

Rhinoceros Auklet

Cerorhinca monocerata



Photo by Monika Wieland

Physical Description:

The rhinoceros auklet is a dark, stocky sea bird up with a thick orange bill. They can be up to 15” long. In the breeding season they get white plumes on the side of their head and a pale horn-like growth on the base of the bill that led to their name. Their pale bellies blend in to their dark breast. In the winter they lose their breeding plumes and their horn. Males are about 10% larger than females.

Natural History:

Rhinoceros auklets are diving sea birds that catch their prey underwater. They propel themselves underwater using their wings. They can dive up to 300 feet deep and can stay underwater for as long as two and a half minutes. They are often active at night, which is when they dig their burrows and feed their young.

Reproduction:

The horn on their bill is thought to be for courtship purposes. They nest colonially, often on sloped islands (to aid in take off – they are poor fliers), where they dig a 10-20 foot burrow with their claws and bill and raise a single chick per season. They can dig a burrow in 1-2 weeks, but have also been seen to use man-made nesting boxes. The incubation period is 39-52 days and the chick is in the burrow 48-56 days after hatching before fledging. The chick is fed only at night to avoid attracting predators like gulls, ravens, and eagles. Their three major nesting colonies in Washington are Protection Island, Destruction Island, and Smith Island.

Life Cycle:

Locally, the chicks fledge in August, and look like non-breeding adults except that their lower mandible is dark rather than yellow-orange. They begin to breed around age 3 and live about 7-8 years.

Range:

The rhinoceros auklet can be found along the entire west coast of North America, from the Aleutian Islands of Alaska south to Baja Mexico. They are also found in the Asian North Pacific waters. They are primarily coastal but in the winter may become more pelagic. They are abundant in the Salish Sea from February through September, when they disperse to the Pacific Coast, though a few remain year-round.

Diet:

Their diet is made up of small fish, crustaceans, and occasionally squid. Locally they eat mostly sandlance and herring.

Threats:

They are very susceptible to disturbance during the nesting season and will easily desert their nests. Nests can also collapse if trod on. Other concerns include gill nets, oil spills, predation, and climatic changes. Predators are especially a concern when introduced to nesting islands, such as the Arctic fox in Alaska and raccoons elsewhere. A population decrease in the 1990s may have been a result of increased competition with double-crested cormorants. Some surveys indicate an increasing population, but there are no known new breeding colonies being established in Washington. Their conservation status is a species of “least concern”.

Fun Facts:

- The rhinoceros auklet, the only living member of its genus, is closely related to the puffins and some want to rename it the rhinoceros puffin.
- Rhinoceros auklets are one of the most abundant breeding sea birds in Washington. The estimated 60,000 birds found in the state represent 90% of the US population of rhinoceros auklets south of Alaska.
- Like puffins, rhinoceros auklets use their stiff tongue to hold fish to the roof of their mouth, allowing them to open their mouth and catch more prey until they have a mouthful of half a dozen fish.
- Rhinoceros auklets are considered poor fliers, and as a result aren't often seen flying higher than just above the surface. They can, however, fly faster than 35 mph.

Sources:

- *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, Fourth Edition*
- *Stokes Field Guide to Birds ~ Western Region* by Donald and Lillian Stokes
- *Birding in the San Juan Islands* by Mark Lewis and Fred Sharpe
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<http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Rhinoceros_Auklet>
- “Rhinoceros Auklet” at Whatbird.com
<http://identify.whatbird.com/obj/262/_/Rhinoceros_Auklet.aspx>
- “Rhinoceros Auklets” at the Alaska Sea Life Center
http://www.alaskasealife.org/New/visitors/index.php?page=Rhinoceros_Auklets.php

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