

A *Birding* Interview with **Stephen Kress**

Stephen Kress, the man behind Project Puffin, is living proof that one person can make a difference. Under his leadership, the National Audubon Society's Seabird Restoration Program has successfully re-established puffin and other seabird colonies on islands in the Gulf of Maine over the past 36 years. Kress is a visiting fellow at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, he teaches the Lab's course in field ornithology for the Ithaca community, and he has authored numerous scientific papers and several popular books, including *The Audubon Guide to Attracting Birds*, the National Audubon Society's *Birder's Handbook*, *The Bird Garden*, and *Project Puffin: How We Brought Puffins Back to Egg Rock*.

Interviewed for *Birding*, Kress explains what persistence, optimism, and a fistful of permits can do—to help restore puffins, and to train and inspire people to carry the conservation message worldwide.

— Noah K. Strycker

***Birding*:** Please tell us about Project Puffin.

Stephen Kress: Project Puffin's initial goal was to establish a breeding colony of Atlantic Puffins at Eastern Egg Rock, a seven-acre treeless island in Muscongus Bay, Maine. I had no idea how long it would take to bring puffins back to Egg Rock, and I was similarly uncertain about the broader possibilities of the project. Now, 36 years later, the 100+ pairs in the colony all raise their chicks, which points to the island's suitability for puffins. Over the years, we have also learned how to restore storm-petrel, tern, and Razorbill colonies, and we have established research camps on seven Maine islands. Our seven full-time staff, along with 16 summer interns and 30 volunteers, now protect 23 waterbird species, including Maine's most threatened seabirds.

The project has helped establish a new way of thinking about seabird management, which is that humans can influence the diversity of seabird

species and even promote the expansion of present ranges back to historical ranges. Prior to Project Puffin, the norm was to manage seabirds through legislation, law enforcement, and habitat acquisition. All of these strategies are beneficial, but for many species—such as puffins and terns—they are inadequate. Effective restoration also includes public education. There's a critical need to build a caring public willing to work for effective seabird conservation, which requires sensible fisheries management and healthy oceans.

***Birding*:** Why did you start Project Puffin?

SK: People unintentionally extirpated Maine's original puffin colonies and, by providing food for competing gulls, people kept them from returning. Since people caused this demise, I believe we humans now bear the responsibility for restoring this ecosystem to its original diversity. Our results have convinced me that the Gulf of Maine can still support viable puffin colonies. Project Puffin affirms my belief that people are stewards of life on earth and, as such, we have an ethical obligation to promote healthy wildlife populations for future generations.

The fact that puffins are abundant elsewhere made it no less important to bring the birds back to Maine. Former nesting islands such as Egg Rock are much more vibrant places with puffins and terns nesting there again, and Maine residents and visitors can now enjoy watching them. These charismatic birds can help spur broader public interest in marine conservation. Finally, the same methods we developed to restore puffins are now being used to help globally endangered species worldwide.

***Birding*:** What were the logistics of transporting baby puffins from one country to another?

SK: After obtaining 13 state, federal, and provincial permits, we collected our first six puffin chicks from Newfoundland in 1973 and, with the help of a private pilot who took an interest in the

project, moved them to Maine. Canadian Wildlife Service biologists helped us move nearly 2,000 puffin chicks over the next 16 years. About half were taken to Eastern Egg Rock, and the other half to Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge. At the height of the translocation phase of the project, we were moving 200 chicks per year. These were placed in sod burrows underground. Interns stationed on the islands hand-fed the chicks twice a day on a diet of thawed smelt, fortified with vitamin supplements.

The most difficult part was waiting four years from the time the first transplanted chicks fledged until they returned to nest, then another four years until our first Eastern Egg Rock chick hatched. I am by nature hopeful and persistent—the sort of outlook that is vital for a program such as ours.

Birding: Looking back over your fledgling efforts in those early years of the project, what stories still give you a chuckle?

SK: Now, we can laugh at events that threatened the project at the time. Like the time we collected 200 puffin chicks on Great Island and brought them to the mainland, only to find that a storm prevented our rush back to Maine, forcing an unplanned night in Newfoundland. Fortunately, a Canadian biologist offered his cool basement to keep the chicks in overnight—only to discover that rats also lived there, which necessitated keeping an all-night vigil in the dank cellar.

Birding: Besides puffins, what other species of seabirds have benefited from this project?

SK: I got the idea of starting tern colonies from reading early naturalists' descriptions of mixed puffin and tern colonies at Eastern Egg Rock. This tern colony was raided for eggs and feathers through the early 1900s. Herring Gulls had replaced them by 1936. When I first visited Egg Rock in 1969, the colony was dominated mostly by Great Black-backed Gulls.

While waiting for the puffins to return, we set out tern decoys and played tern sound recordings to encourage

terns to nest in areas where we had chased off the gulls. By some measures, the tern restoration work has proved even more successful than our work with puffins. By 2007, more than 1,300 pairs of Common, Arctic, and Roseate Terns were nesting on Eastern Egg Rock. The island has become especially important for endangered Roseate Terns, hosting more than 100 pairs in most years—the largest North American colony north of Cape Cod.

Birding: What techniques developed for Project Puffin are being used elsewhere?

SK: The “social attraction” methods we developed—particularly the use of decoys and sound recordings—are now widely used in restoring other seabird colonies. In Maine, these techniques have helped create new colonies of Leach's Storm-Petrels and Razorbills. I know of at least 42 species in 12 countries that have benefited from social attraction and seabird chick translocation. These include projects with some of the most critically endangered seabirds such as the Bermuda Petrel and Short-tailed Albatross. Now these methods are even being used to help Purple Martins and other declining songbirds.

Birding: What are the current goals of Project Puffin and the Audubon Seabird Restoration Program?

SK: To further our goal of helping other rare and endangered species, we have established the Josephine Daneman Herz International Seabird Fellowship, which invites seabird colleagues around the world to work with us in Maine. Our goal is to inspire similar restoration projects elsewhere. Clearly, the long-term nature of restoration requires nothing less than people with a lifelong commitment and dedication—attributes demonstrated by the highly dedicated team that furthers Project Puffin's work in Maine. My other present focus is to ensure Project Puffin's future. Toward this end, we are building an endowment to insure the long-term management of Maine seabirds.



Stephen Kress. Photo by © Bill Scholtz.

Birding: What does it take to keep this project going? When will you be able to declare victory?

SK: The few summers of research I originally envisioned have turned into a life's work—one with no end in sight. Seabird restoration on the Maine coast for puffins means ongoing commitment and stewardship, as the growing human population of New England affects everything above and below the water in profound and complex ways. Today, cod and other predatory fish are largely missing from the original food chain, and puffin predators such as Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls rule the coast in vast numbers, their populations subsidized by lobster bait and garbage from landfills throughout coastal New England.

I see no end to the need to place interns on islands, and I feel that training and inspiring young conservation biologists is one of our most important accomplishments. Hundreds have participated in our project and have carried their experiences worldwide, helping wildlife in many ways. Future colony management challenges include controlling invasive vegetation and predators on seabird nesting islands, and encouraging nesting on higher ground, to insure safe nesting from ocean-level rise.

Project Puffin is supported mostly by private contributions from caring people, so ongoing support is essential. Hands-on management and education are expensive. Each year, the project spends nearly one million dollars in Maine to steward most of the state's rarest seabirds. As part of our mission, we seek a following that understands the value of seabirds and their dependence on people for their protection. To learn how you can help by adopting a puffin or making a gift, please visit our website <projectpuffin.org>.