

Storm Petrel

A flight of imagination on the back of a bird

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WE FOUND IT ON RONA the very day we'd arrived, and, in keeping it, maybe I imagined I could bring home something of the sky and spaciousness of that island, at least for a while.

It wasn't the dead bird we saw, lying on the turf, not at first, but a tiny wink of metal. I said, "Look, what's that?" and Stuart replied, "Storm petrel. They breed here. But ringed—that's a real find."

So here it is on my desk, in a polyethylene sample bag. An ex-storm petrel, just a clump of desiccated feather and bone, with a tiny ring on its hooked-up leg. When you report a ringed bird it's called a "recovery," but this one was beyond all hope of that.

My five-volume wartime *Handbook of British Birds* says that storm petrels are "essentially pelagic," they "never occur inland except as storm-driven waifs." That's the kind of language they inspire. There's a lovely poem by Richard Murphy, called "Storm Petrel," that begins:

*Gypsy of the sea,
in winter wambling over scurvy whaleroads
jooking in the wake of ships . . .*

At only six inches long, dark brown with a white rump, somewhat like a house martin, you'd think them too small to jook anywhere at all, never mind in storms, but they manage fine, and come ashore only to breed, in crannies between stones, on

islands and cliffs at the ocean's edge.

So the bird is small and the ring on its leg even smaller. Back at the shelter we had to peer at it down the wrong end of binoculars to make out the number and that terse, famous address: "British Museum London S7."

THE RINGS ON OTHER BIRDS, bigger birds, gulls and such-like, often have space for the word *inform*. "Inform British Museum," they say, which makes it sound as though the bird in question had transgressed somehow, had jumped parole. The *inform* makes the bird-ringing project sound imperious and Edwardian, which it was—Edwardian, anyway, because bird ringing began in 1909. But the storm petrel's leg is so twig thin, there is no room for an *inform*.

A few days after we got home, I did contact the British Museum through its website. There is a form with boxes to fill in:

Ring number: 2333551

Type of bird (if known): Storm petrel.

Sex of bird (if known): Unknown.

Age of bird (if known): Unknown.

Was the bird dead or alive? Dead. *Recently (one week)?* Long dead. Desiccated corpse.

What had happened to the bird (hit by a car, oiled, etc.)? Possibly preyed upon.



Where found? Scotland. Island of North Rona.

Where, more precisely? The north-pointing peninsula called Fianuis.

When found? Early July.

I pressed “submit,” and the form went off on its own mysterious flight, leaving me with the questions not asked:

Smell of bird? Mysterious, musky, like an unguent.

Where found, even more precisely? Under an earthfast rock, on a patch of gravel, almost at the point where the vegetation expires altogether, and the waves pound ashore.

What kind of day? A lively, companionable summer’s afternoon, with a sun bright enough to glint on a tiny metal bead and make us notice it, the only man-made object in all that place.

IT WAS THE TWENTIETH CENTURY before it was ascertained that birds do actually migrate; it seemed so improbable that swallows, for example, flew all the way to southern Africa. They obviously vanished in autumn and reappeared in late spring, but some folks thought they just hid, or hibernated in the bottoms of ponds. Gilbert White frets around the subject of migration; he hedges his bets. When he was writing this letter of 1769, all options were open:

When I used to rise in a morning last autumn, and see the swallows and martins clustering on the chimnies and thatch

of the neighbouring cottages, I could not help being touched with a secret delight, mixed with some degree of mortification: with delight, to observe with how much ardour and punctuality those poor little birds obeyed the strong impulse towards migration, or hiding, imprinted on their minds by their great Creator; and with some degree of mortification, when I reflected that, after all our pains and enquiries, we are yet not quite certain to what regions they do migrate; and are still farther embarrassed to find some do not actually migrate at all.

Hybernaculum is his word for the winter quarters a swallow repairs to, but where was this hybernaculum? His other words are interesting too. *Embarrassed* and *mortification* almost suggest that the Enlightenment just then dawning, all that science and discovery, might have been driven not by the will to master and possess nature but out of chagrin. As human beings, our ignorance was beginning to shame us, because we didn’t know the least things, like where swallows went in winter.

