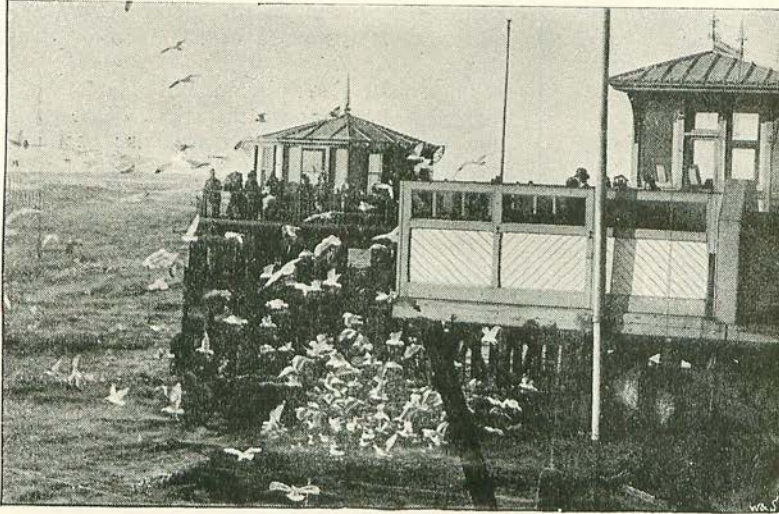


The Camera Amongst the Sea Birds.

BY BENJAMIN WYLES.



FEEDING THE GULLS: SOUTHPORT PIER.

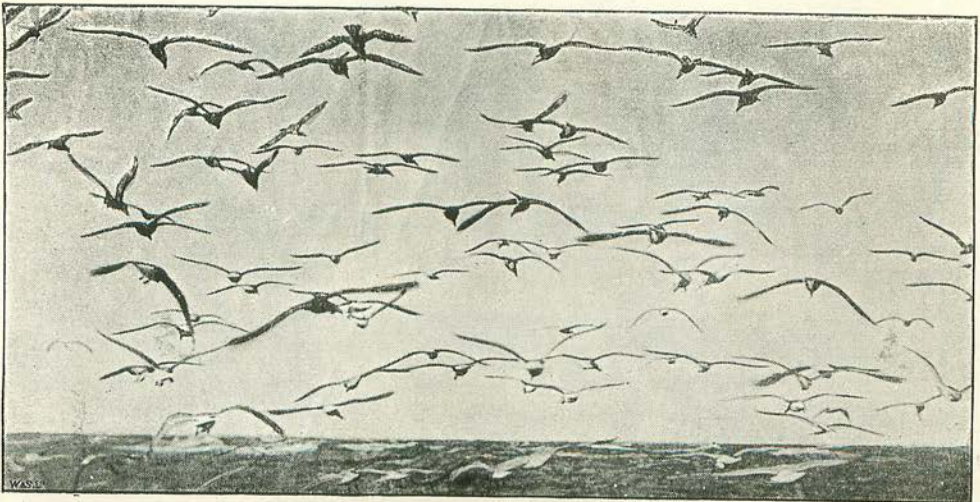


REAT was the interest raised not many years ago by a photograph containing what purported to be a solitary seagull, and not interest alone. Controversy amongst the experts alleged that it could not be a photograph direct from Nature; it might be the photograph of a dead gull, or a stuffed gull added to its

background of waves, or it might be painted in by hand, but the only genuine gull in the case was the public, in believing such a thing possible. Since then, better lenses, shutters for rapid exposure, and, above all, the increased rapidity of the gelatino-bromide process, have combined to make the impossible of that day the practice of this, so that now a

