THE CATCHING OF SEA BIRDS IN NORTHERN AND WESTERN SCOTLAND AND THE FAROES

A Summary of Historical and Contemporary Survival

John R. Baldwin

The present account is primarily a summary of the lecture given in Kirkwall in April 1973 to the Conference of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies and interested Orcadians.

In certain environments, sea birds provided one of the fundamental resources for survival. They were essential to the economy and way-of-life of the indigenous population. Consequently, in areas where their capture has lingered into later times, an ethnological approach can be valuable - examining man, his needs and his solutions through his equipment and techniques, with a view to formulating, where relevant, distinct patterns of development and localisation and considering these in their cultural and ethnic context. At the same time, it would be as unwise to underestimate other historical and geographical influences as to ignore a certain ecological relevance.

In Scotland and the Faroes, sea birds are found mainly in the high cliffs, particularly in

the islands and the coastal fringes of the north and west. Puffins and Manx shearwaters, razorbills and guillemots were most commonly taken, but also for example, fulmar, gannet, kittiwake, shag and cormorant, gulls and terns, petrels and ducks. Access to the ledges presented the cragsman with certain problems, overcome in a variety of ways involving use of a rope (held by others or staked to a cliff-top). Sometimes a kind of 'seat' was used to lower him; sometimes an aerial rope-way constructed. Alternatively, he might climb down the cliff; or he could climb up from a boat. At other times a team, not an individual, was involved.

Ropes have been made variously of swine's hair (Orkney, Foula) or horse hair (St. Kilda, Hebrides), cow and sheep hide (St. Kilda), straw (Orkney) or hemp, and were often used to haul up the catch as well as the man. Long poles were occasionally used to aid movement on the rocks.

COLLECTION - EGGS

It is necessary to distinguish between the taking of eggs and the taking of birds. Eggs are far more simply gathered - either lifted by hand or with the aid of some form of scoop - a small hand net once in 19th century Orkney, a spoon in

20th century Foula. They were generally transferred to a container for carriage back to the settlement. In certain places, notably Shetland and St. Kilda, intelligent use of observation on the part of the inhabitants led to a regularised system of cropping, which not only ensured a more continuous supply of eggs, but also a longer bird-catching season, since the hatching of the young would also be staggered.

CAPTURE - BIRDS

The birds themselves can be caught when either in flight or stationary. Certainly in early times, man looked for his prey primarily on the ground and particularly at times when they were either too young to fly, sitting, or in moult. Only gradually did he develop equipment and techniques that allowed a progression from simple seizure to the use of clubs, snares and missiles, whilst nets are thought to be a late development in the northern world from the classical world.

SEIZURE

Most sea-birds, particularly the young, could be taken by hand, with or without decoys, from their ledges, cracks and burrows; a few were taken as they alighted. Particularly on St. Kilda, such methods gave rise to legends in which fowlers lay

on their backs outside their doors with bared breasts, the guillemots mistaking the skin for a guano-covered rock. Alternatively, the feet of a sentinel gannet were reputedly tickled as a means of gaining his confidence.

Shags could be taken either on the rocks or in rock crevices; cormorants in sea-caves. With burrow-nesting birds, the arm had to be inserted into the burrow. Sometimes a hole would be too long and a shaft dug down to the nest of the puffin or Manx shearwater. In the Faroes a special augur-like spade was occasionally used - a lundanavari. Alternatively, a short 2' long stick with a large hook at one end could be inserted and the birds would normally grasp this and be hauled out, often several at a time, clinging to each other. In Iceland, such a stick was known as a kjebb, on Mykines in the Faroes, a lundakrókur, on Foula (Shetland) a croakie, on Unst (Shetland) a kilpin stick. Such a stick seems to have been quite general in the north; in the west of Scotland, however, it is not documented, but here a dog (generally some kind of terrier) has sometimes been used, both to discover and isolate burrow-nesting birds, to retrieve them, and occasionally to kill them. This was a standard St. Kilda

practice up until the 1930 evacuation of the island, and was also known on Ailsa Craig in the late 19th century. Elsewhere, it was practised in Norway and in mid-17th century Faroe, where it seems to have disappeared soon after, probably under pressure from more efficient techniques.

