

## Gannet Catching in the Hebrides

*By John MacInnes*

Wild-fowling, which in this context means the killing of seabirds for food, and the use of feathers and other products as trading commodities, is well known from the numerous descriptions of the island group of St Kilda, some fifty miles west of the Outer Hebrides. What is perhaps not so widely known is the part played by wild-fowling in other island communities round the Scottish coast. The social and economic importance of hunting seabirds may not have been as great everywhere as it was in St Kilda; nevertheless, the birds must have represented at least a valuable source of food.

With one exception, which forms the subject of this note, wild-fowling is now a thing of the past, and the evidence for its existence lies mainly in Gaelic oral tradition. Sometimes this amounts to little more than a few casual memories preserved by the descendants of those who actually took part in the activity. Some of the islands whose inhabitants are said to have engaged in fowling are now deserted: Mingulay, for example, in the south of the Outer Hebrides, or North Rona, northeast of the Butt of Lewis, the most northerly point of the Outer Hebrides. Rona indeed has not supported a viable community for over two hundred years. In other places, wild-fowling as an organised activity had ceased to exist a number of generations ago.

In these circumstances, we are unlikely now to recover sufficient information to present a detailed picture of the techniques or the social organisation involved in fowling. This

is not true, of course, of St Kilda, for which an extensive literature exists. Moreover, accounts of wild-fowling in this literature can be checked against the reminiscences of surviving St Kildans who have first-hand knowledge of the occupation. Literary references to wild-fowling in other communities, however, are disappointingly meagre, and oral tradition must be our main source of information.

Viewed against this background, the one organised wild-fowl hunt that still survives in a Gaelic speaking community takes on an increased significance. This is the annual gannet hunt on the rock of Sùlaisgeir, about fifty miles north of the Butt of Lewis, which is planned and carried out by natives of the parish of Ness, in the north of the island of Lewis. The venture has now a commercial dimension in that a certain proportion of the catch is sold. In former days, in a subsistence economy, the social organisation involved, the rules of sharing the catch, and so on, would no doubt have been governed by different principles. Hence we should not accept a description of the contemporary hunt as completely typical either of this particular kind of wild-fowling or even more so of wild-fowling in general in Gaelic communities. A full account of this, showing both general and particular features, will be published when all the available information has been collected and analysed. The present note is designed to draw attention to an aspect of social and economic life which is seen both in Faroese and Gaelic communities. It is especially appropriate to do so in honouring a scholar who has himself pioneered the discovery of certain Gaelic — Faroese contacts. The note is based upon personal fieldwork and first-hand information, but I am also greatly obliged to my friend Mr. Michael Robson, who has confirmed or supplemented my own findings.

Sùlaisgeir, normally written Sula Sgeir on English maps, is, as its name implies (<O.N. *Súlusker* or *Súlnasker*) one of the breeding grounds of the gannet, and from time immemorial, according to tradition, the men of Ness have each autumn sailed to Sùlaisgeir to kill and bring back the young birds.

Sùlaisgeir, which lies north-east and south-west, is about half a mile long by thirty or forty yards at the narrowest part, where the landing-place is situated. The western end forms a steep, rocky bluff, fairly level at the top. The skerry slopes downward in the centre, and rises again into a rounded mass of rock at the eastern end. The whole of the western end is surrounded by steep cliffs, with the upper surface covered with huge blocks and slabs of stone.

Towards the end of August the fowlers prepare to set out. By that time the young gannets are in prime condition, well feathered but — except for those birds that were hatched early in the breeding season — still unable to fly. Up until about twenty years ago, the journey to Sùlaisgeir was undertaken in sailing boats: these were open boats, usually with a twenty-foot keel or thirty feet overall. Two boats, each with a complement of eight men, normally left Ness. Current practice, however, is to hire one motor-boat from the local fishing fleet to carry all the fowlers and their supplies and fowling gear. Meal, salt, potatoes, biscuits, and tea are basic items; to these may be added whatever is regarded as desirable for variety of diet. In the past, it is said, the fowlers lived to a great extent off fresh gannet meat, but this is no longer the case. A supply of salt is carried for salting the birds. Water has also to be transported, for there is no spring on Sùlaisgeir, but only a seepage well of brackish water which is used for washing. In addition, rain-water is collected in sails.

The boat normally sets out very late in the evening — variations depending, naturally, on weather and tide. The men aim at arriving at the skerry early in the morning in order to have the maximum time in which to unload the supplies and fowling gear. This is by no means a simple task as there is no proper landing stage on the skerry and everything has to be manhandled by a human chain up the steep face of the rock. Here again the current practice varies somewhat from what obtained in the past.

