

Common Murre

Uria aalge

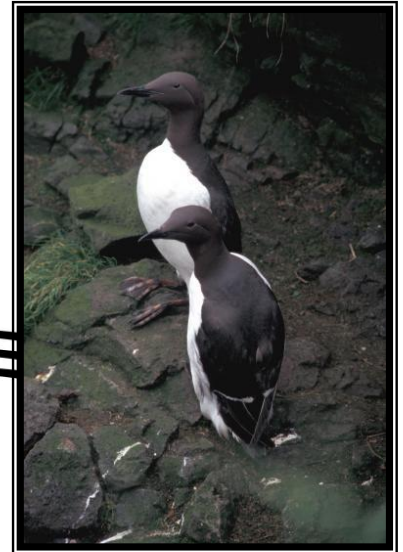


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<https://pixnio.com/fauna-animals/birds/common-murres-on-hall-island>

Physical Description:

Common murres belong to the Alcidae family. In addition to murres, this family group also includes puffins, murrelets, auklets, and guillemots. Less “chunky” than the other large alcids, the common murre has a short neck and a long, straight bill. This crow-sized bird can reach lengths between 15.0 to 16.9 inches (38 to 43 centimeters) and weigh between 28.2 to 39.7 ounces (800 to 1,125 grams). They have a wingspan of 25.2 to 27.9 inches (64 to 71 centimeters). Common murres are black above and white below with a white wing-bar and white sides faintly streaked with dark. During the breeding season, the head is solid black, but outside of the breeding season, the chin and lower half of the face are white, with a black line descending from the back of the eye through the white area. The “bridled” form in the Atlantic region has a white eye-ring (a ring of feathers or eye arc) that extends across the side of the face.

Natural History:

Common murres are permanent residents in many areas and found along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts during the breeding season. However, far-northern populations migrate south when the water freezes. Outside of the breeding season, common murres are almost always seen in the water, spending much of the time on the open ocean and in large bays. They are found closer to rocky shorelines during the breeding season, and farther offshore during the non-breeding season. They breed in colonies on coasts and on islands alike, provided there are cliff ledges or flat bare rocks atop sea stacks (steep rock formations) near the coast. Relative to their size, they have the most densely packed colonies of any bird. On land, they sit upright. Common murres feed by pursuit-diving, and are capable of diving to large depths in search of prey. To dive, they partly extend their wings and propel themselves underwater, then snatch and carry their prey in their mouth. They will carry a single fish at a time lengthwise in their mouth, with the head of the fish held in the mouth cavity. They forage mostly early and late in the day, most often in large flocks, including multispecies assemblages. Common murres are numerous. The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan estimates a population of 4,250,000 in North America, rates the species an 11 out of 20 on the Continental Concern Score, and lists it as a Species of

Moderate Concern. Pacific populations have declined and partially recovered, while Atlantic populations appear to be increasing.

Reproduction:

While common murres typically nest on wide, open ledges of rocky cliffs, only small numbers do so in Washington. Most colonies in this state are located on sea stacks and flat-topped islands that are partially vegetated or bare. Common murres breed at 18 locations along the outer Washington coastline, with as many as 10,000 birds to a colony. They arrive on the colonies in April and may be found there until September. Upon arrival at breeding sites, they participate in courtship displays. Courtship displays including bowing, billing (rubbing bills) and preening. The male points its head vertically and makes croaking and growling noises to attract the females. Pairs exhibit a high degree of site and mate fidelity. They do not build nests. Instead, eggs are placed in shallow depressions along ledges/bare rock. Common murre eggs are pointed at one end; when pushed, they roll around in a circle, preventing them from rolling off the ledge.

Life Cycle:

Common murre pairs only have one brood a year consisting of a single egg. Variation in egg color and markings allow parent murres to recognize their own eggs when they return from sea. This is important since as many as 20 pairs may incubate in one square meter. Egg colors range from white to tan without markings, to dark green or turquoise with extensive black spots and scrawls. Incubation lasts about five weeks; both sexes incubate and feed the newly hatched chick. Two to three weeks after hatching, when the chick is ready to fledge, successful breeding males and their partly-grown chicks depart the colony. When the chick is ready to fledge, the male swims below the cliff and calls out to it. The chick then hurls itself off the cliff edge and drops as much as 800 to 1,000 feet into the ocean where it swims out to its father. Often, to prevent young chicks from jumping off the ledge prematurely, adults stand between the chicks and the cliff edge. Other adults (i.e., females, failed breeders, and sub-adults) leave the colony once male-chick pairs have departed. During the at-sea chick-rearing period, chicks are fed at sea by the father until independence (when the chick is able to fly) which occurs when the chick is between 39 to 46 days old. Common murres first breed at 4 to 5 years of age and can live up to around 25 years old.

Range:

On the Pacific coast, common murres breed from Alaska south to the northern limit of the Channel Islands off Southern California. They will winter at sea within this same range. In California, common murres are largely resident year-round near breeding colonies, but some birds disperse to southern California in winter. Insufficient evidence is available to determine whether murres from Alaskan colonies winter in the area from southern British Columbia to California, although some Alaskan murres (especially from the Forrester Island colony) are present in northern British Columbia in summer and winter. Washington's breeding population does not appear to migrate. Major colonies in Washington are located at Point Grenville, Split Rock, Willoughby Island, Quillayute Needles, and Carroll and Jagged Islands. On the Atlantic Coast, they breed from Labrador, Canada south to New Brunswick, Canada and winter at sea

from Newfoundland, Canada south to Massachusetts. Common murres are also found in Greenland, northern Europe, and Asia.

Diet:

Common murres eat mainly fish during breeding, and more krill and squid during winter and pre-breeding periods. Common prey species include northern anchovy, rockfish, Pacific herring, Pacific whiting and market squid.

Threats:

Common murre numbers fluctuate annually and are highly influenced by food supply and climatic events. For example, populations in Washington State experienced a crash as a result of the 1983 El Niño event, dropping from 30,000 to fewer than 3,000 birds. While some populations in Washington have since recovered, others have yet to rebound, leaving the current total population in Washington at about one-third the former level. Sadly, common murres are the most frequent avian victims of oil spills along the Washington coast. They are also highly sensitive to disturbance by humans, whether they are on foot, in a boat, or in a low-flying plane. When disturbed, the birds may knock eggs and chicks out of the “nest” sites in their haste to fly clear of the disturbance. The unguarded chicks and eggs are then easy prey for gulls and other avian predators. Other threats include over-fishing (leading to low food supply) and getting caught as by-catch in gill nets.

Fun Facts:

- Common murres are silent at sea, but in flight make a soft murr sound.
- If you see a string of black and white birds flying swiftly across the surface of the water, chances are you're seeing a "bazaar" or "fragrance" of common murres.
- They can fly 125 miles from the nest to find food for their chicks.
- They will dive to almost 250 feet in pursuit of schools of small fish.
- Common murre colonies are so dense that there can be 28 to 34 birds per square meter, with incubating adults so close they touch their neighbors on both sides.

Sources:

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