

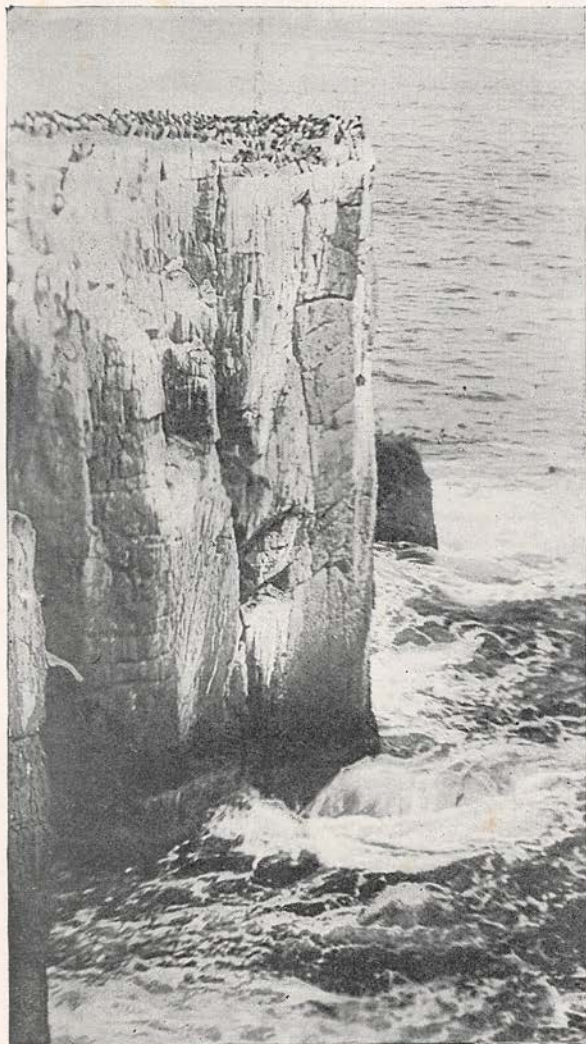
## SEA-BIRDS AT HOME.

BY R. B. LODGE.

*Illustrated from Photographs taken from life by the Author.*

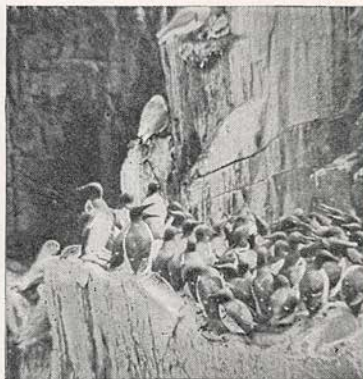
THE holiday resorts all round our coast are thronged in summer time with visitors, some of whom find the time hang very heavily on

Not even the excitement of the promenade on the pier or esplanade, listening to the same old tunes, or the sail at so much a head,



GUILLEMOTS ON THE CLIFFS.

their hands—paterfamilias especially, who is condemned to give his womenkind and family a rest and a change, but who, after the first day or two, finds it unutterably slow.



when half the company, sometimes, alas! all of them, are very grievously ill, or the melodious voices of the beach minstrels, with the attractions of the fortunetellers, beggars, shell pedlars and tin-type men thrown in, can suffice to arouse his flagging spirits.

From the pier, where he has been seeking solace and consolation from a cigar, he can watch the graceful ease with which the gulls wheel and soar apparently without exertion, and admire their snowy plumage, looking so daz- zlingly white against the fleecy blue



sky, and the buoyancy with which they rise and sink over the incoming waves. With them are possibly a few terns, feathered fairies of the air, light as butterflies and swift as swallows, whose long pointed wings fairly twinkle in the sun in their mazy evolutions; and an occasional cormorant may approach near enough for one to make out

visitors. Probably somewhere not far off they breed in countless numbers, in some sequestered and secluded part of the coast; or possibly a few miles out at sea, in some picturesque group of rocky islets, where the cry of the sea-birds mingled with the ever-



KITTIWAKES AT HOME.

his glossy dark green plumage and glittering green eyes. His long dark and deeply-sunk body and snake-like head and neck remind one of some piratical viking ship in the olden days, deeply laden with plunder.