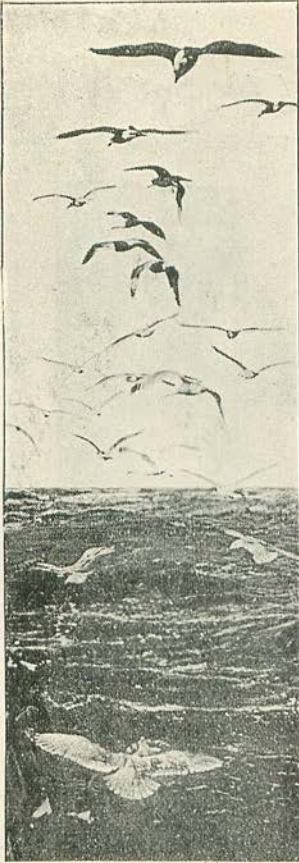
photographer with experience, under fairly favourable conditions, may depict not one, but many birds in flight, on a single plate. The chief difficulty is that of focusing an object constantly moving through widely varying planes. Such a photograph by the writer appeared in the June number of *THE STRAND MAGAZINE*.

The flat sands of Southport make it almost



ASPECTS OF GULLS FLYING (1).

imperative to the fisherman to land his catch on the pier, the rejected offal being thrown back into the sea. The keen sight and smell of the sea birds enable them to seize the opportunity. The pier-manager has the offal saved and doled out to the birds at a regular hour, and now at noon daily the birds are fed; at least, during the winter months. Such a delightfully lively dinner party is a thing to be remembered by those who have once witnessed it. "Grace before



GULLS FLYING (2).

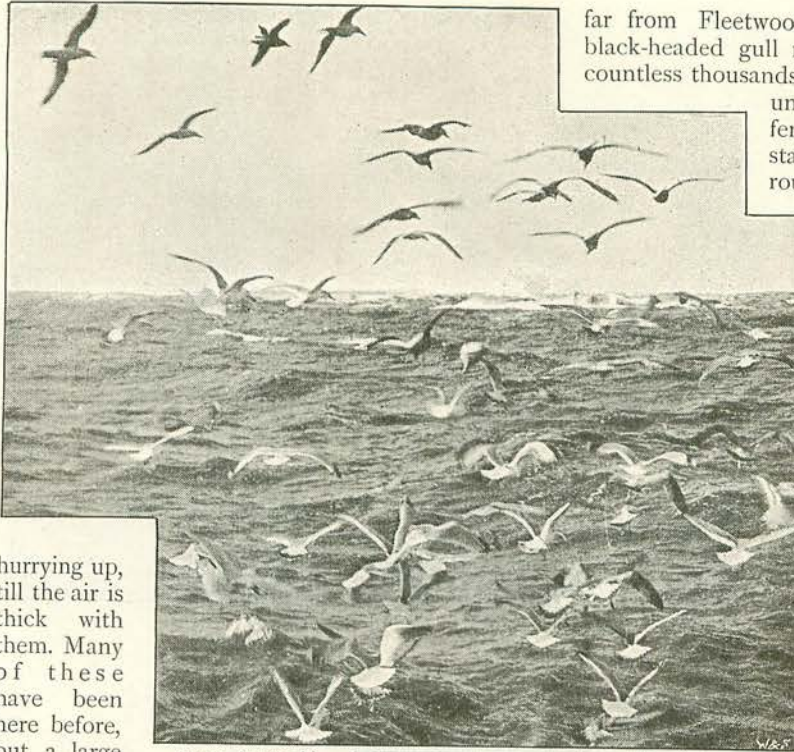
meat" takes the form of a shrill whistle, which is quite as effective amongst the birds as the most elaborate of dinner-gongs, for this becomes the signal for a general scramble, and down they come to one point in a mass of flapping, struggling wings, legs, heads, and tails, splashing, tugging, several tearing at one piece. Our first illustration gives an excellent idea of the scene.

The next five photographs show how their aspect varies with the wind. One day they keep their sides towards us; another day they face us, or turn their backs on us, but always keep their heads towards the wind. No ruffled plumage if they can help it.

