

Catastrophe

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A chick, downy and delicate, eyes a nearby Herring Gull. At just about three weeks old, the gull towers above the little chick who, in the usual way of things, would now be nothing more than a snack. It would be swallowed whole, gone in a trice, its short life ended so that another can survive. Harsh, but that's the usual way of things.

In the usual way of things, this chick would be high above, hiding in plain sight amongst thousands of others, jammed together on the congested cliff. This very evening its father might call to it from the water far below, encouraging it to jump. This chick is a Guillemot, cousin of the beloved Puffin, and this is how they greet the world. A true leap of faith, hurtling from the ledge on which they hatched mere weeks before to the ocean waves beneath.

But this is not the usual way of things.

Far from it.

Instead, the little chick is huddled in the shadow of the cliff-face. Broken, twisted little bodies lay all about, Guillemot chicks that have met the same fate. The Herring Gulls ignore them, as they ignore our chick. Do they know?

The chick sways, stumbles. Its head drops, its neck twisting in a bizarre arch. It topples forwards, rolling closer to the gull. Regaining its feet, the chick blunders away. It pauses, then falls again, rolling downhill once more. It won't survive much longer. And it won't be eaten by the watching Herring Gull, or by anything else. Its little body will stay on these rocks, in the shade of its cliff-top home, and rot.

This pathetic little scene is being played out, over and over again, across the country, and across the world. By now bird flu, or Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has killed birds in their thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands.

The virus has been around for millennia, but this is a new strain, found just 25 years ago. This outbreak is unprecedented. It hit our shores late last summer, in a different seabird, the Great Skua, spotted by conservationists on Shetland, a stronghold for the species. Scotland is home to 60% of the world's population, the vast majority of which breed on the Northern Isles. They are so synonymous with those wild rocks that the local name for them, the Bonxie, has been adopted by birdwatchers everywhere.

So, these birds dying was a worry. But the breeding season ended, the birds dispersed, and the local conservationists breathed a sigh of relief.

Then geese started dying. On the Solway Firth, which divides the northern-most reaches of England and west Scotland, a third of the wintering Barnacle Geese perished. Then swans, and other wildfowl. The same thing was happening on Lindisfarne in the North-East, and elsewhere.

And when the Bonxies returned to Shetland this summer to breed, they kept on dying.

And then Gannets, and terns, and gulls, and crows. Owls, Blackbirds, Moorhens, Lapwings and Wagtails. And Guillemots, and others.

As it spread through species, it spread through the UK, crashing down the east coast, and then to the west. Bass Rock, a hulking mound that sits in the Firth of Forth, the mouth of the river that runs past Edinburgh, hosts the largest colony of Northern Gannets in the world. 150,000 pairs breed there each year. Up to 90% of them have abandoned their nests. Just down the coast, on Coquet Island in Northumberland, every chick from the colony of almost 2,000 Sandwich Tern nests has died. It's a sad story, and its repeating itself throughout Europe and North America. And it isn't just birds. Foxes and seals have also been infected.

My days at work are spent atop the cliffs of St Abbs Head in southern Scotland, with Bass Rock as my backdrop. I spend hours each day with its mass in my eye-line, shining white against the horizon. I'd been hearing about the carnage there for weeks, so it was no surprise, though still heart-rending, to see our first dead bird, a Gannet, draped amongst a mass of Guillemots. The virus spreads via faeces and other infected secretions, so it was perhaps inevitable that, over subsequent days, inexorable holes appeared in that mass, as Guillemots died in droves. By the time that little Guillemot chick found itself stumbling about on the rocks, it all felt totally inescapable.

This is our fault. We have caused this. HPAI came into being in intensive poultry operations in East Asia and has spread across the world through the movement of that poultry and the goods it produces. Goods that many of us consume. Once in wild bird populations, it has spread further through their movement and migration. Predators like birds of prey and foxes have been infected by eating carcasses strewn across our countryside.

Who knows where this will end? Seabirds live for many decades and produce just one or two young a year. They cannot replace themselves quickly, so we'll be seeing the ramifications of this disastrous breeding season for years to come. And HPAI is far from over. At the end of the breeding season, millions of birds from across the world will migrate, possibly taking the virus with them, spreading it further. And once the winter is over, they'll return to their breeding grounds, and the virus may return too.

For myself, I cannot fathom Shetland without its Bonxies, but that is a very real possibility. I might have to come to terms with the first extinction of a species I have actually worked with.

The environmental crisis is here. Once again, our lack of respect for the planet we call home has led to disaster.