The first idea that seizes the average Briton is of course the proverbial desire to sally out and slay them; but second thoughts are always best, and besides there is also the Wild Birds' Preservation Acts to be considered, any infringement of which may lead to trouble.

Instead of useless slaughter, let us rather try and find out the home of these charming



lasting roar of the surge are the only sounds that break the peaceful quiet—that quiet which is so infinitely refreshing after the noisy din of the myriad-voiced, brass-banded Babylon-on-Sea, which we have for the present joyfully left behind us.

Let us lie down on the short turf which clothes the summit and try and realise the scene before us. Below is the sea with its multitudinous and complex variations of colour and light and shade, its shimmering surface veiled with the creamy network of foam, and dotted with guillemots and puffins busily engaged in fishing. Kittiwakes are passing and repassing backwards and forwards to their nests in the perpendicular cliffs, where they may be seen on every little pinnacle and jutting crag like snowflakes on the dark and rugged rocks, while their never-ending cry "kitty-kea, kitty-kea" resounds on every side.

The summit of the isolated table-topped rocks which jut out into the sea is thickly covered with a dense and wriggling mass of birds, clad in dull brown with white breasts. These are guillemots, which make their homes on the rocks that rear their dizzy height in defence of our rock-bound island. Here they lay their eggs, undisturbed save for the climbers, who pursue their perilous calling suspended by a single rope over the raging surge below.

"How fearful

And dizzy 'tis, to cast one's eyes so low!  
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air  
Show scarce so gross as beetles: half-way down  
Hangs one that gathers samphire—dreadful trade!  
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head:  
The fishermen, that walk upon the beach,  
Appear like mice; and yon tall anchoring bark,  
Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy  
Almost too small for sight; the murmuring surge,  
That on th' unnumber'd idle pebbles chafes,  
Cannot be heard so high.—I'll look no more;  
Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight  
Topple down headlong."

SHAKESPEARE'S "King Lear.

The guillemots frequently nest, or rather lay (for of nest there is no attempt), in most places where the coast is sufficiently rocky. The Yorkshire coast about Flamborough, the Isle of Wight, the Welsh coast, almost the whole of the Scotch coast, and the Northumberland rocks, are all favourite localities for these interesting birds. On the mainland they use exclusively the ledges on the face of the cliffs, but where any isolated rock has a flat top, like the pinnacles of the Farne Islands, they crowd closely together in great numbers, each bird laying its immense egg on the bare rock, on which it sits in an upright position. The colours of the eggs vary in a most wonderful manner, no two out of hundreds being alike. It may be that this diversity of colour is to enable the birds to identify their eggs, especially as experienced eggers maintain that every bird lays the same

coloured egg each year. Without some such contrivance it is difficult to imagine, when hundreds of eggs are laid on the bare rock in a small space, how each bird is to distinguish its own egg from that of its neighbour. It would be contrary to all precedent if they sat indiscriminately on any egg unappropriated; and though the observations of one experienced ornithologist seem to show that this does happen occasionally, I cannot think that such a departure from the usual state of things is anything more than accidental and very exceptional.

Another contested question is the pointed shape of the eggs, which has been described as a curious provision of nature to diminish the risk of the eggs rolling off into the sea when disturbed by the hurried departure of the mother bird; the tendency of such a shaped egg being rather to revolve than roll very far.

Only those who have witnessed the crowded mass of birds on the top of an island stack can quite realise the possibility of any difficulty in the matter. The extraordinary sight must be seen to be understood; it reminds one more than anything else of a swarm of bees. Each bird is busy preening itself, or quarrelling with its neighbours, while a constant stream of birds are leaving the rocks, flinging themselves headlong into space until they reach the sea below, at the same time others are continually arriving and struggling for a place, often sitting on the heads of the crowd until they can succeed in squeezing in.

