

We can draw an important lesson about the relationship between man and nature from the tragic event of the extermination of the Great Auk. As Peter Nielsen, a Danish merchant in the village Eyrarbakki in South Iceland, argued almost 100 years ago:

“The fate of the Great Auk should teach us to treat with caution those birds that are becoming fewer in numbers on this island, for example the Sea Eagle and the Great Skua, and remember that we must pass the bird populations we have inherited from earlier generations on to the generations that follow us.”

Peter Nielsen 1925



Ólöf Nordal
Alca impennis ♀ Iceland 1844
Female esophagus and stomach
2016. Photograph 60 × 90 cm

ólöf nordal

Ólöf Nordal lives and works in Reykjavík. She studied at The Icelandic College of Art and Craft, received an MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan as well as an MFA in sculpture from Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

Nordal's art can be found in all major public collections in Iceland, as well as in private collections in several countries. She has received various grants and awards for her artwork, including the Richard Serra Award from the National Gallery of Iceland. Since 1998 she has held many private exhibitions and taken part in numerous collective exhibitions, in Iceland and abroad. Several of her works have been installed in public spaces in Reykjavík and around Iceland, including the *Great Auk* (1998) and the *Briat Bjarnhédinsdóttir Memorial* (2007), in the city centre of Reykjavík. Ólöf Nordal's most recent public work is the environmental work *Þúfa* by the entrance to the old harbour in Reykjavík. Ólöf Nordal teaches at the Iceland Academy of the Arts, Reykjavík, and the Reykjavík School of Visual Art.

extermination of a species
– ultimate samples

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special exhibition

The six collaborating institutions of the Points of View exhibition take turns using the special exhibition space of the Culture House. Each special exhibition will be open for a year at a time and should reflect the emphasis and research of that particular institution.

frontpage

Icelandic women skinning Great Auks for foreign collectors, presumably in 1831. A scene imagined by George and Caroline Rowley some 40 years after the event, based on an account written by John Wolley (1823–1859). Wolley visited Iceland in 1858 specifically to learn about the fate of the Great Auk. Courtesy of Errol Fuller.

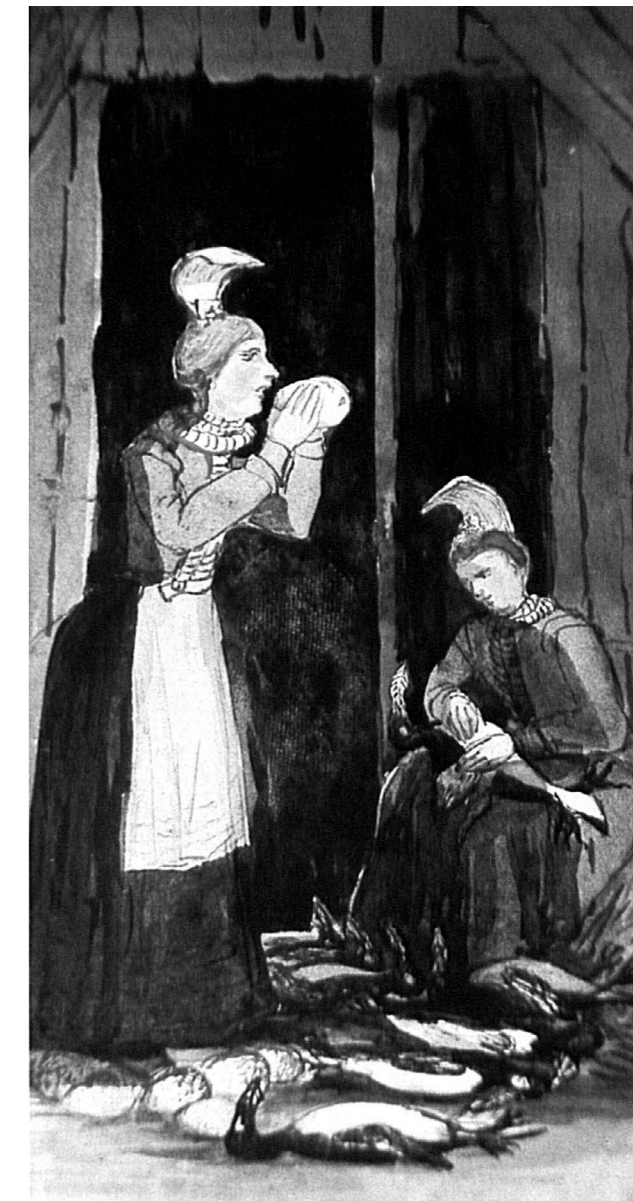
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garefowl † *Pinguinus impennis*

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special exhibition
16.06.2016 – 16.06.2017

Ólöf Nordal and The Icelandic Museum of Natural History
in collaboration with The National and University Library of Iceland and The Icelandic Institute of Natural History

extermination

The special exhibition on the Great Auk (Garefowl) is meant to raise awareness about the importance of responsible use of natural resources and a moral relationship to nature. The last two birds on Earth were most likely killed in June 1844 in a hunting trip to the island Eldey, off the tip of the Reykjanes peninsula in South West Iceland.

