

ORDER IN A GULLERY

WHEN the Government plans a housing campaign, it spreads itself over whole blocks, and begins to build a house here, and a house there, and other houses at intervals. This method needs blue-prints. But the annual housing campaign of the Blackbilled Gulls in the Rakaia river beds needs no draughtsmanship whatever. And it gives a far better mass result.

First Egg is the Key.

As Mr. H. Guthrie-Smith has pointed out, the key to the plan is the first nest and the first egg. As soon as an egg is laid, that first-laid egg "has decided the future plan, the future architecture, the direction and spread of the bird town." That egg "has become the nucleus around which the molecules throng. About the laid egg cluster and crowd individuals just about to lay; about it, the circumference of incubation daily expands; about it, the oolitic circle thickens. The first egg is truly the heart of the community. It is the centre from which life radiates."

Next to this centre, and "as though in defence of it," camp the egg-owners of slightly later date; next to these, birds with completed nests; then those with half-built, then those with quarter-built structures.

"Then come pairs of birds guarding unlined sand-cups, and outermost of all—dilatory, dilettante—possessors of mere scrapes. The breeding area grows in fact by accretion, divaricates from the centre outwards." Some of these Black-billed Gulls are busy building. But it happens occasionally that some sudden, transient panic will seize the entire bird community, "when, after a first instant's scared silence, every bird, clamorous and calling, rises into the air—every individual, that is, not caught with building material in beak." These latter birds, dumb, yet as wildly agitated as the others, are precluded from mingling in the clanging chorus.

Alarm but not Chaos.

"For sudden scares of this sort," observes the naturalist in his latest book "Sorrows and Joys of a N.Z. Naturalist," "I have never been able to account; they may and do occur when neither man nor grazing beast is near. Out of silence,

HOW PANICS SWELL AND SUBSIDE

all in a moment, rises a wild outcry; the gullery lifts into the air, an effervescence of grey and white. The plaint of a thousand birds, hovering, flitting, screaming, quickens the river-bed. All seemingly in confusion, derangement, entanglement inextricable; yet, as in other processes of nature, however apparently chaotic, there is contained the germ of order, so in this instance. That germ is the first-laid egg."

How does this order manifest itself? Mr. Guthrie-Smith explains that "when panic occurs, impulse is of exterior origin. The edges of the gullery first rotate, the birds with least to lose first quitting earth. During penetration to the heart of things, it proceeds to arouse in turn each ring of the community, primarily the holders of ground only cupped; then the possessors of quarter-built and half-built nests; then those just about to lay; then at length the incubating birds; latest of all, by fraction of a second, the matriarch, the owner of the primal egg."

Order Based on Values.

"Again, in the swift subsidence of the assemblage's alarm, that brown inaugural egg shows up once more as central fact. Money speaks. Instantly, almost instinctively, the sense of values obtrudes itself on the wildly flying, inchoate horde. A partially incubated egg is worth more than an egg; an egg is worth more than a nest; a well-lined nest is worth more than one partially built; a cupped beginning is worth more than a scrape in the sand.

"Primarily, therefore, the birds fall soonest and thickest to the centre—to the loadstone egg, the hub of their little world. Alighted, alighting, and low in air, the big bird-bubble subsides as it has arisen—funnel shape, a waterspout of wings waisted like a balloon, thicker above, attenuated below. It is order in chaos, method in confusion, begotten of that subconscious care for the race so deeply implanted in the individual. This seemingly so broken a confusion in birds, their rise in air, their fall to earth, is truly in its stages as exact and undeviating as any chemical process. Arouse these Blackbilled Gulls a thousand times, and rearrangement will occur on precisely similar lines."