

## THE DISCOVERY OF PINK-FOOTED GESE NESTING IN ICELAND, 1929

Extracts from the Diary of S. W. P. Freme

*The late S. W. P. Freme, in company with W. M. Congreve (C. in the narrative), made the first discovery that the interior geese (heiðagæs) of Iceland were Pink-footed and not White-fronted as had previously been believed. In view of the importance of this discovery to our subsequent knowledge of the Pinkfoot, we feel that the details of the journey are of especial interest. We are indebted to Mr J. R. Charnley for permission to use these extracts (hitherto unpublished). The two ornithologists were staying at Skútustaðir, at the south end of Myvatn at the beginning of June 1929.—Ed.*

1 June.—A message has arrived from a farmer on the edge of the desert to say that White-fronted Geese are breeding within a day's journey of him. It would be a great thing to prove that these geese really breed in Iceland. Eggs have been exported from here to England, but as yet no reliable ornithologist has given them his 'cachet.' It will be hard work I expect. We have talked it over, and we propose to ride for them on Monday. This will enable us to make Viðerkeri the same day, and we can push on to the breeding place on Tuesday. C. intends to obtain clutches of eggs for proof, which I shall clinch by shooting and skinning a bird. Almost excited tonight! Meanwhile we are pleased with Páll. He has done good staff work and will get 'backshish' for this if it does not turn out a mare's nest! I have a shocking cold tonight. I suppose it was the east wind catching us after we swam back from the Diver's nest. It might have left me alone till the big ride was finished. I expect I shall have a rotten time.

Monday 3rd.—Feeling rotten. Our ponies are supposed to be here by 9, but as time is of no account to these folk, I think we'll not get away before 10.

Páll, Congreve and I rode out at 10.20, taking the usual fish and egg ration in a cardboard box, and travelling light as regards luggage. Three or four miles down the track to Husavik we turned southward and rode over sparse scrub till we came to Lake Sandvatn on which was a small herd of Whooper Swans. We rode on turning almost due south till at 1.10 we halted for lunch. Afterwards, we pushed on, slowly because of the bad going, and continued over the same monotonous kind of country till almost due west of Sellandars Fjall. The day was quite warm. We saw very few birds but got a fine view



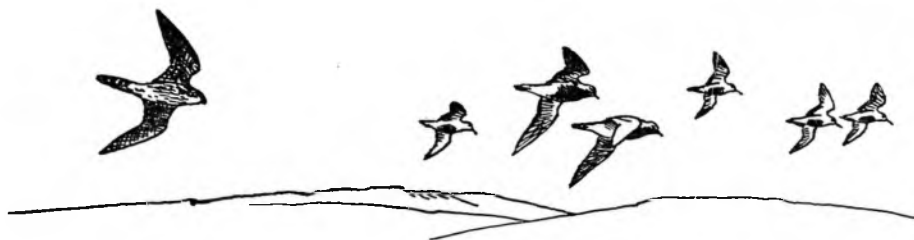
at close quarters of a grand falcon which had just dived on a male Rjupa. These unfortunate Ptarmigan get a rotten time. We counted at least 15 corpses or remains on this ride, all apparently of male birds. The ponies were marvellous, making the most of the ground that no horse could have gone over without mishap. My beast, Dina, a piebald lady of 13 years is wonderful, and the way she crosses bogs and streams would have to be seen to be believed. After  $5\frac{1}{2}$  hours riding we made Viðerkeri, a large but poorly-built farm pretty far from civilisation. It stands, indeed, almost on the edge of the desert, though there are, I believe, one or two hovels even nearer to that abomination of desolation. We were met in great style by Tryggvi Guðmundsson, our host and guide for the time, a fine wiry old savage who combines the manners of a duke with the appearance of a pre-Renaissance freebooter, who stabled our ponies and showed us our quarters. We have a ramshackle bedroom with one window—broken, and in the dining room is a long bench which does duty as a table. For seats are wooden forms, and there are two chairs chipped from the lava rock and padded with sheepskins. I cannot imagine how this man and his family live out here in the 'blue' like this without going dotty. It would suit me for a little while but . . . !

All the track of our ride today has been through a country devoid of life, and it was a surprise to find a farm tucked away in this weird undulating tundra that seems to sweat with an unwholesome damp from the snow that has left marshes where a day or two ago it lay deep. As far as we can make out we should be about 30 miles from the alleged breeding-ground of the White-fronted Geese. Tryggvi showed us eggs which he claims came from there two years ago. There were two clutches. One was certainly of a goose of some sort, but we think the other most likely was laid by a saw-bill duck—Goosander or Red-breasted Merganser. Today I have not suffered much from our 28 miles or so of ride, but my cold is frightful and I am running a temperature which does not, however, prevent me from being rather hungry. Tryggvi has rather put the wind up me by telling us that the ride to the breeding-ground and back will take 16 hours ! If this be really the case I'm likely to be a wreck tomorrow !