The wild sea bird is the proverbial emblem of unfettered freedom, yet year after year she returns to rear her family where she herself first saw the light. During March the dinner on the pier is given up for lack of guests. A deputation of a couple of birds has visited the old breeding ground; a few days elapse, and another and larger embassy goes to see that all is right, and then all depart, to be seen no more in their winter quarters till winter shows signs of returning. In October evidence of memory and of the communication of ideas may be seen. Suppose the weather has allowed a supply of the dinner material to be obtained, the feeding having ceased since March, not a bird will be in sight; but let the feeding whistle be blown, and from all points across the sea they come



GULLS FLYING (3).



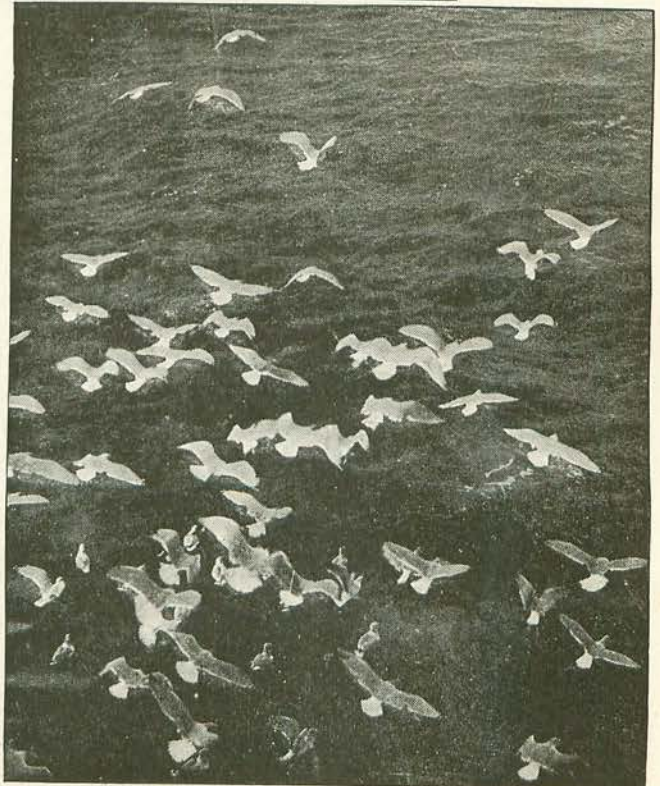
GULLS FLYING (4).

hurrying up, till the air is thick with them. Many of these have been here before, but a large proportion

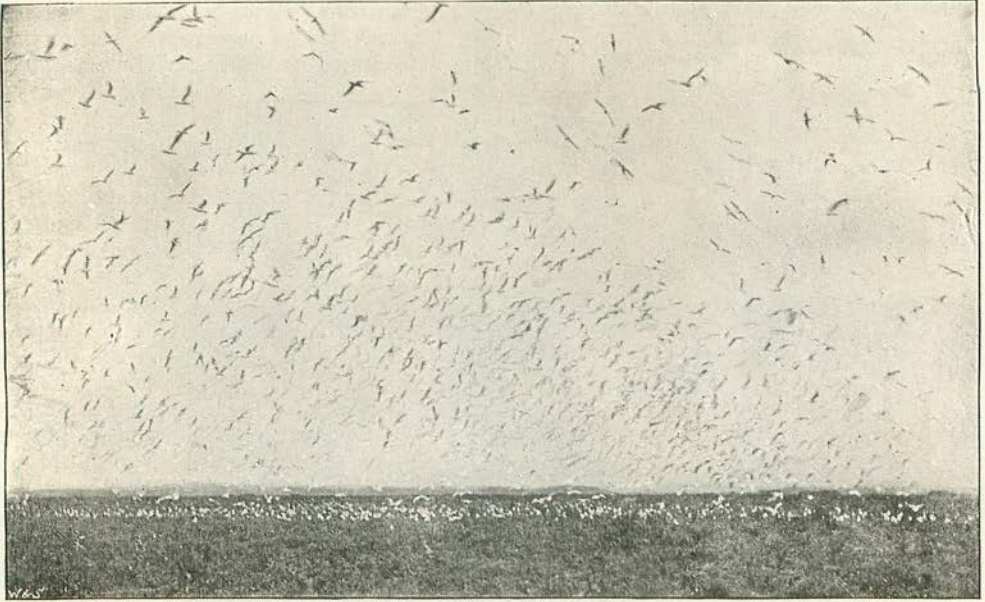
are young birds, known by their differing plumage, the grey thickly streaked and mottled with brown, to be exchanged for the pure delicate light grey of adult gullhood when a year old. These seem just as eager as their seniors, as if they had been told what to expect. One would like to hear, in bird talk, a description of these "fish dinners."

