no trouble to unearth their small white eggs. We found that one of the parents, either the male or female, stayed in the burrow every day.

The petrel nestling is fed during the day by the parent thrusting the beak down its mouth and injecting him with a yellowish fluid. The old birds seem to be expert at this, for if you take one out of the burrow he will immediately "play Jonah" in your direction with surprising power of projection. A dose of rancid fish oil suddenly shot up your sleeve is not pleasing either to your nerves at the time, or to your nostrils afterward. If you drop him, he will generally crawl back into his dark hole, or flit off swallow-like and disappear toward the open sea.

I'll never forget the evening we made the dangerous trip clear to the top of the rock in the dusk and hid there on the north slope. At the last gleam of daylight, the petrels swept in upon the island like a swarm of bats. Those in the burrows came chattering out to meet them. The ground beneath seemed full of squeakings and the air of soft twitterings and whistlings, until it felt uncanny. We frequently felt the breath of swift wings, but it was all like a phantasy, for not a bird could be seen, not even a shadow. How in the world a petrel could find his own home and his mate in a whole acre of nesting holes, hidden all about in the grass and in the darkness of the night, is more than I could understand.

(To be concluded.)