

WINKLE GATHERING IN BUTE

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From time immemorial shellfish have formed part of the food of mankind. The caves round the shores of Bute and Cumbræ have shown thick layers of empty shells, for the men who sheltered there in pre-historic times ate many shellfish.

When St. Blane landed at Glen Callum's Bay with his load of holy soil and was carrying it to his monastery the yoke holding the baskets broke. There was a woman gathering shellfish on the shore and he asked for help but she refused. St. Blane cursed her and said, "May it be high tide whenever you go to the seashore".

Before the Kaiser's war Hughie the Hawker had his stance at the end of Rothesay pier with his barrow and sold pokes of winkles. When custom was slow he would fill in the time eating his wares, often putting the empty shells back among those on the barrow. One could buy them too from barrows in Glasgow and at the railway station at Kilmarnock. But now we don't eat them much in Bute. During Hitler's war it was the English wives of the Navy who made mussel soup and gathered cockles. Despite our own lack of appreciation, many hundredweights are sent to Billingsgate every year. In the last three years an average of 1553 cwts has been gathered from the shores of Bute and the Kyles and the annual value of that was £1,660. Do not think that it is money easily earned or, with the memory of the summer of 1955 warm in your hearts, that it would be a pleasant job to gather winkles along the seashore. It is a seasonal

trade and it is in winter that they are collected. The largest winkles are found at low tide and the best low tides in winter are in the cold and dark of 6 o'clock.

Everyone knows the periwinkle, or winkle as it is more often called, but little attention was paid to its life history until about 40 years ago. They were gathered and eaten and that was that; but quite a lot of work has been done on them lately, some of it at the Marine Station, Millport. Winkles are often called "whelks" by the fishermen who collect them but they should not be confused with the dog whelk (*Nucella papillus*) which also lives between tide marks and is about the same size as the common periwinkle. The most obvious difference is that in winkles the opening of the shell is smooth and round, whereas in the dog whelk the underside is drawn out and grooved. There are four species of winkle common on the shore but it is with the common periwinkle (*Littorina littorea*), the largest of the species, that we are concerned.

The winkle is found at high water and at low water, on rocks, among small stones, in sand and on mud. The shell is usually black but may be brown or red. In the first two months of its life it has a mortality rate of 94% and for the first year one of 66%. It is collected by the sackful and yet it survives as one of the commonest of our seashore shells. It feeds mostly on seaweeds, nibbling at the knotted and bladder wracks and browsing on the small algae which form a slimy coating on rocks and stones. In spring and early summer the female lays a vast quantity of eggs contained in capsules, each .6 to .9 mm in diameter, rather like tin hats in shape and containing up to three eggs. The larva breaks out of the capsule on the 6th day and is then free swimming for a short time before it settles on the shore as a tiny periwinkle. They grow faster at low water as immersion is more important to them than light or warmth. It is difficult to tell the age of any shell, as varying conditions of food and heat and cold and position on the shore all

affect growth. They are of marketable size in their second year. The really large ones of $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches long are probably about 5 years old. Specimens have been known to live up to ten years in an aquarium.

They have the habit of climbing and in Co. Galway, where they are gathered in great quantities, an experiment was tried to take advantage of this climbing habit. At low water 3 ft. stakes were set out in rows on the shore near low water mark, the idea being that the winkles would climb up them and the gatherer would walk upright among them and pick the shells off. The winkles certainly climbed the stakes but the slightest movement of wind or water made them fall off. As there is little still weather on that coast the experiment was abandoned.

Unlike limpets they do not cling to the rocks but seek safety in storms by withdrawing into the shell, shutting up the mouth with a horny plate, and yielding to the current. Their rounded shell ensures that they can be rolled about by the waves without damage. After a storm quantities are found washed into creeks and crevices of the rocks. This makes collecting them an easy job. Their power of shutting up the mouth of the shell with a water-tight door means that they can be kept perfectly fresh in sacks while waiting despatch to London. The gatherers find that they stay fresher in sacks left above high water mark than they do when the sacks are covered twice daily by the tide.

