

Puffin population attracts flocks of enthusiastic fans

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Puffin watercolor painting by Tom Hennessey.

Chances are you may not know that in Maine's midcoast waters, out where breaking seas shush to the shouting winds, there are several islands that have recovering populations of Atlantic puffins. The significance of that information can't be appreciated, however, without realizing that by the early 1900s Maine's midcoast puffin colonies had been reduced to only one breeding pair on Matinicus Rock. Originally, puffins also nested on Eastern Egg Rock, Western Egg Rock, Large

Green Island and Seal Island.

Like the depletion of eider ducks — by 1907 only two pairs remained on Maine's 3,500 miles of ragged coastline — the annihilation of the midcoast puffin colonies was attributed to thoughtless unregulated hunting, for eggs and feathers as well as meat. History has it, however, that the lighthouse keepers on Matinicus Rock protected the surviving pair and their offspring. Thus began the restoration of puffins to the 28-acre rock, where last summer 310 pairs were recorded.

Unfortunately, puffins haven't returned to all of their former nesting islands. Wildlife biologists specializing in seabird management surmise that puffins attempting to return to the islands were menaced by large populations of unworried gulls, especially the voracious black-backed variety. Obviously, predator control is essential to puffin restoration. For that matter, human activity on nesting islands also must be controlled. Otherwise, disturbance of nests may result in abandonment of eggs and chicks. Eventually, and justifiably, the hunting of puffins was prohibited by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Moreover, in Maine puffins are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Here, then, the question begs: Where did the puffins now nesting on the aforementioned midcoast islands come from? The short answer is Newfoundland. The long answer is the National Audubon Society's Project Puffin, established in 1973. So it was that wildlife biologist Stephen Kress, director of the society's Seabird Restoration Program, traveled repeatedly to Newfoundland's Great Island to capture chicks that gave Project Puffin its wings.

Between 1973 and 1989, Kress released 954 chicks on Eastern Egg Rock. Likewise, 950 were released on Seal Island between 1984 and 1989. Eastern Egg Rock now has a breeding colony of 82 pairs, while Seal Island has 336 pairs. Considering that puffins now return to four of their original nesting islands it's obvious that support for Project Puffin is surging like a groundswell. Suffice it to say the list of benefactors and patrons, including the Maine Outdoors Heritage Fund, is long and impressive.

While the directors and staff of Project Puffin have good reason to beam as brightly as Matinicus Light, farther Down East, Machias Seal Island shines as the nesting ground of Maine's largest

puffin colony, now estimated at 3,500 pairs. Smaller in number but no less important is Petit Manan Island's colony of 66 pairs. Not surprisingly, part of the Petit Manan population resulted from puffins migrating from Machias Seal Island, while others came from midcoast Seal Island and Eastern Egg Rock.

In that wildlife populations existing on the fringes of their ranges are fragile, the restoration of puffins to midcoast Maine, the very southern fringe of the bird's North American range, is truly remarkable. But then again, the puffin is a remarkable bird. A member of the auk family, the Atlantic puffin's range extends from Maine to Newfoundland, Iceland, Norway, United Kingdom and the northern coast of France. About the size of a pigeon, puffins have a wingspan of 20 inches or so. Males are slightly larger than females but the dramatic black-and-white plumage displayed by both sexes makes visual identification difficult. Of course, the most recognizable feature is the big, brightly colored bill accounting for the appellation "sea parrot." Further, it can be said that a puffin looks like a cross between a parrot and a penguin.

Though not monogamous, puffins show long-term mate fidelity, which in itself speaks for the longevity of the species. A male puffin banded and identified by Project Puffin biologists as Y54 has demonstrated this longevity. Now 29 years old, the bird is thought to be the first transplanted puffin to nest on Eastern Egg Rock. Last summer, Y54 and a female identified as U75 paired again, as they have since 2002. During the past 25 years, the patriarchal puffin has had three mates that have produced 23 chicks all told. As for longevity, the oldest puffin on record is a 36-year-old that summers on an island in Scotland.

