

## The Last of its Kind: the Search for the Great Auk and the Discovery of Extinction

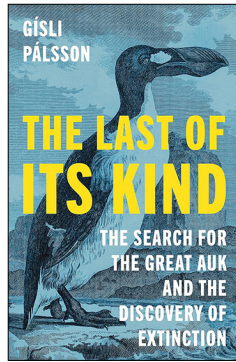
By Gísli Pálsson. 2024. Princeton University Press. 328 pages, 16 colour illustrations, and 37 black and white illustrations, 38.00 CAD, Hardcover, 31.99 CAD, E-book.

The author of *The Last of its Kind* is not an ornithologist, although he collected bird eggs as a youth. As a result, this is a book primarily about the people of Pálsson's native Iceland, the locals who hunted Great Auk (*Pinguinus impennis*), and the foreigners who came looking for the birds. Pálsson conducted anthropological research in the mainland village nearest to Eldey, a small island off the southwest coast of Iceland where the last Great Auks were hunted in the 1840s. To be fair, because Great Auk lived most of the year at sea and only came ashore briefly to breed on inaccessible and often remote islands, little is known about its biology.

The main thread of the book is an 1858 expedition to Iceland, undertaken by English scientists John Wolley and Alfred Newton, in search of Great Auk. Wolley came from the Victorian tradition of studying medicine but became a naturalist rather than a doctor. He was an avid and experienced oologist with a collection of over 10 000 eggs ... but no egg of Great Auk. Newton was a zoologist who studied at Cambridge University and later became a prominent professor there.

Wolley and Newton chose Eldey as their destination because it was more accessible than other known breeding sites in Iceland and Newfoundland. They hired locals who had hunted Great Auks previously to help them achieve their goals, which were to observe breeding behaviour and collect birds and eggs. Icelanders had always hunted seabirds and their eggs for food, but from the mid-1700s onwards hunting supplied the feather market, and skins and bones were also sold to public museums and private collectors. Similarly, the population breeding on Funk Island, off the northeast coast of Newfoundland, was hunted for food and later feathers, which led to its extermination.

The plan was to get to Eldey for the breeding season at the end of May. But the waters around Eldey are treacherous, and 1858 was marked by particularly harsh weather, including a cold and stormy spring. While waiting for calm weather, Wolley and Newton, with the help of an interpreter, undertook extensive interviews with any locals who had knowledge of Great Auks. Wolley compiled five handwritten notebooks, the Gare-Fowl Books (which were never



published), written in English, Icelandic, Danish, and German. ('Gare-fowl' was an antiquated English name for Great Auk, which was called *geirfugl* in Icelandic.) In a sense, they became anthropologists, recording everything told to them, not just information related to the birds. Meanwhile, the man they had contracted to collect birds and eggs at another breeding island in southeast Iceland did not find any evidence of living Great Auks, only butchered bones. By mid-July, it was obvious they had missed the breeding season and any hope of seeing Great Auks. They returned to England, not knowing if Great Auk was extinct.

The default explanation suggested when a species has gone missing from a known location is usually that it has gone somewhere else for unknown reasons. That is no different today than it was in the 18th century. There was no mention of the possibility that Great Auk was extinct in the Gare-Fowl Books, but in 1861 Newton (Wolley had died unexpectedly in 1859 of a brain infection) refers to "the last Gare-fowls known to have occurred in Iceland" in a paper in the journal *Ibis* (p. 157; for the article, see Newton 1861). The concept of the extinction of a species had been established in the early 1800s through the study of fossilized bones; Newton added the concept of unnatural extinction, "the loss of a species as a result of human activities" (p. 4), which was "a phenomenon to be subjected to scientific inquiry and political action" (p. 181). Wolley had stressed how important it was to document the relative abundance of a species, which was a new idea at the time and critical to determining whether a species was on its way to extinction.

While emphasizing Newton's achievements in conservation (e.g., enacting game laws in England, including a restriction on hunting seabirds during the breeding season), Pálsson points out Newton's hypocrisy: his purpose in going to Iceland was to procure the skins and eggs of Great Auks for his personal collection. And even after lobbying for new game laws, he continued to collect birds during the breeding season.

This book tells an interesting story of the individuals who contributed to changing ideas about animal populations and extinction, but I found it difficult to read. Pálsson casts a wide net in his research and appears to have wanted to include most of it in this book, whether directly relevant or not. One example is in Chapter 4 (Arriving), where the author makes a two-and-a-half-page digression into how aquariums

came into use in the 1850s, with no connection to Great Auk or the central characters of the book. The author frequently skips back and forth in chronology, an example being his description of Wolley and Newton riding out of Reykjavík, followed by pages of detail about Newton's role in enacting game laws a decade later. Readers that persevere will gain a better understanding of the extinction of a species. The book will also appeal to readers interested in Icelandic history.

*The Last of its Kind* has a 22-page Bibliography and 15 pages of Notes by chapter, if the reader wants to dig deeper into any of Pálsson's topics. There is also a three-page timeline that starts in 1534 with Jacques Cartier's report of slaughtering many Great Auks for food at Funk Island. Estimates put the population

there at over 100 000 breeding pairs at its peak (Montevecchi and Kirk 2020). The last living Great Auk may have been seen off Newfoundland in 1852.

### Literature Cited

**Montevecchi, W.A., and D.A. Kirk.** 2020. Great Auk (*Pinguinus impennis*), version 1.0. In *Birds of the World*. Edited by A.F. Poole and F.B. Gills. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.gre auk.01>

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