

Common Murres

It is often easy to spot Common Murres from the lighthouse observation deck during the whale watching season at Point Reyes because they are here at this time of the year in breeding colonies. In fact, our visitors are usually amazed to see the huge numbers “huddled penguin-like on the rocks” below when we focus the spotting scope on them. Although there is a general information sign about Common Murres on the observation deck, we are providing some more in-depth information here so that you can answer visitor questions.

General Description (see a field guide for a more exact description and pictures)

- **a member of Family Alcidae**, along with Auks, Razorbills, Guillemots, Murrelets, Auklets, and Puffins; **they are a pelagic seabird**
- **Murres are not related to penguins**, although they remind one of penguins because they are black above and white below, and because they sit upright when on land
- Common Murres are less chunky than other large alcids, with a short neck and a long straight bill; they are about 17 inches in length (from tip of bill to tip of tail)
- they are sometimes described as a “football with wings”

Habitat

- **North American west coast range is from California to Alaska**
- **Murres spend much of the time (8 or 9 months of each year) on the open ocean;** Murres in our area spend much of their time out to the edge of the continental shelf
- numbers on ocean waters greatly increase October through March; breeding colonies start late December through July to August
- **Murres in our area are year round residents**, they do not migrate; far northern populations migrate south when water freezes
- most Murres concentrate in waters from about 200 to 500 feet deep

Behavior

- **they swim well and are skillful divers**
- **they chase down fish 100 feet to even several hundred feet below the ocean surface;** some sources say they dive 550 to 600 feet
- underwater, they stroke with their wings and steer with their feet
- they have been called “underwater fliers” or “black and white torpedoes with feathers”
- their short wings are perfect for diving and “flying” under water
- although they are rapid fliers in air, their flight is labored, with “clumsy” landings
- they forage mostly early and late in the day, most often in large flock

Diet

- **mostly small fish**
- diet can also include crustaceans, marine worms, and squid
- diet varies with seasons and in cold-water versus warm-water years

Nesting

- **Murres occupy Marin breeding colonies (regularly) from late December through their departure from July to mid-August**
- they are highly gregarious, nesting shoulder to shoulder (actually touching their neighbors on both sides) on islands, offshore rocks, and inaccessible mainland cliffs
- **they have the most densely packed nesting colonies of any bird**, with 26-34 birds per square meter
- they first breed at 4 to 5 years

- they do not build nests; females lay a single egg each year on bare rock or soil
- eggs are pear-shaped, so if disturbed the egg rolls around its pointed end in a circle rather than rolling off the cliff edge
- occasionally Murres will place a few small stones around the egg
- the female can find her egg among all others by color and by unique markings
- Murres almost always nest facing a vertical face, which they lean against while incubating
- incubating lasts 4 to 5 weeks, with both the male and female incubating and feeding the newly hatched chick
- 2 to 3 weeks after hatching, when it is half grown (some sources say when the chick is only 20 to 25% of adult weight), even before its able to fly, the chick dramatically leaves the colony by jumping off the cliff edge and floating down to sea
- one parent (usually the male) stays with the chick as it go out to sea; that parent feeds and cares for the chick for up to 2 months until the chick can fly and forage on its own
- most chicks depart the colony in the evening or just after nightfall on a calm day
- Murres are highly sensitive to disturbances; in their haste to fly away from a disturbance, they may knock eggs or chicks out of the nest site; unguarded chicks and eggs are easy prey for gulls, ravens and other avian predators

History of Farallon Murre Colony

- one of the best known colonies in California
- peak numbers of 400,000 in 1850's
- declined to 60,000 birds at the end of commercial egg collecting in early 1900
- by 1959, continued human disturbance and chronic oil pollution caused numbers to drop to 6000 or 7000
- population has since rebounded

Population and Conservation Issues

- **Murre population fluctuates annually, often dramatically, in response to weather events and food supply**
- **Murres inability to fly well means it cannot adapt well to difficult conditions**
- Murres are frequent victims of oil spills because they spend so much time on the water
- Murres are frequent victims of drowning after being trapped in gill nets because they dive so deep
- attached are two articles about recent seabird die-offs (including Murres)

References

- The Birder's Handbook by Paul R. Ehrlich, David S. Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye, published by Simon and Schuster Inc., 1988
- National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, published by National Geographic Society, 1983
- The Marin County Breeding Bird Atlas, a Project of Point Reyes Bird Observatory, by W. David Shuford, published by Bustit Books, 1993
- Point Reyes display sign on lighthouse observation deck
- Bird Web, an online site by Seattle Audubon Society
- Monterey Bay Aquarium Foundation 2006 website