



Winging It

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Convention
Inside!**

Puffins A-Plenty

Seabirds are abundant and approachable on Northumberland's Farne Islands

BY HARRY FULLER

The captain of our little boat is a weather-beaten fellow, his face the shade of coffee touched by cream. His eyes seem too deep-set to be able to see past the wrinkles and bushy, grayed brows. I come down the steep wooden steps leading off Staples Island and am nearly lifted aboard by two muscular lads that are the boat's crew.

The captain looks at me. "Mr. Fuller?"

I recognize his quavery voice from a phone call I'd made a few days earlier, reserving a spot on his boat for today. He's spotted me for the Yank who called him on the phone.

"Everything fine?" he asks.

"Yes sir, great trip", I say smiling, nodding. I lift the binoculars off my chest so he can see why I've come.

Great trip indeed. Sometimes you tick a lifer with a glimpse of one or two birds, quickly, faintly, in the distance. Other times you see one close by, over an extended viewing. The Farne Islands are one of those rare places where you might see hundreds of a new species so close that binoculars aren't needed. Staples is one of the Farne Islands off the east coast of Northumberland, northern England, a tiny, rocky hump, less than fifteen acres of rock with a sprinkling of soil. Austere, maybe, but 100,000 puffins can't all be wrong.

The others on board appear to be normal, sober-acting British, but their reserve

melts under so many close views of so many busy and loafing puffins. People gawk at puffins. Puffins stare back at the gangly bipeds on the other side of a rope that marks the narrow wooden path. Adult puffins power in from the ocean with sprat or sand eels dangling out of their outrageous beaks, crash-land on the dense turf, bounce like tennis balls, then gain their balance and scuttle through the grass to the right burrow and the right waiting puffin chick. Other puffins laze in the grass or gather on cliffs. Yawns show cottony yellow inside the mouth.

Yes, the Atlantic Puffin, *Fratercula arctica*, is an upright creature. About a foot tall and heavily insulated for survival in cold seas, an adult weighs more than an ounce for each inch of its height. (A Northern Flicker, in comparison, weighs about a third as much as a puffin, yet has nearly the same body length and a similar wing-span.) But despite the stout body, a puffin wings are small, almost blade-like, used (like penguin wings) for underwater "flight".

You see the problem here. Watch an adult launch itself from a dirt ridge above you. Trading altitude for speed, it darts past a few feet away, belt-high, barely clearing the sharp-edged rocks bordering the island, then hurtling onto the frigid sea below. An adult puffin in powered flight, its wings whizzing, simply seems to defy the laws of physics. Naturalists have dubbed the youngsters "jumplings": instead of fledging from the

(continued on next page)

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nest, half-grown puffins leave their burrows, leap from cliffs, and swim with a parent into the North Sea. A young puffin swims before it flies.

And so, from the British: giggles, hoots, quiet snorts of surprise and humor, head-shaking, and marvel. Smiles. That such a bird, with such a schnozz, with such markings, can prevail against northerlies, icebergs, skuas, gulls, sharks, fish nets, global warming, and the sheer indifference of the northern ocean world! It's joyful to behold.