Associated with the guillemots are usually numerous kittiwakes, which nest in the same rocks in the smaller crevices, wherever they can find a corner big enough to hold them, generally below the lower ledges occupied by the guillemots, sometimes indeed apparently almost within reach of an extra high wave, which sometimes, I imagine, must wash the eggs and young from their precarious cradle. They are charming birds, and their innocent and dove-like appearance is not belied by their habits, as is the case with some of the larger gulls. Their nests are composed of seaweed and turf wedged into the crevices of the most precipitous cliffs, never on the flat surface, and usually contain two or three eggs. They will permit of a near approach, and a most interesting and pleasant sight it is to look over the edge of the cliff and watch the parent birds standing at the side of the young ones. Although they are numerous enough in this country some of the colonies on the stupendous cliffs of the

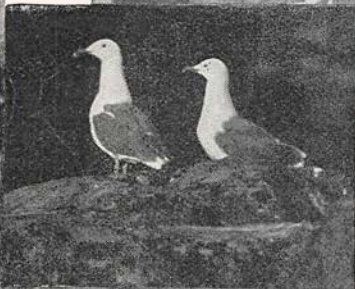
Norwegian coast far surpass any to be seen here, the number of birds estimated as nesting there being well-nigh incredible.

The larger species of gull, three of which are resident British birds, do not lead such respectable lives as the little kittiwakes, but alternate between honest fishing and downright robbery and murder of their weaker neighbours, devouring both eggs and young birds remorselessly whenever they get a chance.

The great black-backed gull is the worst culprit, and is much disliked in the vicinity of eider-duck preserves and grouse moors, where they do much damage. This is the largest British species, having an expanse of wing of between five and six feet. When in adult plumage they are most handsome and bold-looking birds.

During the long continued frost which prevailed some years ago, when the Thames

presence the Arctic aspect of the scene, while through the fog which hung thickly over the deserted river no sound could be heard save the crashing and grinding of the ice and the wild cries of thousands of gulls. With them were numbers of the smaller black-backed gulls, black-headed gulls, and common gulls, some of them so tame from starvation that they took food from one's hands, and it became a regular amusement to feed them with bread from the Embankment and



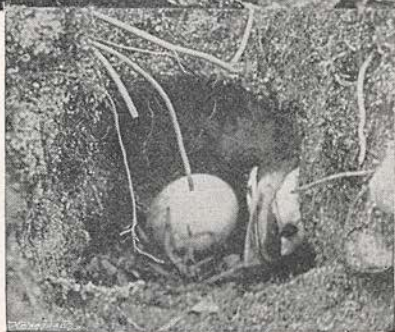
through London was almost blocked by immense drifting packs of ice and the foreshore was piled with fantastic shapes of ice and frozen snow, several of these birds could be seen flying about in search of food and perched on the floating ice, increasing by their



LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULLS.

bridges. Many found their way to the ponds in the London parks, attracted by the food for the water-fowl kept there. So much have they appreciated the hospitality then shown them that in subsequent winters many of them have re-visited London when the weather has been mild and open. During these visits they are a great attraction to many who would not otherwise have much chance of observing them in a wild state.

It only shows how soon birds of all sorts find out where they are safe from molestation, and where food is plentiful and easily obtained, and how ready they are to avail themselves of protection. The middle of London hardly seems a likely locality for watching such a timid bird as the dabchick in a wild state, or the water-hen or wood-pigeon. Yet it is an interesting fact that they not only visit London, but breed in the parks, the last two in considerable numbers. If these birds, so timid elsewhere, are able to appreciate the safety which they find in the midst of a



PUFFINS.

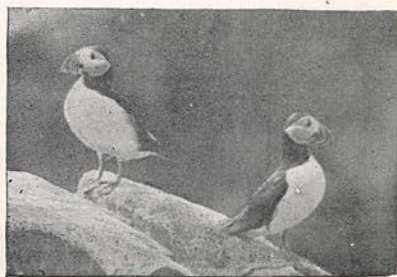


YOUNG PUFFIN WAITING TO BE FED.

populous city, how much more would they repay the hospitality if some bird-loving landowner would only repeat Waterton's plan of converting his estate into a preserve of wild birds of all sorts, where the kestrel could hover over the fields in search of mice in safety from the gamekeeper's gun and pole-trap; where feathered visitors from other countries and rare specimens of our own *avi fauna* could live in peace, with no fear of finding their way into a glass case, and where the gamekeeper would be transformed into a

birdkeeper, a protector of his charges against every description of human vermin.

This sounds like a very far-fetched programme, and yet it was tried by Waterton on his Yorkshire property, and during the breeding season, at any rate, it is carried out at the Farne Islands off the Northumberland coast. For the protection of the sea-birds which resort to the rocks, a private association has acquired a lease of them, and pays four watchers to look after them through the summer months, and prevent the wholesale robbery of eggs and killing of the birds which used to take place unchecked. In consequence of this protection not only has the number of birds increased, and a chance given for rarities like the roseate tern to



ON THE LOOK-OUT.

breed in safety, but the birds are much tamer than they are in other localities.