We have arranged to start off at 4 a.m. and are going to turn in very early. After coffee, taken *en famille*, we went a short distance with the farmer's little boys, and they took us to where they had found a Golden Plover's nest. The bird was sitting tight and allowed us to approach within a few feet before she left the nest with the silent twisting flight that always makes me think of a

woodcock flushed in the open. The eggs were four—the usual normal clutch. The depression that did duty for a nest was lined with a few dried leaves of the Arctic willow and twigs of the same, and some of the birds' own feathers.

We then walked over high tundra ground and saw a good many birds. Whimbrel and Snipe were in plenty, but I noticed that the Dunlin and Golden Plover were mainly in flocks. This may be the result of the recent cold weather, but it may herald the approach of more wintry conditions. An Arctic Skua of the melanistic form, to which the term 'Richardson's Skua' originally applied, was looking for eggs ahead of us, but apparently without success. I watched a mixed flock of Golden Plover and Dunlin flying from a Merlin, but could not see which fell a victim as they joined too far ahead of us.



Came in for dinner, also *en famille*. Despite a feverish feeling which impelled me to take 30 gr. quinine, I ate some mutton and the usual skyr ; were present Tryggvi and his wife, four sons, a daughter and a visitor, besides C., Páll and I. Between us we ate nearly a whole sheep. There were actually potatoes and lashings of dried fish (char), dried cod and a mutton ham which was excellent though imperfectly cured. I gave them all Turkish cigarettes which excited them very much, and had quite a conversation with them through Páll. Tryggvi, though very rough, is a stout fellow. He is thoroughly cheery and looks as hard as nails. Left him deep in the Heðinskrugla Saga at about 9 p.m. and after going out to have a look at the weather, turned in. It has gone very cold, and a big woolly cloud that has come up in the distance looks very like an impending snowstorm. If we're going to have bum weather tomorrow in addition to my other troubles I shall most probably do a graceful collapse on the way.

4 June.—We had the world's worst night ! The family made a hell of a row singing and dancing until well after midnight. The farm cat, a large and dirty specimen put the tin hat on everything by jumping through the broken window and landing on my chest. My very natural outburst and the protests of the startled cat woke C. who promptly started a slanging match. I felt about ready for this, so in Shakespeare's words we 'cursed away a summer's night.' I had been asleep about an hour and a half when Tryggvi came clattering downstairs and Páll beat on our door with a loud bellow of 'Hel vatú.' I turned out feeling like a warmed-up corpse and found that I was shivering all over and decidedly groggy. We got hot coffee and porridge—Allah be praised!—about 3.50, and at 4.40 our little expedition rode out. I was mounted on my beloved Dina, and C. on Brunka who also came from Skútustaðir. Páll had the other pony and Tryggvi rode his own, leading the pack pony as well. Two spare ponies accompanied us, being driven in front. The pack pony had a lucky day, as she was carrying less than 60 lbs. load, instead of the 120 she is generally considered capable of dealing with.

It was an exceedingly cold morning, with every indication of snow to come. We rode at first along a fairly clear track over rolling tundra, so smoothly that we made a good eight miles an hour, and after about an hour and a half found that the comparatively flat ground ended abruptly at the shore of Lake Svartavatn, close to which stood what must in this district be the last outpost of humanity. On this water we saw a good herd of 45 or more Whooper Swans, presumably on passage as they showed no signs of pairing but swam and fed together, trumpeting occasionally. On a previous pool close to Viðerkeri, we had seen few birds, all ducks, and I think none but Scaup, Mallard and Longtails. After passing Svartavatn we had to dismount and walk our ponies over the tundra as there was no track but merely appalling humps of ground about a yard apart over which riding was impossible, and after a little while entered an enormous lava field of many miles extent, which was dangerous going and had to be taken dead slow. On emerging from this, which took an hour or more, though we only rode through a segment of it, we dismounted, having crossed a river, to water the ponies and rest them. Dina was foundering being the eldest out, though I think she puts it on a good deal knowing that I am gentle with her. After 10 minutes 'stand easy' we pushed off again and for some time our way took us across a barren plain of black sand which with its flanking sides of stones, lava and dusty ashes made a picture of appalling desolation, more depressing than anything I have ever seen. I was still feeling pretty done, and the doses of quinine which I took every half hour had rendered me perfectly deaf.