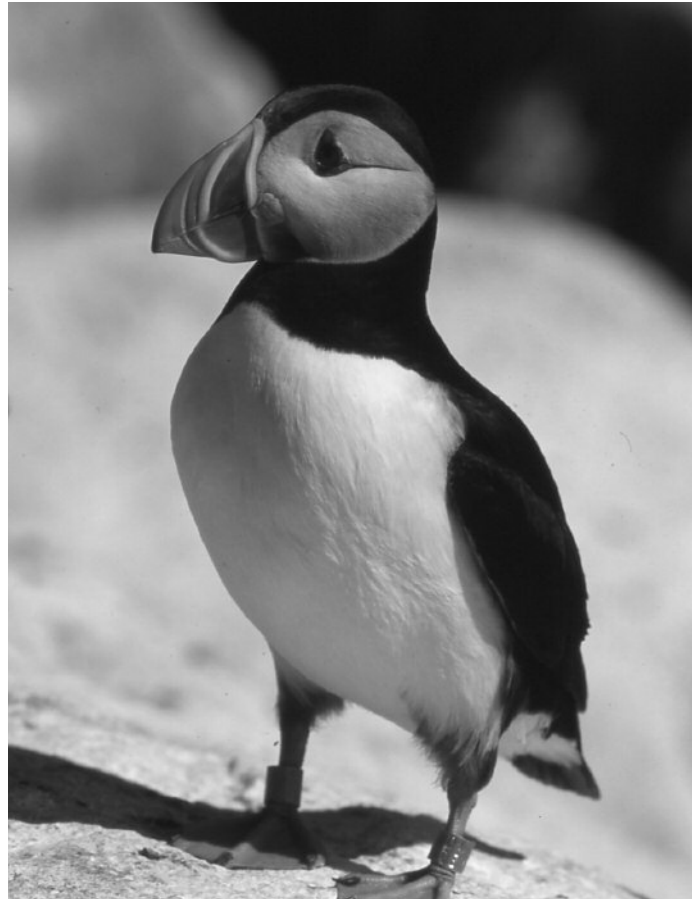
Not just puffins

On Staples I see two pairs of nesting Northern Fulmars in the grass among the puffin burrows. Fewer than 200 pairs nested on the Farnes in 2004, though an estimated half-million fulmars nest along the coasts of Britain and Ireland. Fulmars mate for life, which can last decades, and they form attentive couples, cackling softly, pulling beaks. Their incubation period is more than fifty days long. Fulmars need not hurry—no animal on these islands will challenge them. On stiff wings, the fulmar rides the air currents with ease, faster even than the larger gannet. Speed abrades the fulmar's outer wing feathers, slowly giving them brown edges as if singed by friction.

Our second stop is Inner Farne, largest of these islands. There's peaty soil and a clay cap over higher parts. Steep cliffs form the western and southern edges. The bedrock is volcanic dolerite, a rock type that naturally tends to form columnar sea stacks. Here we're interlopers, and Arctic Terns, lithe with long tail streamers and buoyant flight, let us know it as the boat lands. About a thousand Arctic Tern pairs nest on Inner Farne among the compact grass and an exotic California borage, *Amsinckia intermedia*, along with a few dozen Common and some 1,800 pairs of Sandwich Terns. It's July. Arctic Tern chicks are hatched and beyond parental control. They roam the island, screaming for fish. Parents work hard to oblige. To protect the chicks, adults hover like tiny police helicopters, sirens going, all systems on alert. Chicks walk obviously onto paths, almost underfoot, so we don hats. A persistent *thunk, thunk* on the back of your skull signals

you've walked too close to an Arctic Tern chick, so get moving. You move.

Adult terns sit on the stone chapel dedicated to 7th-century hermit, St. Cuthbert. They perch on walls, fences, atop the old lighthouse next to puffins. Terns swoop and scream, a churn of sound and motion. Puffins are silent in daytime, but



A crowd-pleaser wherever it occurs, the Atlantic Puffin is highly adapted to a largely aquatic life in cold oceanic regions. (This dapper individual represents the western Atlantic subspecies, *Fratercula arctica arctica*, not *F. a. grabae* of western Europe.) Photo: USFWS

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- The American Birding Association aims to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.
- The American Birding Association represents the North American birding community and supports birders through publications, conferences, workshops, tours, partnerships, and networks.
- The ABA's education programs promote birding skills, ornithological knowledge, and the development of a conservation ethic.
- The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.
- ABA Sales, the ABA's for-profit subsidiary, supplies birders with tools, equipment, and accessories to make their birding more enjoyable.

We welcome all birders as members.

nesting Shags snort and bark like seals, Black-legged Kittiwakes screech, murres give sharp whistles. Inner Farne isn't a peaceful place in mid-summer. Colonial murres nest in compact groups on cliff tops. Kittiwakes pick thin ledges big enough for a single scruffy nest. Alert, hunting gulls constantly maraud. I see a Herring Gull swallow a baby murre. A Great Black-backed Gull bullies a puffin into dropping its beakload of fish.

On this island, I get my first really good views of nesting Razorbills. Smaller than the murre, but more stoutly built, the Razorbill isn't gregarious. A pair will sit or crouch silently, shoulder to shoulder, occasionally sharing a nudge or beak rub. A Razorbill nest will be surrounded by the noisy murres and kittiwakes.

Razorbills have a stunning design in two colors, charcoal black and chalk white. Overall, it's a your basic alcid color scheme, black above, white below. But a fine white line runs from the black eye forward atop the black beak, merging on the culmen with another fine white line that encircles the beak. It's an alcid head designed by a jeweller. The namesake beak is heavy with more height than the round murre beak, but it doesn't rival the outsized proboscis of a puffin. Fewer than 600 Razorbills nest on these islands, and views from within 30 feet or so are scarce; when I get the chance, I happily sit on a rock and study these birds through binoculars.

