

AN ISLAND NATURALIST

Island Years

By Dr. F. Fraser Darling. Pp. xii + 306 + 23 plates. (London : G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1940.) 12s. net.

IN "Island Years" we have an account, written most attractively, of a life which the author, along with his wife and his growing son, has lived (and still lives) on lonely Hebridean islands, uninhabited except by this little family.

The first island which Dr. Fraser Darling and his wife chose for their home was Eilean a' Chleirich, one of the Summer Isles, which lie off the coast of Wester Ross. Thence they migrated to Lunga, one of the Treshnish Isles, where they made a late autumn camp in order to study the habits of the Atlantic seal—and all the time the idea was taking shape of a more daring stay on Rona, a very lonely, storm-beset island lying 47 miles out to sea north-east of the Butt of Lewis. No one had hitherto thought of camping on Rona in the stormy late autumn season when the Atlantic seals in their thousands come ashore to drop their pups, but the Fraser Darlings braved a part of a winter there and faced gales so tremendous that those strong birds the greater black-backed gulls became quite exhausted and permitted themselves to be caught and lifted by human hands. Although the author does not say so, the photograph (illustrating p. 227) of Rona under snow to the water's edge depicts a very rare scene. I well remember the week in December in which the photograph was taken and never either before, or since, had I seen from my home in Skye the lesser isles of ocean snow-clad so completely.

Dr. Fraser Darling is a trained and observant naturalist. In his observations on the Atlantic seal he gives us much new and valuable data concerning the habits of these animals: his notes on that rare nocturnal bird, Leach's forked petrel, are also noteworthy. He mentions that he obtained a midnight flashlight photograph of this bird in flight: one could wish that it had been included in the illustrations, all of them excellent, of this book.

One learns with interest that the rock dove, numerous in Skye, does not nest on Rona; also that barnacle geese, which winter on almost all suitable Hebridean islands which are uninhabited, are absent from Rona.

There are so many interesting and delightful passages in the book that it is difficult to pick out the most attractive, but the account (p. 255) of the joy of the Atlantic seals as they battle with enormous seas is outstanding. Fraser Darling

describes in restrained yet vivid language the occurrence (p. 262) of the 'green ray' at the moment of sunset at 10.10 p.m. after a day of restful beauty. I like, too, his description of Loch Fada (p. 50), and I am glad to see that he appreciates the aroma of the crowberry. This, to my mind, is one of the most fragrant and characteristic scents of the hills and moors, yet no other author I have read appears to have noticed it. On p. 48 Dr. Fraser Darling gives an interesting account of a peregrine falcon preying on little auks, and on p. 106, of barnacle geese alighting on the sea. I once saw this, from the same island group from which the author records it.

Writing of the eiders of the Summer Isles (p. 113), Dr. Fraser Darling mentions that their eggs hatch during the third and fourth weeks of June. Their laying must therefore be considerably later than the nesting season of the eiders of the mainland seaboard of the neighbouring county of Inverness where, on June 1 of the present year, I saw more than one brood of young eiders swimming actively in the shallow water of an ocean bay, accompanied by their parents. It is interesting, too, that the stormy petrels of the Summer Isles (p. 126) do not arrive at their nesting haunts until early June, whereas R. M. Lockley has chronicled that on the island of Skokholm (which lies off the coast of Wales) they first make their appearance as early as April. By the way, this species (p. 127) does not *always* "shuffle away on its hocks into its crevice" when disturbed, for I have on occasion seen them walk, upright and graceful. The statement that the legs "though of fair length, will not support the bird in the upright position of a robin or sparrow" is therefore not altogether accurate.

It is interesting to know that skylarks do not arrive at Dundonnell until April, because at my home in the north of Skye, where the species is abundant, they arrive with regularity in mid-February, regardless of the weather conditions then prevailing.

In this book unusual words are occasionally met with. "Cormorantry" as the name of a colony of nesting cormorants is new to me; so also is "rinze" heather.

"Island Years" is one of the best books of its kind that has been published, for the author has done things no other man has done, seen sights no other man has seen, and is master of a style so vivid that these rare sights and sounds are conveyed faithfully and without effort to the reader.

S. G.