After leaving the black sand country we crossed another of the hideous lava fields and saw far in front of us a plain of green grass like the estuary of a tidal river. Crossing ridges of sand and stones we rode into the approach to the gorge of the Krossár, a wide expanse of stunted grass intersected by soft ditches flanked by the swelling stony hills that further on roughened into grim precipices. Since entering the desert region we had set eyes on no living thing at all excepting a solitary ringed plover, which is said to be the only bird that breeds in the desert. In the hurry of starting and in my present state of health I had been too preoccupied to think of equipment, so that I now found that I had been idiotic enough to forget my field glasses. I soon came to regret it, for from a stony ridge on our left flank a grey goose rose and flew down our back track. I could have sworn that it was a Pink-footed Goose—the very apex of our hopes. I borrowed C.'s glasses and got down to investigate, and felt that it was unquestionably a Pinkfoot, a bird with which by reason of long waits on the Dee marshes I am only too well acquainted. A little doubt now arose as to whether there could possibly be Whitefronts and Pinkfeet together. We had now no doubt that there must be Pinkfeet here, and thought it probable that the natives had been mistaken all along. A little later the halt was called again and C. and I changed ponies each mounting one of the spare ones. I got a snorter whom there was no holding, and involuntarily led the field for the next half-hour, which was all that was required to get us to the entrance to the gorge. We saw several geese, all evidently Pinkfeet, on the way. On entering the gorge and riding as far as rocky debris would permit, we dismounted and paused to look for awhile at the snaky necks that craned down at us from the tops of the steep bluffs. Congreve then mounted the cliff on our left and I walked back until I stood beneath a tall buttress on which a goose, obviously on the nest, was sitting. A little later I heard C.'s whistle indicating that he had flushed the bird. It came over me beautifully and I got it nicely. Long

before I even fired I knew it to be a Pinkfoot. She had been sitting on only one egg. Nearby the nest was evidence that ravens had devoured other eggs. I mounted the cliff and we found that several other nests had been similarly plundered within a very short distance. Ravens have evidently made a hunting ground of this. We soon found another nest, the female sitting tight with the gander beside her. I crawled within five yards of them and tried to take a photograph, but failed owing to the shutter of my camera jamming. The female lay right on her side and tried to hide, but when my presence became known to them they rose together and made off. There were five eggs and plenty of down, of which I took photographs. We moved on to where Páll and Tryggvi were waiting, and then C. went back to take the five eggs and try to get a photo of the birds. I found another nest of four, and this C. also took when he returned, having got a photograph of the geese at rather too great a distance. We sat down to have lunch after we had spent a little time in observing the many geese which were flying round, and decided that they were all undoubtedly Pink-footed.

So far we had seen no birds in the gorge but geese, but now as we sat eating the Barrow's Goldeneye eggs we had brought with us from Vioerkeri we saw, a little further up the gorge and on the same level as ourselves, the finest falcon I have ever seen. It was a very old Iclander and at 100 yards distance looked to be quite white. Though of quite different shape it was distinctly larger than a Buzzard, and of very sturdy build. Intending to procure it I made a stalk and soon got within 30 yards. The falcon had a very small bird—a pipit—held in one great yellow foot, and was lowering its blunt head to pluck the atom when it caught sight of me. I coveted it, but hated to think of shooting it, though not usually so soft-hearted, as I thought there might be young to feed. Spreading its very pale grey wings, it sailed round a bend of the gorge, both long thick legs drooping, and the tiny pipit still clenched in one foot. This was the whitest Iceland falcon I have yet seen. After lunch we began to work down towards the river, as Tryggvi saw a goose on the opposite side which he said was White-fronted. I am perfectly sure, however, that it was a Pinkfoot. On



our way down, we found evidence that foxes had destroyed many nests, and also saw a number of eggs that had been destroyed by ravens. Geese rose from crannies and ledges in bad places, and we could see others sitting on their nests, across the stream. All were undoubtedly Pinkfeet. Congreve, Tryggvi and Páll waded the stream, but seeing that they went above their thighboots I did not follow, knowing that I could not afford a wetting in my present condition, especially as the day was so cold and I had no dry things to change into. I worked back along the bottom of the bluff, finding another nest or two and the evidence of many more destroyed. C. and the others found the birds nesting freely on their side of the stream. There the foxes had done less damage, though C. found a decapitated goose. He took two clutches of six and one of seven. Tryggvi took a clutch of five that I had previously seen. On my way back I noticed another Iceland falcon, a greyer bird, fly into a cave where I have no

doubt there was an eyrie. I also watched a brute of a raven egg hunting, and the geese appeared to be afraid of him. The ponies had strayed about a mile, and C. having rejoined me, we ate an egg each while Páll and Tryggvi went in pursuit.

