

THE CAPE PETREL *or* "CAPE PIGEON"*(Daption capensis.)*

(By R. A. Falla.)

THE Southern Ocean is the home of many species belonging to the great order of Petrels or "tube-nosed swimmers." Many are so much alike in size and colour that they are not distinguishable on the wing to untrained observers, and consequently they have no distinguishing popular name, or even sailors' names. One striking exception is the subject of this article. Portuguese seamen voyaging south met with a conspicuously dappled petrel in the region of the Cape of Good Hope and called it the "Pintado," the painted bird, and English seamen called it the "Cape Pigeon" from its slight resemblance in size and plumage to the common domestic pigeon of Europe. Since that time the range at sea of this pretty bird has been found to be more extensive than that of almost any other petrel. In the southern summer it may be found off the coasts of Antarctica itself and in winter reaches the coasts of South Africa, South America, Australia, and New Zealand.

Before ships and men invaded these southern seas the food of Cape Pigeons was probably similar to that of other petrels, consisting of small marine animals like squids and crustaceans. But they must also have had a taste for scavenging when opportunity offered, for with the advent of sailing ships these birds became well known for their habit of following in the wake and scrambling for refuse thrown overboard. To the present day only comparatively few petrels have acquired this habit. From the stern of a sailing vessel the Cape Pigeons could be caught and examined by the simple method of flying a number of threads from the mizzen rigging, and in these the birds became entangled as they flew past. They were thus well known to sailors and passengers of from one hundred to fifty years ago. More recently another new source of food supply has become available to these adaptable birds, namely, the waste oil from the great Antarctic whaling industry. Around the Island of South Georgia it is said that they become so numerous in summer that when whaling ceases in the winter months

many of the birds die of starvation. A certain number find their way to temperate coasts where whaling is carried on in the southern winter, and on the New Zealand coast they may be seen in Tory Channel in numbers, and off Whangamumu less commonly. When feeding in flocks in this way they are noisy and quarrelsome, but always dainty in movement, whether in swimming or flight. They are little disturbed by boisterous weather and seem to have reserve powers of flight enabling them to remain at sea in the teeth of a gale.

It may seem strange that so little is known of the nesting places and nesting habits of such an abundant bird. The nests were first described at Kerguelen in 1899 and the first eggs collected at the South Orkney Islands in 1903. Since then they have been found on the Antarctic Continent also. In all these places the situations have been similar, tall cliffs with here and there a narrow ledge on which there is just room for a bird to sit. Except that a few pebbles are sometimes gathered, there is no attempt at an actual nest, and the sites are generally inaccessible to all possible enemies except such predaceous birds as the skua gull. Protection from these is effectively gained by the power of squirting oil and partly digested food from the throat by both adult and young Cape Pigeons. They always do this when disturbed, and a few venturesome human naturalists that have managed to get near a Cape Pigeon's nest have had to take the precaution of "drawing the bird's fire" with a long stick until its "ammunition" is exhausted. Dangers from falling rocks are avoided by the selection of ledges where the cliff overhangs immediately above, so that the Cape Pigeon may be regarded as a bird that has left nothing to chance. Only the rigours of climate and the fluctuations of food supply remain as dangers against which the birds are unprotected, except by their general fitness. As with all petrels, only one egg is laid, pure white, and fairly large for the size of the bird.