THE BRITISH MUSEUM passes the forms on to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), which organizes bird ringing in the UK. So in due course a computer printout arrived from the BTO. It informed me that the storm petrel had been ringed twenty-four years previously, not on Rona, where we’d found it,

Watching Cranes, I Think of Camus

Tonight, our spoonful of uplift
is red-crowned cranes, wings up,
legs down, floating into the DMZ
on the feel-good spot of the news.

*It's almost a sanctuary, the reporter says,
this open, empty land that runs along
the 38th parallel between North
and South Korea for 160 miles. It's true,*

the cranes have found refuge here,
the land, people-less, littered with mines
and surrounded by troops, left behind
to the birds for the time being.

It's almost comical how the news report
thinks it needs to shuffle between
an opportunistic nature rushing in
to fill an emptiness, and the vague sense

of some power larger than us
fixing once again what we've broken.
I'm no better. I'm dragging up Camus,
who wondered how we could ever be

miserable, so much beauty in the world,
but, also, how we could ever be happy,
so much shit in the world. Yes, Camus
is there, uninvited, in the final montage—

a new day, the morning sun oranging
the snow-dusted marsh, the camera closing in
on a pair of cranes, their necks dipping,
rising, one head bowing to the other until

the pair lift into air as if they are levitating,
then fall, their wings opened like parachutes
as they touch down ever so lightly on the earth
where all that poised firepower waits.

—Robert Cording

but 170 miles northeast of there, on the island of Yell.

Yell—I knew that place. It's one of the northernmost of the Shetland Islands. Only the summer before, I'd been there with my friend Tim; we'd seen killer whales off the cliffs at Noss, and made a road trip north via the chain of ferries, passing farms and small towns and the oil terminal at Sullom Voe. We'd traversed Yell, then taken another ferry to the farther island of Unst and made our way to see the gannetry at Muckle Flugga. That was all one place, stored in one corner in my mind, but Rona was wholly different. Different direction, different culture: uninhabited, remote, and Hebridean. As soon as I read the letter, though, a connection shot between them. Suddenly they were linked by a flight path, straight as an arrow. I knew maps, but not as the storm petrel does.

Perhaps if you were some sort of purist, if you carried a torch for “the wild” and believed in a pristine natural world over and beyond us, you might consider it an intrusion to catch a bird and make it wear a ring or a tag. Perhaps you'd consider that their man-made burden violates them in a way. I admit there was something uncomfortable about the metal ring soldiering on while the bird's corpse withered, but when I got the chart out, traced the route, measured the distance, and understood that yes, of course, on a southwest bearing, you could swoop along certain channels from the North Sea through to the Atlantic, it was because this one ringed bird had extended my imagination. The ring showed only that it was wedded to the sea, and, if anything, the scale of its journeying made it seem even wilder than before.

IT WAS RINGING that proved that swallows indeed flew south and did not stupefy in the bottom of ponds, and ringing too that showed that storm petrels do the same. They migrate from Shetland or Rona, or their many other breeding places, down to the vast pelagic hybernaculum off Namibia and South Africa. A few come to grief; become small, washed-up bodies on a faraway shore, some bearing a return address. An address! Ludicrous thing for a storm petrel to carry. “The Ocean” would be their address, save for those weeks when they're obliged to creep between stones to breed.

So that's why I keep the bird's remains here in this room, my own hybernaculum—if only for a while. It's just a tuft of feathers in a polyethylene bag, a tiny skull, and that silvery ring above its shrunken, black, webbed foot. I keep it for the intimacy, and for the petrel smell: fusty, musky, suggestive of a distant island in summer. And I keep it out of sheer respect, because in life, this ounce of a bird made twenty-four return trips the length of the Atlantic. Twenty-four at least—which is not bad at all, for a waif, wambling. 🐾

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