

# EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

## #2 THE GREAT AUK

*Pinguinus impennis*



The Great Auk was the only species in the genus *Pinguinus*, and was the only flightless giant auk from the Atlantic, to survive until relatively recent times, but became extinct about 1850. It was also known as *garefowl*, or *penguin*. They were, in fact, the northern hemisphere equivalent of the Penguin.

In the past, the Great Auk was found in great numbers on islands off Norway, Britain, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland and eastern Canada but was hunted to extinction.

Great Auk

The Great Auk was the largest of the auks, and stood about 75cm (30-34 inches) high and weighed around 5kg (11lbs.) It had a white front and glossy black back feathers. The longest wing feathers were only 10cm (4"). Its feet and toenails were black. The webbing between the toes was brownish-black. The beak was black with white grooves. Between the beak and eye there was an area of white feathers on both sides of the head. The iris was reddish-brown. Juvenile birds had less obvious grooves in their beaks and had mottled black and white necks.

They were strong swimmers, and used their wings to swim underwater. Their diet was mostly fish, usually 12 to 20cm (4¼ to 7¾ inches), but occasionally up to half their own body length; based on remains associated with Great Auk bones and other considerations, it seems their favoured prey were Atlantic Menhaden (*Brevoortia tyrannus*) and Capelin (*Mallotus villosus*). They walked slowly and sometimes used their wings to help them on rough surfaces. They had few natural predators, mainly raptors and large marine mammals. But most importantly, they did not fear humans. Their flightless state and awkwardness on land made them extremely vulnerable to humans, who relentlessly hunted them for food, feathers, and as they became rare for museums and private collectors.



Great Auk Egg

The Great Auk laid but a single egg each year, which was incubated on bare ground, most of which hatched in June. The eggs were yellowish-white to light ochre with varying black, brown or greyish spots and lines particularly on the larger end. Egg size varied between 110-140 x 70-84mm (4¼ -5½ x 2¾-3¼ inches).

Great Auks were heavily hunted for food, eggs and down from at least the 8th century AD. Hunting by local natives has also been documented from the Late Stone Age in Scandinavia and North-eastern America; and from the early 5th century AD in Labrador where the species seems to have been a straggler. A burial site at the Maritime Archaic site at Port au Choix, in Newfoundland, dating to about 2000 BC, was found to contain a body that appears to have been buried clothed in more than 200 Great Auk skins, with the heads left attached, probably for decorative purposes.

Their population may have reduced by the "little ice age" (*circa* 1250–1850), but large scale hunting for their down was the main cause of population decline. As the species became scarce birds and eggs became highly prized as collectors' items. Naturally, the continual collecting of the few remaining eggs ensured the rapid demise of the species. In July, 1840, the last known Great Auk seen in the British Isles was killed by two St. Kilda archipelago (Scotland) residents. It is claimed that this was because they thought it was a witch. [Probably after imbibing too much of a certain local distillation. Ed.]

The last large population lived on "The Great Auk Rock" off Iceland. This island was a volcanic rock surrounded by high cliffs, which made it inaccessible to humans, but in 1830 volcanic activity caused this rock to submerge and the birds shifted to the nearby island of Eldey which was accessible on one side. The last pair, (which were incubating an egg at the time) were killed there on the 3rd of July 1844, although there was a later claim of a live individual being sighted on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland in 1852...but, alas, not one sighting since.



Razorbill

DNA analysis has confirmed the Razorbill (*Alca torda*) as the Great Auk's closest living relative.

Reference: Wikipedia — the free internet encyclopaedia.