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"JUST enough room is left for incoming birds to walk to their own home without being pecked by the others"—Black-browed Mollymawks on their nests on Campbell Island

Wild Life in the Sub-antarctic

MOLLYMAWKs, THE SMALLER ALBATROSSES

Written for "The Listener"
By J. H. SØRENSEN

THOSE who travel any distance by sea are more or less familiar with the mollymawks. Usually these small albatrosses are called mollyhawks and, indeed, so general has this name become that one might fairly be accused of being pedantic in insisting on the retention of their correct title. The name mollymawk requires some explanation. According to an authority, it is corruption of an English word, corrupted from a German word, corrupted in turn from the Dutch! It was originally a name for the Arctic fulmar, whose fast flight reminded the early Dutch whalers of *mallemugge* (pronounced molla-murger), the tiny midgets that whirl around a lamp. To-day mollymawk is applied by mariners of nearly all nations to the smaller albatrosses of the southern oceans. In view of the peculiar history of the derivation of the name it is perhaps excusable that so many people now call them mollyhawks.

Largest in numbers (although smallest in size) of the albatross family, the mollymawks belong to probably nine different species, the majority of which are found in southern oceans. They differ from their larger relatives, the Wandering and Royal albatrosses, in that the dark colouration of the wings is continuous across the back. In the larger or true albatrosses the white of the head and neck is continued unbroken to the tail. Four species are common and breed on our sub-antarctic islands. Buller's mollymawk breeds on the Snares, the Shy mollymawk on the Auckland Islands, and the Black-browed and the Grey-headed mollymawks on the Campbells. The latter two associate in the same colonies; sometimes one species is dominant in numbers, sometimes the other.

The Campbells Colonies

On Campbell Island, only the northern coast is used by breeding birds. Almost the whole of Courjolles Peninsula at the north-western corner of the island is occupied in the season, and the effect, from a distance, is as if one were looking at a gigantic carpet of daisies draped over the cliffs. And at a distance one's view has to be, for a deep U-shaped gap on a knife-edged ridge prevents access to the colonies. Fortunately there are other accessible breeding areas and, as no birds of a different species have been noted near the island, presumably the Courjolles birds are the same kinds as those one can visit.

My first visit to a mollymawk colony was in the month of October, when thousands upon thousands of these birds had arrived from the sea and begun to occupy the territory they had abandoned some four months previously. The rowdy courtship of birds pairing off, the activities of birds already mated and building their nests, the constant arrival of new members from the sea and departure of others in search of food made a memorable sight. I watched and wondered at the industry of the birds and marvelled at the instinct that brought them back over hundreds of

miles of trackless ocean to this particular spot. "Like a gigantic poultry-farm gone mad!" said my companion, breaking the spell, and for want of a better description it must suffice; it was certainly hard to hear oneself speak. As for the birds, they took little notice of human intruders. Time was obviously a serious matter to them; there seemed so much to do and so little time in which to do it.

At the northern end of the Campbells, ledges and terraces have been gradually eroded on the steep cliffs. These are fully utilised by hundreds of thousands of mollymawks, and the cliffs, starred with the white breasts of sitting birds, are a wonderful sight from the sea.

Intensive Settlement

The queer mud and straw nests, shaped like huge cheeses, are situated about four feet apart—just enough room is left for incoming birds to walk to their own homes without being pecked by the occupants of others. With such intensive settlement the ground becomes heavily fertilised and supports a lush growth of several species of plants. In the late spring, the brilliant green carpet of plants, studded with dark brown nests and occupied by thousands of snowy-plumaged, black-winged birds, is one of the sights of the sub-antarctic.

The nesting birds, and thousands more wheeling in flight, contrasted with the sombre cliffs and the almost unnatural blue of the vast ocean hundreds of feet below, never failed to impress all on the Campbells who made the long trip from the camp to Courjolles.

The construction of the nest is done by the building bird gathering mud and straw and trowelling it on with the side of the huge beak. Usually the nests are constructed on earthy ground where plenty of mud and grass is available;

(continued on next page)