In the days of sail not only supplies but the boats themselves



were hauled up on to the rock and secured there until the fowlers were ready to return home. This was done in the following manner.

An hour before high water, the boat was moored to a ring which had been fixed — at some indeterminate date in the past — in the rock. Four men then proceeded to lift the bows out of the water until the boat was balanced on the edge of the landing rock. This operation was controlled by the rope which ran through the iron ring. The stern was now lifted out and the boat hauled and propped up in a gully, which it practically filled, and moored to a large boulder. When, as normally happened, two boats were used, one was man-handled up nearer the top of the rock. The boat in the gully, being nearer the sea, could be damaged by heavy waves if a sudden storm should blow up. To ensure that the timbers suffered no harm, a wad of peat which was transported for that purpose, was packed between the boat and the sides of the gully.

Nowadays, the fishing boat remains at anchor off the skerry while men and gear are transported ashore by dinghy. Only this dinghy is hauled up on the rock. After all gear and supplies have been safely conveyed to the top of the skerry — a process which may take five or six hours even in favourable conditions — the fishing-boat sails away and will not call at Sùlaisgeir again until the fowlers have completed their work.

In the comparatively level area above the landing point are the houses in which the fowlers will eat and sleep. Four of these are presently in a habitable condition; the ruins of at least two others are visible. They are all built entirely of stone, with the same corbelled, »beehive« construction. The base is very roughly circular; from this, successive rounds of overlapping stone are built up, gradually becoming narrower, until the tapered top is closed. The present huts have all been built within the past seventy or eighty years. The art of building these beehive stone huts is still known to the Nessmen, and, should any of the houses on Sùlaisgeir have been damaged by

storms throughout the previous year, the necessary repairs are immediately carried out. The walls are made as draught-proof as possible by being stuffed with cloth, sacking, or whatever material comes to hand. For the first few nights the fowlers are generally troubled by the presence of great numbers of earwigs, and sleep with scarves round their heads.

Each hut is about four or five feet high, with an approximate floor space of forty square feet. The low doorway, through which a man can only crawl, is partially protected from wind by a projecting wall which serves as a primitive porch. More or less opposite the doorway is a stone bench for sleeping on; on either side of the doorway there are stone benches called respectively *am bodach* and *a' chailleach* — »the old man« and »the old woman«. The fireplace, which is really no more than a crude hearth, is set in the centre of the floor, as in the old thatched dwelling-houses that were found throughout the Highlands and Islands, the smoke being allowed to fill the house and make its way out through the top of the building. In the past, a fire of burning peat was transported to Sùlaisgeir in the bottom of the sailing boat. When the fowlers left the skerry a very large fire, completely banked with peat, was left alight in one of the huts. It was reckoned that this slow-burning peat would remain alight for the best part of a week, the purpose being to ensure that, if any emergency occurred on the homeward journey which made it necessary to turn back, the fowlers would have warmth and cooking facilities. There is, in fact, no record in oral tradition of this having ever happened.

Traditionally one hut was occupied by a boat's crew; the modern practice, however, is to use three huts: one for sleeping, one for cooking and general daytime use, and one for stores. Cylinders of gas are nowadays included among the gear and cooking is done on gas rings.

There is one building on the skerry which has never, so far as is known, been used by the fowlers. This is an ancient chapel, known in Gaelic as *Teampull Shùlaisgeir* — »the

Temple of Sùlaisgeir«. It is slightly different in construction from the fowlers' huts, mainly in having two doorways and a horizontal slab of stone in the roof.

The gannetry, which occupies both the easily accessible ridge and the ledges of the cliff face, lies about three hundred yards from the huts, in the southern section of the rock. The fowlers seem to refer to the gannets generally as »the birds« — *na h-èoin*. This apparent avoidance of the ordinary Gaelic name *sùlaire* may be based on a tabu (cf. W. B. Lockwood *Noa Terms of the Gaelic Fishermen* in *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, Vol. XI p. 85 ff.) but curiously enough it does not apply to the name of the young gannet — *guga* — which is freely used. It is quite possible, of course, that the use of *na h-èoin* merely indicates the importance of the gannets as the object of the entire operation. On the other hand, if *guga* is an onomatopoeic word — it is generally connected with Gaelic *gugail*, »clucking, cackling« — it may itself be based upon a tabu.