More than 20 bird species nest on the Farne Islands. Shags may nest on the narrow, roped-in pathways. There are also Great Cormorants, Common Eiders, Common Shelducks, and the abundant gulls—Black-headed, Lesser and Great Black-backed, the ubiquitous Herring. The second most common seabird nesting here is the Common Murre (some 40,000 pairs). Other breeding birds are Eurasian Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, Pied Wagtail, and Water Pipit. One bird you'll see overhead is Northern Gannet, with nesting colonies along the nearby coast. Common Redshanks visit from the mainland in summer. From the boat, you will also get good, close looks at some of the 3,500 Gray Seals that live and dine in these waters.

Seabirds at risk?

There is a sad note to the Farne Island story for 2004. National Trust property manager John Walton, who manages the Farne Islands, told me that 2004 was a disastrous year for the nesting seabirds. Many species raised fewer young than in any recent year. Some, like puffins, didn't fare too badly, but for others, the year was nearly a washout. Shag nests: 271 monitored and only 74 chicks fledged. Kittiwake: 551 nests monitored, 55 young fledged. Arctic Tern: 386 nests monitored and 81 young fledged.

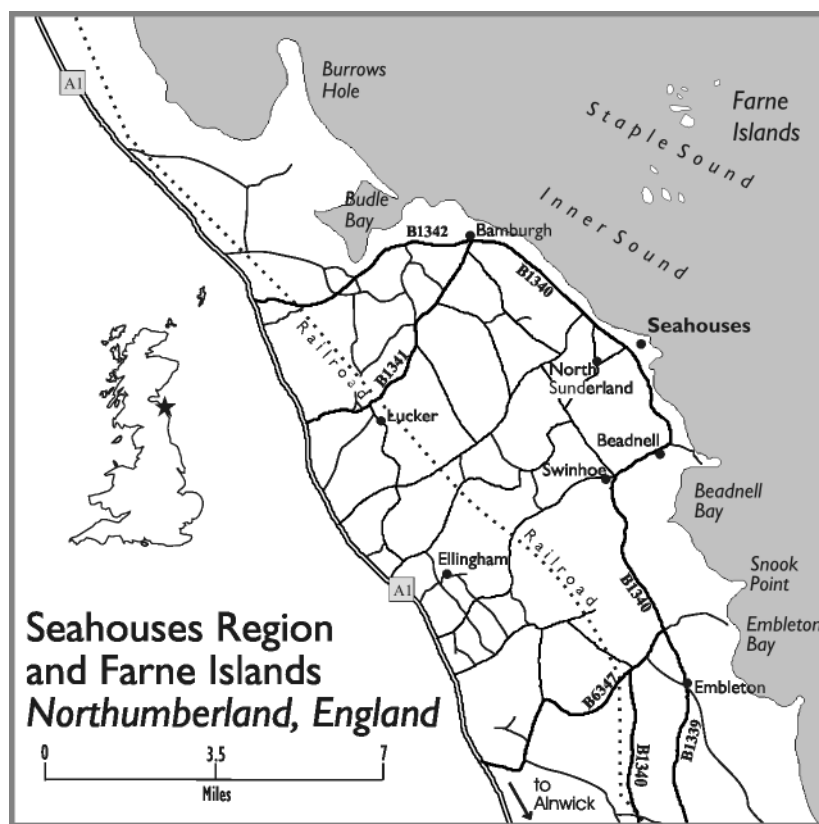
Walton says, "By mid-July, it became evident that there was a sand eel shortage, with young birds, or all age groups, dying through starvation."

Most of these breeding birds are long-lived; they probably experience considerable year-to-year variation in nesting success under any circumstances. So with luck, future breeding will make up for the depressing 2004 results. But the sand eels and other small fish these birds depend on are in chronically short supply due to over-harvesting to supply fish farms. Worse, global warming is apparently reducing reproduction of small fish in the North Sea by altering the zooplankton near the bottom of the North Sea food chain. The future may hold trouble for seabirds of the Farne Islands.

Visiting the Farnes

The best time to visit the Farnes is from late April to early August. After that, most Atlantic Puffins have left. (Though in August or September, you may miss puffins but see other interesting birds like Balearic Shearwater, Great Skua, European Golden-Plover, Black Redstart, Redwing, Bluethroat, and Little Bunting.). Inside Seahouses Harbor, your departure point for the Farne Islands, are Common Eider and fishing terns, including Little Terns that stay along the mainland shore.