CLUBS

Birds could be killed outright, whether struck in the air or on the ground. More often they were just stunned and, after retrieval, killed by hand. Short poles were used for clubbing on the ground, and fulmars are still struck thus in the Faroes. Young gannets were treated in the same way on St. Kilda, the Bass Rock, Mykines and Sulnasker (Iceland). The Sula Sgeir fowlers from Lewis still carry 2'-3' long cudgels and at one time some such stick was certainly used for knocking the birds over on Stack Skerry. More recently, both on Sula Sgeir and St. Kilda, gugas and puffins caught in snares were clubbed after capture and before their heads were cut off or necks twisted.

In caves in northern and western Scotland, cormorants, shags and rock pigeons were attracted at night with a fire or lantern and then struck down as they flew near with a longer pole - often an ordinary fishing rod. Outside, on the cliffs,

a blow with such a pole would bring down puffins - throughout the Hebrides, where it seems to have been a technique of some importance, and also in the Faroes and Iceland.

SNARES

Like most trips, snares could be set and left, or be operated by man. They could have either a single or multiple noose which entangled the feet of the bird or closed round its neck.

One of the commonest items of equipment for catching birds in the Hebrides and the north isles of Scotland was the single horse-hair noose attached to the end of a long 14' or so pole. This is the slat ribeadh of St. Kilda. On present-day Sula Sgeir a locally-made iron 'jaw', to close round the guga or young gannet's neck, has to some extent replaced the older type. In the Faroes, however, a single mid-20th century reference would suggest that either the method is a late import or, more likely, disappeared early under the influence of the hand net.

The multiple noosed snare is recorded in Scotland only for St. Kilda, for taking puffins on the earth or rocks. In Iceland, floating boards with multiple snares attached were used at sea for guillemots. These progressed temporarily to the

Faroes in the 18th century, and more successfully in the 1920s. A set of five boards in Iceland was termed nederstader; in Faroese the technique is known as at snara.

NETS

Mass capture of birds with nets seems not to have been a Scottish or Faroese tradition in recent historical times.

Only one instance of a ground net - for puffins on later 19th century Ailsa Craig - has been found, though they were used in both Iceland and Norway. Large fixed flight nets were equally scarce, one at the mouth of the Nith in Dumfriesshire probably resembling the more frequent examples of the west coast of England. Quite large, moveable flight nets were, however, once used in Orkney, held up against a cliff face for the birds, frightened by noise, to fly into off the ledges. Similarly, nets over the mouths of caves in the Hebrides and Wester Ross caught shags, cormorants and rock doves disturbed from within.

It is the hand-net, however, that causes most interest. Known amongst the Polar Eskimos, the Aleuts, in Japan and the Pelew Islands, within the North Atlantic its centre is undoubtedly Faroe. The Faroese fleygistong - a triangular mesh bag,

attached to a 10'-12' rod - is known to have been introduced to Heimey, Iceland, c. 1885, where it was known as a haf, but in Scotland it has been recorded only from late 19th century Westray, Orkney, which had trading links with Faroe, and apparently also from Foula. A Westray man using one of these hand-nets was known as an auk-swapper, guillemots being the usual catch. In the Faroes, puffins and fulmars are taken with it, and so important were the former to the economy that special stances, in use for generations, were allocated on the cliffs to the fowlers. Nowadays young puffins are taken with the fleygistong on Mykines, around the electric 'street' lighting on suitable summer nights - a modern development of an old practice.

Further to these principal methods of capture, there is a miscellaneous group which includes baited hooks and boards, the casting of stones and the use, in later times, of firearms.

A regular progression in techniques is evident in most places - with accompanying regression back to simple seizure as the activity has declined. The degree of sophistication will indicate to a large extent the degree of dependency. Most Scottish environments progress no further than rod and noose, or club, although St. Kilda, with its seizure,

clubs, dogs and snares, betrays an involvement only met with elsewhere in the Faroes. That this island did not adopt the hand-net is probably a result of its isolation rather than of lack of need or initiative, for the Faroes have, in a sense, always been more in a mainstream of communications than the Hebridean outliers.

From a contemporary ethnological point of view this has been a happy twist of fate. The two areas are, of course, not only adjacent but related geographically and culturally. In the one, a remarkably full range of earlier techniques has survived into modern times, whilst in the other, it has been possible, in addition, to examine more recent and highly developed fowling procedures as part of a natural progression.

