

# Pigeon Guillemot

*Cephus columba*



Photo by Monika Wieland

## Physical Description:

The Pigeon Guillemot is a stocky bird, about 13.5 inches long with a 23-inch wingspan. It has broad rounded wings and a thin straight bill. During breeding season, March to September, they are black overall except for a bold white wing patch and conspicuous bright red feet and not-so-conspicuous red mouth lining (displayed when calling). In non-breeding plumage, they have a whitish head and breast with mostly black wings except the wing patch, which remains white.

## Natural History:

Like all Alcids, Pigeon Guillemots, are diving sea birds, which propel themselves with their wings, “flying” through the water. They feed on benthic fish and invertebrates typically found at 10 to 30 meters below the surface.

## Reproduction:

Pigeon Guillemots mate for life and each spring reestablish their pair bonds. Colonies of several pairs to hundreds of pairs are located on sandy bluffs or rocky cliffs. Nests are established in cavities or burrows dug by the birds. Each pair incubates one or two eggs until they hatch in about 32 days. The new chicks will fledge about 35 days later. The fledglings, though flightless, will feed themselves by diving for prey as they develop their flight feathers. The new fledglings molt into their winter plumage, a sooty white with mottled wing patches and grayish heads, and leave the colony shortly thereafter.

## Life Cycle:

Pigeon Guillemots live and feed offshore except during the spring and summer when they return to the onshore breeding sites. When the fledglings leave the colony, the adults also return to offshore waters.

## Range:

Pigeon Guillemots populate the entire west coast from the Aleutian Islands to central California.

**Diet:**

Pigeon Guillemots feed primarily on small benthic fish like gunnels, sculpins, sandlance and herring.

**Threats:**

The present conservation status of the Pigeon Guillemot is “least concern”. Oil spills, plastic trash, habitat loss and human interference can kill or drive away these birds, or prevent them from breeding.

**Fun Facts:**

- Look closely at a Pigeon Guillemot in flight. Do you see an obvious tail? There is one but it is small. Guillemots use their bright red feet to help maintain coordinated flight, for turning in flight, and even as brakes when they wish to slow their flight, as when landing.
- It is great fun to watch Pigeon Guillemot pairs in flight as they chase each other around in a great aerial display including steep climbs and dives, which sometimes continue right into and under the water.

**Sources:**

*Pigeon Guillemots and Conservation* by Craig Johnson, a brochure underwritten by Island County Resources Committee

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