The breeding places of the birds are interesting sights about the middle of June. The old birds are then comparatively tame. Some nests contain eggs. Many of the chicks are too young to crawl out of the way, while others are strong enough to skulk, like little puff-balls, under a branch of heather or dried bracken. The inaccessible cliffs of the coast are by no means alone chosen as breeding grounds; often vast colonies occupy the flattest of flat places, like Pilling Moss, not

far from Fleetwood, where the little black-headed gull makes his home in countless thousands. The place is an uncultivated shaking fen; and when you stand still, water rises round your feet. The nests extend over many an acre. At first the old birds are rather shy; but let a gun be fired, and the air is at once filled with the indignant parents, who whirl round us, scream at us, and do all they know except attack us. The nest is usually placed in the lee of a bit of weed or heather. The eggs vary in



RISING FROM THE STRIKE (5).

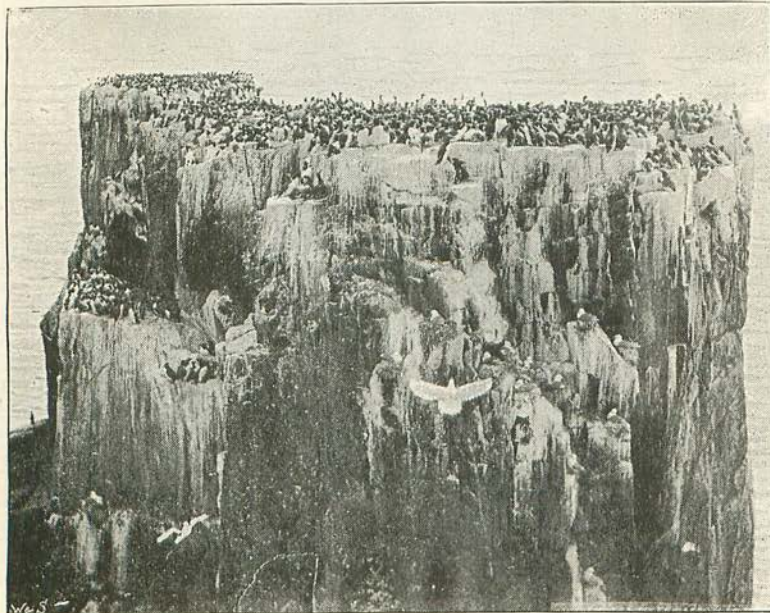


BREEDING GROUND AT PILLING MOSS.

the limits of a deep greenish grey, mottled with still deeper spots and markings. "Very like plovers," remarks an uninitiated friend. Very, indeed! These *are* the so-called plovers' eggs that figure on many a breakfast table!

Few places afford such glimpses of the sea birds at home as the outer Farne Islands. The Pinnacles are narrow, needle-

like rocks, rising sheer out of the water, without a break, to an immense height. Their almost level table-tops present the curious sight of thousands of guillemots, close packed and standing on their tails—this is really their way of sitting, each on its one egg, which it holds between its feet. No foot of man or beast can reach them; but we can get a fair view from the high parts ad-



THE PINNACLES.

ja-cent. It may be their colour—a parsonic black and white—and the leg being placed so far back that they have a standing-up look, that imparts such ludicrous solemnity. They utter a strange cry, all together, and with intervals of perfect stillness between. It is a strong, resonant boom like thunder, loud and penetrating, but so weird that one may fancy it passing for the supernatural in the dark, without very much help from the fears of the superstitious.