Each boat in the Bill Shiel fleet is small, open-backed, and lined with simple benches. You want the "All Day" trip, which stops on two islands and provides the best birding. It cost £20 (about \$38) in 2004. About fifty of us loaded at 10 a.m., departing through the narrow mouth of the well-protected harbour. It's a very English trip. Nobody wears life jackets. There's no monotone "In case of emergency..." lecture. There's no ticket-taking. When we load or unload,





An adult Arctic Tern in a rare moment of repose on Inner Farne Island, which hosts hundreds of pairs of this graceful, highly migratory seabird. Photo: Harry Fuller

nobody makes a count. “We depart this island at 1:15”; miss your boat, look for the next one. Carry your own food and water for the day. The only toilets are on the second island, four hours into trip. Nobody warns you. How much coffee or tea did you have with breakfast?

Seahouses Harbor lies a bit north of the 55th parallel—north of Edmonton, Alberta, but south of Juneau, Alaska. The inner strait is about a mile wide, the outer no greater. So the distance covered on a full-day boat trip is less than ten miles, and most of the time is spent on the two islands. It was a half-hour’s ride to the outer islands where we landed first, and on the way the boat was surrounded by feeding murrelets, puffins, gannets, and screaming Arctic Terns. The ocean here can be rough even in summer, but it’s generally an easy passage. I am saying that as someone who gets seasick in a hammock. But I love pelagic birds, so the Farne Islands are a favorite of mine: great seabirds, no nausea.

Trains go to the Seahouses area from both London and Edinburgh. From London, take a train from King’s Cross Station and get off three and one-half hours later at Alnwick (the location, by the way, of the castle that stands in for Hogwarts School in the “Harry Potter” movies). Arrange a taxi in advance to take you the final twenty miles north to Seahouses. The train ticket is less than £100 round-trip from London; the taxi, about £12 one-way. You’ll need a B&B room in Seahouses or North Sunderland. Reserve in advance: the towns are favored by divers, and space is limited. I stayed in a fine B&B with huge breakfasts for £20 per night. It was a ten-minute walk to the tiny Seahouses Harbor, where the boats are based.

For more information on this delightful region, visit <www.seahouses.org>. You can call Bill Shiel’s Boat Tours from the U.S. at 44-1665-720-308. They’re five hours ahead of our Eastern Time Zone. Harry Fuller’s a long-time member of the ABA who left San Francisco three years ago for a job in London. His birding website is <www.towhee.net>.

Milestones

- Birding with his friend and guide **Michael Retter, Richard D. Messinger**, of Chicago, Illinois, saw a Tropical Parula at Santa Ana NWR, Texas, for his 550th ABA-area bird.

- A Flammulated Owl near Portal, Arizona, was the 600th ABA bird for **Brian Hobbs**.

- Our apologies to **Richard Irvin**, whom we erroneously credited in the October 2004 “Milestones” column with his 1,600th ABA-area bird (quite a feat, given that the ABA Checklist stands somewhere around 925 species). The tally of 1,600 species should have pertained to North America, including Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

- Hungary for good birding? You might follow the lead of **Beverly** and **John Winn**, who visited Hungary to see, respectively, a Bearded Reedling and a Saker (both on the nest!) for their 5,000th World birds. Their trip total was 220 species.

- **Alan Turner**, of Ashton-Under-Lyne, England, has made the most of his birding holidays to the U.S.: he tallied a White-headed Woodpecker near Sisters, Oregon, for his 500th ABA-area species.

- Visiting western Arunachal Pradesh, India, **Ray Ziarno**, of Lansing, Michigan, ticked a flock of five Beautiful Nuthatches for his 3,500th World species.

- **Mike Schwitters**, of Choteau, Montana, spotted a Red-breasted Flycatcher on Shemya Island, Alaska, for ABA species #750. Mike adds that the patience and understanding of his wife, **Connie**, was finally rewarded by a Sage Thrasher in Montana, #700 on Connie’s life list and also on Mike’s list of “birds I have shown to my wife.” “Bless her”, he adds, a sentiment we think extends to long-suffering birders’ spouses around the world.

- Two bird guides on St. Paul Island, Alaska, hit 700 while working on the island. **Gavin Bieber**, of Tucson, Arizona, reached the mark with a Jack Snipe, and **Rick Knight**, of Johnson City, Tennessee, followed with a Siberian (Dark-sided) Flycatcher.

- Pinyon Jays near Springfield, southeastern Colorado, were the 550th ABA species for **David Walsh**, a birder based in Ipswich, Suffolk, England.

- **David Donsker**, of North Hampton, New Hampshire, hit 2,000 for South America with a Powerful Woodpecker while on a trip to southern Ecuador.

- A Black-tailed Gull at Tokeland, Washington, was the 650th North American bird for **Nancy Ladenberger**, of Kingston, Washington.