

The vanished namesake

by Meret Barlang

Have you ever heard about the "penguin of the northern hemisphere"? Great Auks (*Pinguinus impennis*), as the name suggests, looked very similar to today's penguins, although there is no closer relationship between the birds. The shared name dates back to the first European navigators who encountered elongated, black-and-white waterfowl in the southern hemisphere and simply referred to them as penguins. The word penguin can be traced back to the Welsh word "pen gwyn"(for "white head"), a word used exclusively for the Great Auks before European expansion. The life of penguins in the southern hemisphere is well researched, the frack-bearing birds are universally loved, and there are numerous conservation programs to protect endangered species. But what do we know about the Great Auk?



The Great Auks at Home, oil on canvas by John Gerrard Keulemans (wikimedia.org)

The excellent swimmers spent most of their lives in the Atlantic Ocean, hunting fish and crustaceans. On land, the Great Auks could only walk very slowly and awkwardly, as their legs and feet were adapted to life in the water. Their wings were very small and paddle-like and served as propulsion underwater- flying was impossible. During the breeding season, however, the animals were forced to go ashore. They settled on isolated rocky islands, where breeding took place in large colonies. Only one egg was laid at a time, which was very large and pointy.

Hunted and worshipped by Natives and indigenous people more or less continuously since the Stone Age, the Giant Auks can't persist the hunger of the Europeans from the mid-15th century. The tactic "sail - discover - exploit without restraint" also came into play on the rocky coasts of the North Atlantic. How convenient! You just had to pick the ponderous birds off the rocks and then you could use them wonderfully: as fishing bait, as provisions, as a source of oil, as filling material for the warmest pillows and blankets. As if that wasn't enough, collecting eggs - preferably interesting rarities - was all the rage at the time.

And what would be rarer than one of the beautiful, marbled eggs from the far north? Wouldn't they look fantastic in your own collection? It suggested itself to lie in wait in the breeding season and grab some of the eggs. How wonderful for the egg collectors' wallets that the lame giant birds even laid a second egg after the first disappeared in their bag. The few breeding colonies that existed were rapidly decimated within a few years, slowly live got hard for the Great Auk.



Great Auk specimen in Biodiv Museum Gö

The laws to protect the birds, which had existed since 1553, can only be described as half-hearted. Was it the lack of knowledge about the ecology of the animals? Or was the interest in an seeming mass resource too great? Perhaps the desire to have one's very own specimen in the collection was too big. The disappearance of the last breeding colony on the coasts of Iceland, discovered in 1835, is well documented. Within 9 years, the approximately 50 surviving birds and their nests were completely wiped out. Bizarrely, not to eat them or boil their oil, no. The last of their kind were captured for the museums and zoological collections, which all still wanted a piece of that pie. At that time, Great Auks had a greater value stuffed and dead, than alive. The last living Great Auk was sighted off Newfoundland in 1852. What remains is a sense of loss and shame that our European ancestors did not act differently. Despite everything, the "penguin of the northern hemisphere" is not forgotten. Its unprecedentedly rapid extinction can serve as a reminder to do better.

References

Figures:

Left: The Great Auks at Home, oil on canvas by John Gerrard Keulemans
URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_auk#/media/File:Pinguinus.jpg
Visited on 25.02.2022 at 17:02

Right: Specimen of the Great Auk of the Biodiversity Museum in Göttingen.

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