On our journey back, we took a different route up the side of a very steep stony hill. This was such a tough climb that I led my pony, as did the Icelanders. At the top of the climb was a flat plain, and amidst boggy tundra ground we saw a fairly large tarn and on it a pair of Whooper Swans. Páll soon found a nest of four eggs, and C. arranged to have them taken when they had laid up their full clutch. Tryggvi agreed to ride out from Viðerkeri and get the eggs for 12 krónur! The going was bad round the shores of the tarn, as the ponies tested every step for the fear of getting bogged. Frozen snow was falling, driven by a polar wind. We reached the repulsive lava fields eventually, the most hideous formation I have ever met with, and in our fatigued condition it seemed to us that they were interminable. By the time we had got through and led our ponies over the bad ground before coming to Svartavatn Lake, I was nearly asleep in the saddle. I woke up when we got on to the good track over flat tundra, and we hustled our ponies into a gallop that I think soon sweated the fever out of me despite the drive of falling snow. We did the last stage of the journey all out, and arrived at Viðerkeri dead beat. We changed our wet clothes before lowering some scalding coffee and some salt mutton. Begging a couple of cans of warm water we staggered to bed, cold and stiff with our hands bruised and cut by the lava rock and with every muscle aching. I felt very weak, but conscious of the fact that I no longer had any fever about me. To know that we had settled an ornithological fact long doubted and disputed was well worth the aching bones we had earned. Personally I felt as though I had been kicked in the pants by an outsize in horses. It had been said that a raid on any of the reputed colonies of geese in Iceland was possible only to a native. That compensates me for my hard day, and C. is consoled by the authenticated clutches he has got for his collection. . . .

5 June.—Woke feeling all old and feeble. C. has my cold, for which I am sorry. We are exceedingly stiff but frightfully elated. Even the thought of the 25 miles we have to do today doesn't seem to matter.

To my disappointment I found that the goose was irreparably knocked about by the bumping it had received on the journey. I skinned the neck and head, which are sufficiently distinctive for proof, and gave the carcass to Tryggvi, who will eat it. C. was blowing eggs all the forenoon, whilst I was doing the goose helped by Tryggvi's little boys who are simply splendid kids. Arranged to start back at 2 p.m. Paid Tryggvi 70 krónur for board and services and dashed him 10 extra. Gave Sverrir, the youngest boy who seems to have attached himself to me, my small knife which seemed to have taken his fancy. Then we had to sign our names in Tryggvi's visitors' book and also in Sverrir's Birthday Book. We rode out about 2.10, after various and repeated farewells from the family. Our luck was out as regards weather, for all the slow way home we shivered through a bitter snow blizzard. On Sandvatn we saw a fine old Northern Diver at close quarters, a noble looking bird beautifully marked. We got to Skútustaðir after 4 hrs. 20 mins. riding, having made the ponies hurry over such small tracts of level ground as we covered. C.'s cold is very bad, but mine seems to be working out. This climate takes some beating for quick changes. One thing is quite clear, it is very doubtful indeed whether the White-fronted goose does breed in Iceland. They are said to have bred

on the Jökulsá River for many years, but the Icelanders are too inaccurate as ornithologists for this to be accepted. It is perfectly obvious (a) that these people confuse *all* Grey Geese with each other under the local name of *Gragaes*; (b) they do not know that *Anser brachyrhynchus* (Pinkfoot) is a different bird from *Anser anser* (Greylag); (c) it seems certain that those who do know the Latin names of the geese and who do know that the above two species are distinct, apply the name *Anser albifrons* (Whitefront) to the Pinkfoot simply because *albifrons* has long been supposed to nest in Iceland, whereas the Pinkfoot has not! Evidence is plentiful that *albifrons* does breed on Jökulsá, but it must be remembered that as we have just exploded one fallacy as to the breeding of this bird on the Krossá, it is more than possible that the other reputed breeding place of the Whitefront may turn out to be no less than a wrongly identified colony of Pinkfeet. Pending a trip to the Jökulsá, which is too far for us to arrange so late in the season, I shall try to collect evidence on the subject.

Certainly the circumstances should be investigated as our report of the Pinkfeet at Krossárgil will certainly discredit the statements of Icelandic ornithologists that the birds breeding at Grafarlönd are really Whitefronts. C. and I are inclined to the belief that the Whitefront does not, and never has bred in Iceland at all.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A conclusion which has now been shown to be almost certainly correct.