To some extent the cultural association can be traced linguistically, in the terminology employed for certain items of equipment and that used for the birds themselves. It can also be traced in the survival of customs and oral traditions and more particularly in the system of allocation of fowling rights to the inhabitants of particular communities.

Although in Scotland, exclusive private ownership has been the case for some areas - instance

the Bass Rock - other areas have been leased out. A rent payable through a factor or tacksman allowed the inhabitants of e.g. St. Kilda or Mingulay use of the cliffs as well as the land, and between themselves these populations implemented their own system of division. In Orkney, the *races* on Copinsay probably reflect croft or family ownership; certainly the Shetland *lees*, on the cliffs, were a recognised part of a croft's grazing rights, where a man could also collect eggs; whilst the *toogs* were reputedly the division of the fowling cliffs or *banks* on Foula.

It seems likely that the cliff divisions and fowling rights in Shetland were dependent upon the amount of land held, as was certainly the case in the Faroes and St. Kilda.

In the Faroes, doubtless because of the value of such rights, only a certain type of infield land (*bøur* not *trød*) carried such privileges. In both areas, however, there was a certain allocation of cliff regarded as common property, where anyone could take birds. In St. Kilda this element grew steadily during the 19th century; in the Faroes, latterly, the amount of his catch there, that a man had to yield to the community has gradually lessened. These and the fact that fulmars, a

relatively recent Faroese resident (mid-19th century), have generally not been subjected to restrictions, serve to reflect the overall lessening in importance of fowling in the economy, along with the diminishing population in townships where it is still practised.

As for the uses of sea birds and their eggs, these are generally common to all communities regardless of race or culture. Primarily they were sought as food, either eaten fresh or preserved in some way. The feathers could be used domestically for bedding, dusters, fishing-lures, etc., but were only exploited on any scale within the region (along with bird oil and grease) in the 19th century, and that primarily on St. Kilda, the Bass Rock and in the Faroes. Oil was also used both as medicine and for the lubrication of machinery and firearms. It was burnt in lamps and smeared on sheep and boot leather.

Otherwise, all these various 'bird components' could be used in the payment or part-payment of rents, whilst amongst many miscellaneous uses, carcasses manured fields, dried stomachs provided containers, bones secured house-thatch and clothing and were used as spoons, lamps and pipe-stems. White of egg was even mixed with clay in the Faroes

in the manufacture of crude pottery.

Whilst some of the major uses have survived in the Faroes to the present day, and in certain parts of fowling Scotland well into the 20th century, genuine need had largely disappeared, even in the remoter areas, by the second half of the 19th century. That there are records of so many apparently miscellaneous survivals, however, underlines the importance that sea-birds had in earlier North Atlantic societies, harsh in their environment and forced to be self-sufficient.

Along with the equipment and techniques developed to gather the crop, they illustrate men's struggle for survival, his problems and his means of overcoming these. They can also illustrate his need to safeguard his future by the responsible control of his resources.

That man no longer needs to rely on sea-fowl does not mean that the problems of survival in those remote areas have been otherwise overcome, merely that in his wisdom he has devised seemingly better or easier ways of living, elsewhere. In doing so he has largely removed the direct confrontation with nature for survival and with it the realisation of the delicate balance necessary between man and nature for the future well-being

of both.

Within North Atlantic Europe, the study of sea-bird fowling can help fill one more small gap in our knowledge of life and work in the area, notably within the historical past. Further, it emphasises a cultural unity and cross-fertilisation which, although considerably weakened in post-Norse times and subjected to increasing outside influences and localised developments, have nonetheless been maintained throughout parts at least of the area until modern times.

Note: A more comprehensive examination will be found in "Folk Life", Vol. 12 (1974) The Journal of the Society for Folk Life Studies.

WHAT IS ORKNEYINGA SAGA ABOUT?

Edward J. Cowan

This paper attempted to argue the necessity of approaching the saga without any preconceived ideas based on misconceptions about Vikings, Orkney and the saga literature as a whole. The saga has often been misread, perhaps most notably with reference to Earl Rognvald and Sweyn Asleifsson. In the case of the former, the reader tends to be seduced by