

BIRDS OF THE PAST

BY GEOFF HOGAN

PART TWO: WATER BIRDS

As Jacques Cartier travelled through the Gulf of St. Lawrence he likely encountered two unusual species of aquatic birds, the Great Auk and the Labrador Duck. The Great Auk, a large flightless relative of puffins and murres, and the Labrador Duck, a stocky seaduck with a bill adapted for specialized feeding, are now both extinct. No records exist to confirm their presence on PEI, although both travelled widely throughout our region. They became extinct relatively early when few people, if any, were keeping bird records on the Island. Indeed, many people were concerned primarily with their own survival.

The Great Auk resembled a penguin and dove for fish in the same manner. Although they were abundant in the early years, their nesting colonies were restricted to a few rocky islands of Newfoundland and further north. Superb swimmers, it is conceivable that some made their way to our shores, as puffins and murres occasionally do today. Bones of the Great Auk have been found on the Magdalen Islands and Cape Breton. Unfortunately, their flightlessness and colonial nesting habit made them highly vulnerable at their breeding colonies and they were exploited relentlessly for food and fish bait by passing ships and fishermen. In time, the unregulated killing wiped them out forever. The last known pair were killed on a small island off Iceland in 1844.

The Labrador Duck is a species about which relatively little was ever known. Never an abundant bird, its breeding grounds were believed to be in Labrador although it travelled as far as New England in winter. At times, it showed a preference for sandy, coastal shoals and PEI may have provided attractive habitat, but we have no evidence from that period to confirm its occurrence here. The birds were sometimes shot for markets in the cities although widespread "egging" (the practice of taking wild birds' eggs for market) is thought to have been the cause for its eventual extinction in 1878.

ON THE EDGE OF EXTINCTION

The rarest bird that could possibly be seen on PEI today was perhaps one of our most abundant. The Eskimo Curlew is one of the rarest birds in the world yet according to MacSwain (1908), it was the common curlew of the Island. The Eskimo Curlew is a small shorebird with a long downward curved bill, similar to the larger and still common Whimbrel or Hudsonian Curlew. Each year, in late summer, Eskimo Curlews migrated by the millions to the east coast from across the Arctic. Here they stayed for several weeks fattening on berries growing along the coast. The stored energy was vital in order to complete the arduous flight across the ocean to South America where they would spend the winter. The non-stop flight took 2 to 3 days. In spring, they returned to the Arctic breeding grounds



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