The connection between the heyday of the large yachts and the humble shellfish gatherer may not be obvious but in the years before 1914 there were many "butterfly sailors" as yachtsmen were called. These men followed the yachts for six months and went to the net and line fishing and shellfish gathering for the winter season. It was not only the winkle that found a market but clams, cockles, horse mussels and spoutfish were also collected. In the upper part of the Firth of Clyde there may have been over a hundred men

living in their own small boats and working round the shores during the winter months. At least 200 cwt of winkles would be sent to London every week. After the 1914-1918 war yachting revived but the boats were smaller and carried a smaller crew and at the same time the small fishing boats were replaced by larger boats with larger engines. By 1939 the number of butterfly sailors was under fifty and about 50 cwt. of winkles were sent off weekly. Since 1946 the number of yacht hands has been still further reduced to not more than twenty five in the Firth of Clyde for the season 1955. The fishing boats have become larger and are more highly powered and more expensive so that line fishing can no longer be a side line. This winter there will probably not be more than a dozen regular shellfish gatherers.

The price received for a bag of winkles is good, over £1, but the cost of transport is very high. Professor Tattersall, who tried the 'winkle farm' in Co. Galway, advised the fishermen to grade their shellfish before sending them, as the price for a bag of uniformly large ones was much higher. With the heavy rail charges it seems the sensible thing to do. It takes a lot of winkles to make up a hundredweight, 114 to a pint of those which are retained by a $\frac{7}{8}$ " sieve and 84 to a pint for a $\frac{3}{4}$ " sieve.

The gathering is best done at the spring tides and that means working by lamp or torch. Miss McArthur of the Straad tells how numb the feet and hands get collecting in a winter dawn but she also tells of the strange and beautiful things she sees. For example, one frosty morning there was a great battle between the gulls and geese on the mud flats. The usual feeding grounds of the geese were frozen hard and the gulls resented their invading the shore. The noise was terrific, and then suddenly they realised there was food for all and gulls and geese began to feed peaceably side by side. She also finds the rare beauty of

sunset and sunrise seen from the water's edge to be compensation for the bitter cold.

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THE BIRDS OF THE ISLAND OF ARRAN

BY J. A. GIBSON

The Island of Arran is one of the great glories of the Clyde area, and the lack of an up to-date account of its birds is a most serious gap in our present knowledge of Clyde ornithology.

It is a remarkable fact that although Arran offers attractions to the bird-watcher not found elsewhere in the Clyde, previous accounts of the birds are few and inadequate. This can be explained partly by the relative inaccessibility of the island — travelling to Arran was a chancy business not so very long ago — and partly by the fact that there never seems to have been an ornithologist resident on the island; certainly not one who has been prepared to write about the birds. Almost all the published notes on the birds have therefore been contributed by visitors, whose observations often covered very brief periods.

The earliest notice of Arran birds that I have been able to trace is that by Martin Martin (1703), who visited the island before 1700 and wrote, "This isle affords the common sea and land fowls that are to be had in the Western Isles." He also mentioned the protection of the blackcock. Next, Pennant, in his *Voyage to the Hebrides*, written in 1774, said, "The birds are eagles, hooded crows, wild pigeons, storks, black game, grouse, ptarmigans, daws, green plovers and curlews." To these he added the partridge as a proof of the advancement of agriculture. In the *Old Statistical Account*, Kilmory parish (1793), the Rev. John Hamilton mentioned wild swans and fieldfares in winter and the lapwing in summer. The Rev. James Headrick, in 1807, has a chapter on "Game" in which he records the following: "Among the feathered tribes, the capercaillie formerly abounded, but seems now to be extirpated. The blackcock and grouse swarm in the most unbounded profusion; and I suspect their further multiplication is prevented by not having a sufficient proportion annually destroyed. Among these