On a visit during the season 1895, for the purpose of photographing the birds and their nests, I was generally able with care to approach near enough for my purpose, as these illustrations testify. I also succeeded in stalking the cormorants on their nests, approaching to within about five yards of several nests. Eider ducks are always very close sitters, and I experienced no difficulty in photographing the duck on the nest, and also a group of about thirty, with one drake among them, on the rocks at the edge of the water. The terns were rather shy, but came back to their nests after a short time. I think the most wary at the nest were the lesser black-backed gull and the herring gull. The former of these are exceedingly numerous on all the islands; their nests were everywhere, on the surface of the rocks, among the coarse grass and campion, and almost hidden beneath the tall docks which grew luxuriantly in one spot. Untidy looking structures they are, as a rule, compared with the one shown in the photograph on page 576, which was made of bladder campion torn up while in blossom, the white flowers still fresh. The eggs of these two species are so much alike that it is almost impossible to distinguish between them with any certainty unless the parent bird can be seen on the nest; this shyness of being watched to the nest of course very much increases the difficulty, as both birds build in similar positions—a few herring gulls among an innumerable number of lesser black-backed gulls. The birds themselves can be recognised easily enough, the light black back of the one being so much darker than the grey back of the other. They are both of very thievish disposition, taking the eggs and young of the other birds, who are obliged to look closely after the safety of their treasures, for should a bird be frightened off the nest and stay away longer than usual, the chances are that they will swoop down and fly off with the eggs transfixed on the beak, or swallow the young birds whole, if they are small enough. Their throats are of a most accommodating size, being able to gulp down a very large object. The great black-backed gull do not breed at all on these rocks; they appear to be too distrustful even of their own species, and seek out some lonely spot by themselves.

Of all the sea-birds, however, there are none of a more striking appearance than the puffin, or sea-parrot as the fishermen call

them, from the shape of their tremendous beak. Their colours are so conspicuous, and their attitudes and facial expression are so thoroughly quaint and comical, that they are sure to be noticed by even the least observant; and they are also generally very tame, allowing a close approach when perched on the rocks, as they are wont to do in small companies on some jutting promontory. These birds are among the few which seek safety for the sitting female by burrowing underground. The layer of soil on the summit of one of the islands is completely honeycombed with their holes, giving it the appearance of a rabbit-warren. If, however, you put your hand in as far as you can reach, you will in many cases catch the old puffin, if indeed she does not catch you first. It is as well to be provided with a stout pair of gloves, as they can bite hard, very hard, and hang on like bull-dogs, their little black eyes expressing anger at being disturbed. The egg—for only one is laid—is large for the size of the bird, as large as a hen's egg, and is almost white. When the young are hatched they are fed by the old birds with small fish and sand-eels, and may be seen sitting expectantly at the mouth of the burrows waiting to be fed. They are curious little objects, without the tremendous beak, with its gay and brilliant colouring, of their parents. A curious thing about this beak is that it is larger in the breeding season, a specially-developed sheath which covers it dropping off after the nesting duties are over.

These island rocks are also frequented by myriads of terns, the most graceful perhaps of all birds on the wing. The common, the Arctic and sandwich terns, and occasionally a pair or two of the rare roseate terns, are all to be found, and also a few oyster-catchers, ringed plovers and rock-pipits.

Other places frequented by sea-birds are the Isle of Wight, Dungeness, Channel Islands, Scilly Islands, Lundy Island, Cornish coast, all the Welsh coast, most of the Scotch, with the numerous islands—Skye, the Hebrides, Orkneys, St. Kilda; Ailsa Craig, the Bass Rock and the Yorkshire cliffs. The low-lying sandy shores from Lincolnshire to the Thames only afford suitable places for the terns, ringed plovers, oyster-catchers and similar birds, which lay their eggs on the sand or amid the shingle and *débris* above high-water mark; while one species of gull, the black-headed, leaves the sea entirely and comes inland to breed in large colonies in the fresh-water marshes, broads and ponds in various parts of the kingdom.