

T.H. NELSON
J.P, M.Sc., M.B.O.U.
1856-1916

Thomas Hudson Nelson was born in Bishop Auckland on the 12th. February 1856, the son of a local magistrate. His mother died when he was just 10 years old.

In his early years he was greatly influenced by the Headmaster of King James Grammar School - the French Marquis de Keruen de Limoclan, who had been compelled to flee from France during the war of 1870. Nelson became head boy of the school and later took up Law as a profession. Before he could progress far, heart trouble ended his chosen career.

On doctors orders he moved out of Bishop Auckland to Redcar where he was able to focus all his energies on the study of nature, in particular, the observation of the birds of the surrounding coast and estuary.

Nelson was a man who made friends easily. Local fishermen and boys came to his door with anything new or strange they had found. An old fisherman told how in his early days at Redcar, Nelson always slept with a string tied to his foot, the other end hanging out of the window so that at dawn fishermen could wake him when there was 'anything particular' about in the shore, at the Scars or out at sea.

Nelson's greatest contribution to ornithology (the study of birds) were his two volumes of 'The Birds of Yorkshire', which were published in 1907 and described at the time as

*“written by an ornithologist full of local
enthusiasm, with an artists' sense and antiquarian
joy in the discovery of any little treasure hidden in
the old world places and dialects”.*

This in particular refers to his passion for recording details of folklore, legends and superstitions about birds.

Nelson also contributed to *The Naturalist*, a journal of the natural history for Northern England, and *The Zoologist*, a national journal, providing regular reports entitled ‘Ornithological Notes From Redcar’. These now provide us with important records against which we can measure today’s’ bird populations.

The following is an extract from his notes of 1886:

“Many Manx Shearwaters, Puffinus anglorum, were in the offing in August and September. On August 3rd. Mr. Emerson shot one about two miles off Redcar; Mr. Pyman obtained another on the 4th; and I shot one on Sept. 22nd. Mussel (the Middlesbrough taxidermist) tells me that my bird is the finest specimen of its kind he has ever preserved.”

Nelson died in Harrogate in 1916 after a long illness, and was laid to rest at Redcar.

THE NELSON COLLECTION

Thomas Hudson Nelson was a well-known and respected ornithologist of his time. The collection of birds you see in this room has been retained in its original setting dating back to the bequest of the collection by his wife in 1918. It is a unique collection containing many birds from the Yorkshire area, including some rare specimens.

This bird and egg collection could never be replaced and so is a highly significant part of the museum’s collections. It should not be seen as promoting the collecting of birds and eggs today, but as an aid to a wider understanding of birds and how our own attitudes to them have changed with time.

There are 171 cases of mounted birds, containing 435 specimens, representing 157 different types of bird species. The rarest specimens are those of the Little Bittern -case 116; Red-crested Pochard – case 134; Rosy Paster (Rose-coloured Starling) –case 117; Rough-legged

Buzzard – case 119; and the Kentish Plover – case 60. The nests on display come from other collections.

Nelson's collection of birds and eggs date mainly from 1870-1900. Many of these birds 'fell to his gun', and those of his friends and acquaintances. Nowadays this seems to be greatly at odds with his love of ornithology. From the 1880's onwards many other ornithologists were pushing for greater protection for birds.

Most of the taxidermy work was carried out by George Mussel of Middlesbrough. The cases and settings were arranged by Nelson and some of his artist friends painted the scenery and backgrounds.

There are 2,700 eggs in the collection, from over 253 types of bird. Of particular note are the seabird eggs, particularly Guillemot and Razorbill, which show an incredible range of colours and surface patterns. They stand as testimony to the men who made a living by collecting eggs from precarious seacliffs along the north-east coast.

In Nelson's time, collecting eggs for food from the towering sea cliff roosts was still common practice. Nelson not only got eggs for his collection from the 'climbers', as they were known locally, but also took part in these cliff-edge forays and paid individuals to collect from specific sites.

Before the advent of the Wildlife & Countryside Act, the right to collect 'sea fowl' eggs belonged to the farmers tenanting the land adjacent to the sea cliff. This right was commonly given up to gangs of 'climbers' who worked specific parts of the coast. A gang usually consisted of only two to four men, one to climb and the others to manage the ropes.

The climbers usually gathered eggs of the Common Guillemot and Razorbill, and so concentrated on the cliffs where these birds bred, notably between Speeton and Flamborough. Puffin eggs were also occasionally taken but were more difficult to find. The men worked the nests so as to gather eggs before they were incubated, and this encouraged the birds to lay more. Nelson reports that the average daily take of eggs by each gang was in the order of 300-400, giving a total for the Speeton -Flamborough section of about 80,000.

In 1834, Guillemot eggs were sold at sixpence (equal to two & a half new pence) per score (20), the price in 1907 was a shilling (5 new pence) for 12 to 16 eggs. The eggs were either eaten or used in the manufacture of patent leather. Well marked Guillemot & Razorbill eggs were often set aside for collectors who paid up to 10 shillings for 'real fancy eggs'.

