



Seabirds

Usually, birds are thought of as living in trees and on land, but seabirds adapted long ago to a life out at sea. In order to survive in this environment, most seabirds live longer and breed later with fewer young than most land birds. They spend much more time with their young than land birds do, usually resting by the seaside in colonies. These colonies can range from several dozen birds to millions of birds at a time in one location.

Most seabirds spend much of their life at sea away from the shore, or along a coast at the seaside. Seabirds usually have webbed feet to help with swimming, and a very dense layer of feathers, which are waterproof on the outer layer. These feathers help to protect the bird from the cold weather and water in their environment. Seabirds tend to be colored in shades of black and white, which helps them hide from both predators and prey. Historically, seabirds have been hunted for food and used by fishermen and sailors to find fish and the shore.

SEABIRDS AT THE NATIONAL AQUARIUM, BALTIMORE, MD

The *Sea Cliffs* exhibit has been at the Aquarium since its opening in 1981. There are three species of seabirds which live in the exhibit: the Atlantic

puffin, black guillemot and razorbill. The National Aquarium, Baltimore, MD is the only U.S. institution that has black guillemots on display. The exhibit was designed to look like the rocky coast of Iceland, which is where many of the birds were collected from in the wild. In the exhibit are nesting burrows for the birds that are opened to encourage breeding between early April and late August or early September each year.

BLACK GUILLEMOTS AND RAZORBILLS

In the summer, black guillemots (*Cephus grylle*) have white patches on their wings, and in the winter they are salt and pepper in coloration. They have a thin black bill and red feet, and lay their eggs on rocky shores near the water. Black guillemots do not travel far south during migration, but live primarily in the Northern Atlantic along the coasts of North America and Europe.

Razorbills (*Alca torda*) are larger than black guillemots and have a very distinctive looking bill. They are black colored on their upper parts and white on their bellies. The bill is thick with a rounded end and is colored black with a white band around the end. In the winter, the razorbill's face and throat turn white.



FAST FACTS

- Most seabirds spend much of their life at sea and rest in colonies. They have special adaptations so they can survive living away from land.
- Atlantic puffins have brightly colored bills, use body language and growls to communicate with each other and are not related to penguins.
- Project Puffin has brought breeding colonies back to areas in Maine where they had been eliminated because of pet infestation, overhunting and pollution.

Seabirds

Their eggs are laid on bare rocks or on the ground. In 2002, the National Aquarium, Baltimore, MD successfully hatched a razorbill chick from the birds on exhibit.

ATLANTIC PUFFINS

The Atlantic puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) are sometimes called the “clowns of the sea” or “sea parrots” because of their brightly colored bills and body coloration. They are the only type of puffin that lives in the Atlantic Ocean. The Atlantic puffin’s upper parts are black and its belly is white. The bill is large and shaped like a triangle, and is bright orange and yellow in the breeding season. The Atlantic puffin’s legs are also colored bright orange. In the winter, the Atlantic puffin becomes more dully colored. The bright bill colors are shed and the feathers on their face turn grey.

Some people confuse puffins with penguins because they look similar, but they are not related. Puffins live in the northern hemisphere, while penguins live in the southern hemisphere. Puffins can fly, but the small wings of the penguin are only used for swimming. Penguins also do not have the brightly colored bills that puffins do. Atlantic puffins eat small fishes, mollusks and crustaceans, which it dives underwater to catch. When

bringing food back to the nest, the Atlantic puffin can carry over a dozen fishes in its bill at one time. The bill has small serrations which help it hold onto the fish while it is catching more fish and flying. Atlantic puffins nest in burrows on sea cliffs and lay one egg at a time, which the parents take turns incubating. Nesting is the only time that puffins spend on land during the year. In 2006, the first Atlantic puffin chick was born at the Aquarium.

PUFFIN TALK

Atlantic puffins use body language and growls to communicate with each other. When they are out at sea, Atlantic puffins are most silent. While flying, they sometimes make a “purring” noise. During the breeding season in the colonies, Atlantic puffins will occasionally growl at each other and use different gestures and postures to “talk” to each other. While visiting the *Sea Cliffs* exhibit at the National Aquarium, Baltimore, MD you can hear the sound of puffin growls and maybe even see some body language.

PROJECT PUFFIN

In the 1800s, puffins were widely hunted for their meat and eggs. The islands that puffins nested on became infested with

rats, dogs and cats that were introduced by humans, and these animals ate puffin eggs. In modern times, environmental disasters like oil spills have poisoned puffins that have eaten or inhaled toxins while swimming and fishing in polluted areas. Atlantic puffin populations in New England became very small and even disappeared in some places.

In 1973, the National Audubon Society started Project Puffin to bring Atlantic puffin populations back to former nesting sites in Maine where they had all but disappeared. Young Atlantic puffins were transplanted to these sites and began nesting there. There are now hundreds of nesting pairs at the restored sites. Most summers, aviculturists from the National Aquarium participate in Project Puffin by helping to identify, band and study the re-established colony. The Aquarium’s mascot is the puffin to show that the National Aquarium is dedicated to conservation projects like Project Puffin.

KEY TERMS

Colony

A group of the same kind of animal living together.

Incubate

Eggs have to be kept at a certain temperature to hatch. Birds usually sit on their eggs to maintain temperature.

Oil Spill

A type of pollution where oil from a boat or pipe is accidentally released into the water and usually hurts a lot of plants and animals.



**NATIONAL
AQUARIUM**

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Through transforming experiences, the National Aquarium inspires people to enjoy, respect and protect the aquatic world.