After wintering on the open sea, puffins begin returning to their nesting islands in April. After a brief period of mating rituals which include bill-tapping and posturing, the birds enter the water and begin breeding. Typically, male puffins dig nesting cavities by burrowing deeply into the ground. However, because there is more granite than ground on Maine islands, burrowing is chancy business. Consequently, puffins may nest in rocky niches and depressions. Nevertheless, the birds usually return to the same islands and often seek the same nest sites.

Only one egg is produced. Naturally, such low production is a factor in the slow pace of puffin restoration. Both parents incubate the egg — at times tucking it beneath a wing — for a period of 42 days, give or take. Likewise, chicks are protected and fed by both parents. When feeding their young, puffins may catch and carry a dozen or more small fish crosswise in their bills at one time. The fish — capelin, smelts, herring, sand eels and the like — are held by spiny ridges on the birds' tongues and the serrated edges of their bills. After a chick is fledged, usually in about 40 days, it is abandoned. But as can be imagined, it takes only a few days without food to send the "puffling" on its first fishing trip, instinctively leaving the nest under cover of darkness. Once at sea, young puffins may not return to land for three years, and may not breed until they are 6 or more years old.

Like all seabirds, puffins are proficient at swimming and diving. Using their wings as well as their feet, they are capable of diving to a depth of 200 feet, though normally they don't fish that deep. Think of how fast the bird must swim and maneuver to catch a spooked smelt or squid. Though puffins are fast fliers — once airborne they can attain a flight speed of 55 mph — they're not as agile in the air as they are in water.

With the arrival of autumn, puffins begin their sojourns to the open sea. Their bills, which lose the distinctive red and yellow markings after the breeding season, start to shrink and their white head plumage turns gray. At that time puffins may be mistaken for razorbills and other seabirds.

All told, the restoration of Atlantic puffins to their midcoast nesting islands is an interesting and

inspiring story.

Though still in its fledgling stage, Maine Audubon's Project Puffin Visitor Center, which opened last year in Rockland, is attracting flocks of bird-watchers, ornithologists, naturalists and other outdoors addicts curious about the celebrity seabirds. Located at 311 Main St., the center is open daily from June 1 through Oct. 31. Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m., extending to 7 p.m. Wednesdays. Call 596-5566 or visit the Web site: www.projectpuffin.org.

Simply put, the visitor center's many exhibits and activities appeal to young and old alike. Especially popular is the webcam system by which puffin activity is transmitted live to the center by three cameras situated on Seal Island. Particularly attractive to children is a life-size model of a puffin burrow into which they can enter and watch a video of chicks inside real burrows, while hearing the growl-like voices of parent birds. Of course, an authentic "bird blind" like those used by scientists monitoring seabird activity is a favorite among aspiring wildlife biologists. Therein, youngsters view projected images of puffins and other pelagic fowl. Equally enjoyable and educational are paintings and photographs of marine animals in their natural habitats. Clearly, the atmosphere at the visitor center is festive, but the message conveyed is cogent: Whenever we lose a natural resource our lives become less natural.

Small wonder, then, that the popularity of puffin watching is rising like a full-moon tide. That said, be informed that there are two boat tours available for viewing puffins at Eastern Egg Rock. In New Harbor, contact Hardy Boat Cruises by calling 677-2026 or (800) 2-PUFFIN, e-mailing cruises@hardyboat.com, or visiting the Web site at www.hardyboat.com. In Boothbay Harbor, contact R.N. Fish & Son Inc. by calling 633-2626 or (800) 633-3244, or visiting the Web site: www.capnfishmotel.com.

To observe puffins on Machias Seal Island and Petit Manan Island, contact the following tour captains: In Cutler, call Andy Patterson, Bold Coast Charter Co., at 259-4484, or visit www.boldcoast.com; in Milbridge, call Jamie Robertson, Robertson Sea Tours, at 546-3883, or visit www.robertsonseatours.com; in Jonesport, call John Norton, Norton Tours, at 497-5933, or visit www.machiasssealiland.com.

Without question, each of those tours will amount to time and money well-spent. But even so, it would be a good idea to bring along some Dramamine or a few soda crackers to keep your stomach on an even keel, out where breaking seas shush to the shouting winds.

Tom Hennessey's

columns and artwork can be accessed online at www.bangornews.com. View Tom's new Web site: www.tomhennessey.com.

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