Guillemot, and to a lesser degree Razorbill, eggs are extremely variable, each bird having its own egg markings so that it is able to identify its roost site.

THE NELSON COLLECTION OF BIRDS – INDEX BY CASE NUMBER

CASE	1.	Common Sandpiper
	2.	Dotterel
	3.	Dotterel
	4.	Knot (summer)
	5.	Knot (winter/autumn)
	6.	Sanderling
	7.	Glaucous Gull
	9.	Sandwich Tern
	10.	Storm Petrel; Sabine's Gull; Little Stint, Dunlin
	11.	Great Black-backed Gull
	12.	Lesser Black-backed Gull
	13.	Black-headed Gull
	14.	Common Gull
	15.	Arctic Tern
	16.	Sabine's Gull
	17.	Arctic Tern
	18.	Iceland Gull
	19.	Black Guillemot
	20.	Puffin
	21.	Sandwich Tern
	22.	Common Gull
	23.	Kittiwake
	24.	Long-tailed Skua (Buffon's Skua)
	25.	Raven
	26.	Pomarine Skua (Pomatorhine Skua)
	27.	Fulmar
	28.	Little Auk
	29.	Roseate Tern
	30.	Black-throated Diver
	31.	Caspian tern
	32.	Pomarine Skua (Pomatorhine Skua)
	33.	Pomarine Skua

34. Common Tern; Arctic Skua
35. Arctic Skua
36. Great Skua
37. Razorbill
38. Ruff (Reeve)
39. Spotted Crake; Baillon's Crake
40. Curlew Sandpiper
41. Great Crested Grebe; Red-necked Grebe
42. Red-throated Diver
43. Great Northern Diver
44. Gannet
45. Whooper Swan
46. Bittern; Stork
47. Greylag Goose
48. Guillemot
49. Ringed Plover
50. Black Tern
51. Black Tern
- 52.
53. Woodcock
54. Sooty Shearwater
55. Stone Curlew
- 56.
57. Little Tern (Lesser)
58. Manx Shearwater
59. Balearic Shearwater (Levantine Shearwater)
60. Spotted Redshank; Kentish Plover (Kentish Dotterel)
- 61.
62. Common Tern
63. Black-headed Gull
64. Great Shearwater
65. Sooty Shearwater
66. Guillemot
67. Great Northern Diver
68. Cormorant
69. Sanderling
70. Ruff
71. Garganey
72. Green Sandpiper
73. Little Grebe (Dabchick)
74. Snipe
75. Lapwing
76. Grey Plover
- 77.
78. Oystercatcher
79. Teal
80. Goldeneye
- 81.
- 82.

- 83.
84. Turnstone
85. Moorhen (Waterhen)
86. Golden Plover
87. Bar-tailed Godwit
88. Ruff
89. Leach's Petrel
90. Tufted Duck
91. Golden Plover
92. Avocet
93. Oystercatcher
94. Coot
- 95.
96. Wood Sandpiper
97. Red-necked Phalarope
98. Grey Phalarope
99. Long-tailed Tit
100. Marsh Tit
101. Great Tit
102. Blue Tit
103. Coal Tit (Cole Tit)
104. Greenfinch
105. Tree Sparrow
106. Hawfinch
107. Corn Bunting
108. Great Grey Shrike
109. Swift
- 110.
111. Fieldfare
112. Redwing
113. Brambling
- 114.
115. Hoopoe
116. Little Bittern
117. Rose-coloured Starling (Rosy Pastor)
118. Water Rail
119. Dipper
120. Leach's Petrel (Fork-tailed Petrel)
121. Shoveler
122. Velvet Scoter
123. Dunlin (Small Dunlin/Shinz Sandpiper)
124. Purpel Sandpiper; Little Stint
125. Rock Pipit; Snowbunting; Woodlark; Shorelark
126. Woodpigeon (Ring Dove); Stock Dove
127. Short-eared Owl
128. Long-eared Owl; Tawney Owl
129. Rook
130. Red-legged Partridge
131. Goosander

132. Common Scoter
133. Smew
134. Red-crested Pochard; Common Pochard
135. Wigeon
136. Shelduck
137. Long-tailed Duck
138. Mallard
139. Merlin
140. Shag
141. Curlew
142. Curlew
143. Bean Goose
144. Barnacle goose
145. Brent Goose
146. Eider Duck
147. Scaup
148. Red-breasted Merganser
149. Waxwing
150. Green Woodpecker
- 151.
- 152.
153. Hobby
154. Pallas' Sand Grouse
155. Barn Owl
156. Sparrowhawk
157. Crossbill
158. Partridge
159. Rough-legged Buzzard
160. Turtle Dove
161. Mealy Redpoll
162. Great Spotted Woodpecker
163. Jay
164. Red Grouse
165. Hooped Crow
166. Chough
167. Peregrine
168. Buzzard (Honey)
169. Goshawk
170. Gyrfalcon (Iceland Falcon)
171. Black Grouse

Nelson's collection of natural history books can be viewed in the Dorman Museum library by appointment.