Before the fishing boat leaves Sùlaisgeir, a number of young gannets are caught and killed. These are taken away by the crew and by any local men who have gone out with the fowlers to help to land supplies but who do not stay on the rock. Such birds will be eaten fresh. It is only after all the supplies have been made secure, however, that systematic killing begins.

The birds are killed by a sharp blow on the head with a wooden club. They are then decapitated to let the blood run. If this is not done immediately the flesh becomes tainted and the bird is regarded as unsuitable for eating. The young gannets on the ridge of the skerry are easily caught, but those on the ledges of the cliff face can only be reached by a roped descent.

The ledges are worked by two men, a pair to each ledge. The fowler who catches the gannets is roped round the middle. Besides being responsible for his companion's safety, the man at the top of the cliff takes the birds as they are passed up. The gannets on the ledges are caught with a wooden pole, about fifteen feet in length. A recent invention by one of the



wild-fowlers — a kind of tongs fixed at the end of the pole and operated by a spring clip on the handle — has displaced the traditional snare which was flicked over the bird's head. As the catcher makes his way farther down the face of the cliff, he will pass each bird up still held at the end of the pole. Rough woollen socks, worn, latterly at least, over boots were traditionally used for this part of the hunt, but as modern climbing footgear becomes popular these socks may now be obsolete.

From the gannetry, pathways run to the huts, where the processing area lies. In the past the dead gannets were carried in sacks to this area — six birds being regarded as an average load. Another recent invention, however, has made this task considerably easier and quicker. An endless wire conveyor now runs from the huts to the gannetry. A sack, loaded with some twenty dead gannets, is sent down to the processing area on one wire while an empty sack comes back up to the gannetry on the other.

Plucking begins at once. As far as possible, plucking is now done in the open. But one of the existing huts, at present used for living in, is said to have been originally built as a »plucking-house«. After being plucked, the birds are singed over a peat fire, on to which is thrown the oily offal of the processed carcasses. After this first singeing, the carcasses are scrubbed with a brush and are then given a final singe with a blowlamp to clean off any remaining fragments of down. The intestines are next taken out, the wings are removed, and the carcass is split open and salted. The salted carcasses are built up into a stack on a base of stone slabs above the landing area. If necessary, a second stack is made slightly nearer the sea. The fowlers take part in all these tasks by turn.

The entire operation takes about two weeks. The date for the return of the fishing-boat will normally have been agreed upon beforehand, but in recent years there is regular wireless communication between the fowlers and their base in Ness. When sailing-boats were used, the launch of the boat from

its gully on the rock could be a difficult task, particularly in bad weather, and even under favourable conditions demanded considerable care. With the help of ropes and tackle, the boat was gradually eased down until it balanced on the rock at the landing-stage. Two buoys on each quarter prevented the stern from sinking as the boat was lowered stern-first into the sea.

Now the processed carcasses are slid down a canvas chute stretched from the stack of salted birds down to the boat below.

The final stage is the sale of gannets upon the boat's return to Ness. There is an enormous demand for them, for the *guga*, which must at one time have served as one of the indispensable sources of protein, is nowadays regarded more as a delicacy, and carcasses are sent to exiled Ness folk all over the world.

This annual gannet hunt, which is of unknown antiquity, has always been conducted with a sharp awareness of the importance of leaving a sufficient breeding stock. A proportion of young are already on the wing before the fowlers go to Sùlaisgeir; a number are regarded as too young for killing; while others are confined to inaccessible areas of the rock. Although the gannet is protected by a United Kingdom Act of Parliament, the immemorial rights of the Nessmen were recognised by the »Wild Birds (Gannets on Sula Sgeir) Order« of 1955. The care exercised by these Lewis wild-fowlers in ensuring that the catch never exceeds the proper limit is proved by the fact that the number of gannets on Sùlaisgeir continues to increase.

#### ÚRTAK

Súluveiðin, ið fer fram á hvørjum ári á Súluskeri (Sùlaisgeir) norðan fyri Suðuroyggjar ytri (Outer Hebrides), er tað einasta, ið eftir er av skipaðari fuglaveiði á skotsk-gæliskum lendi. Fuglamenninir eru einar fjúrtan dagar úti á Súluskeri og halda til í smáum kúputum gróthúsum. Grásúlan verður tikin á rókunum og saltað á staðnum. Veiðin verður færd við báti inn aftur til Lewis, har ið hon verður býtt og avlopið selt. Hesin veiðiháttur er eldri enn menn vita um at siga. Rættindini hjá veiðimennunum eru tryggjað av tingi Bretlands (U. K. Parliament).