The Great Auk was sought after for its feathers, meat, fat and oil. The birds were large, weighing up to 5 kg (11 lb), flightless and clumsy on land, making them an easy prey.

Great Auk colonies are believed to have declined rapidly in the wake of the European settlement in Iceland and later along the NE-coast of North America. However, written accounts indicate that Great Auks were still found in considerable numbers in Iceland as late as the 17th century, but their sightings had become rarer by the mid 18th century onwards.

In addition to uncontrolled hunting and later also demand from collectors, natural forces probably played their role. Powerful volcanic and seismic activity are constantly at work off the coast of Reykjanes peninsula, where some of the last Great Auk lived, resulting in islands and skerries emerging from the ocean, only to sink again.

The extermination of the Great Auk is a black stain on human history, in which Icelanders played their part. We must, of course, keep in mind that people's understanding of nature and the environment at the time was significantly less advanced than it is today. Unfortunately, the deteriorating status of other species of the Auk family in recent decades, including the Little Auk (*Alle alle*) and the Thick-billed Murre (*Uria lomvia*), due to hunting and climate change, raises the question whether we have learned anything from our past mistakes.

the last two great auks

The killing of the last two birds at island Eldey in June 1844 is quite well documented. The primary source are the Garefowl Books, notebooks written by the British naturalist John Wolley, who visited Iceland in the summer of 1858, along with his friend the ornithologist Alfred Newton, to learn about the fate of the Great Auk. Wolley and Newton interviewed several of the 14 Icelandic men who participated in the hunting trip to Eldey.

The purpose of the hunting trip, undertaken on behalf of a Danish merchant Carl F. Siemsen, was to catch Great Auks and to sell to collectors abroad. The birds were sent to the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. The internal organs of the two birds, a female and a male, are still kept in 11 jars at The Natural History Museum of Denmark, University of Copenhagen. The fate of their skins or their whereabouts remains a mystery to this day.

The Great Auk special exhibition is composed of a mounted Great Auk from the Icelandic Institute of Natural History, a drawing from ca. 1770 of the skerry Geirfuglasker (Great Auk Skerry) from The National University Library of Iceland, depicting a hunting party catching Great Auks and other auks, and new works of art by artist Ólöf Nordal: 11 photographs of the internal organs of the last two Great Auks kept at the Natural History Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen, a narration of the killing of the last two birds on Eldey, and video footage of bird hunting, shot in 1966 in the Vestmannaeyjar islands for the the film Skerdagur, which is owned by the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service (RÚV).

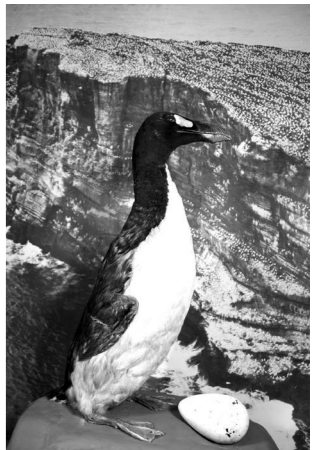
The politics of presentation of animal specimens as well as the fascination with the monstrous are at play in Ólöf's photographs and sculptures. Her work explores the folkloric traditions surrounding Icelandic nature as well as those scientific practices that seek to preserve, protect and catalogue nature, while at the same time fictionalizing it.

a nation acquires great auk

The Great Auk here on display is the property of the Icelandic nation. It was bought in 1971 at a Sotheby's auction in London with funds collected from the public. The price, at the time, was equal to that of a three-room apartment. The funds were raised in a very short time, a few days, and it has been documented that Icelanders would have been willing to pay significantly more for the bird.

This is the only specimen of a Great Auk in Iceland. It was most likely killed in the summer of 1821 at Hólmsberg, on Reykjanes peninsula. The hunting trip was led by Count F.C. Raben along with ornithologist F. Faber and botanist A.M. Mörch. The purpose of the trip was to obtain a Great Auk to the collection of mounted birds kept in the count's castle in Denmark. The bird remained in the possession of Count Raben's family until it was sold at the Sotheby's in London.

Only about 80 Great Auk skins and 75 eggs still exist in the world, most of them from Iceland. In addition to the Great Auk on display here, a whole skeleton composed of bones of several Great Auks from Funk Island off Newfoundland is kept at the Icelandic Institute of Natural History, as well as one egg, whose origin is unknown. Several Great Auk bones have also been found in archaeological excavations in Iceland.



The Great Auk
Photo: Erling Ólafsson