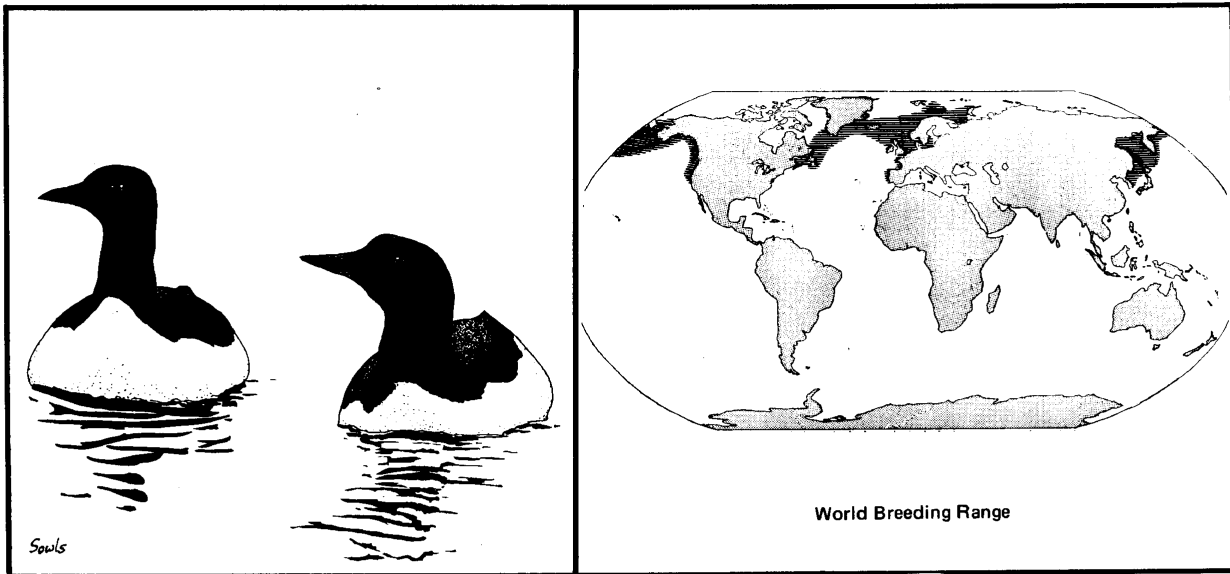


Common Murre (*Uria aalge*)



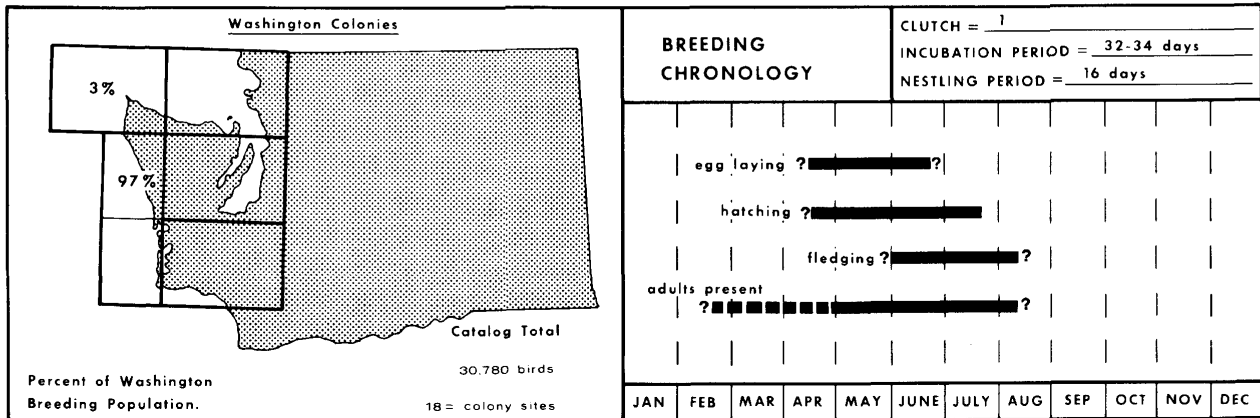
Common Murres are among the most highly colonial of seabirds. Their colonies, usually on rocky offshore islands, are often densely packed with noisy birds, nesting just out of the pecking range of neighbors. Common Murres occur in both the North Pacific and North Atlantic Oceans and are among the most numerous seabirds in the northern hemisphere.

Common Murres prefer to nest on wide, flat cliff ledges and the tops of islands, but they also nest on narrow ledges of vertical cliffs. A large, single egg is laid on bare rock or soil. It is narrowly pointed on one end and broad and rounded on the other. Murre eggs vary greatly in color, ranging from white to buff, brown, reddish, blue, or green. They are almost always marked with dark dots, blotches, or intricate scribbling (Harrison 1978). The unique pattern of each egg

probably aids individual recognition by adults (Johnson 1941).

Murre chicks are fed by both parents and jump from the colonies to the waters below when only partly grown (Tschanz 1968). They are accompanied at sea by only one parent, usually the male (Varoujean in Sowls et al. 1980), swimming from the nesting area to wintering grounds. Observations suggest this may be from colonies along the Oregon coast to Puget Sound in Washington.

Common Murres are strong fliers and are capable of foraging long distances from their colonies. They dive to considerable depths and include fish, crustaceans, and cephalopods in their diet (Ogi and Tsujita 1973, 1977). Common Murres may be seen along the outer coast of Washington during all months of the year. Larger numbers are present from fall



through winter when numbers also are present in the deeper habitats of the inland marine waters.

WASHINGTON COLONIES

Common Murres nest at 18 locations along Washington's outer coast from Erin's Bride north to Tatoosh Island at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The largest numbers are found at Willoughby Rock (5,300), Split Rock (10,400), Grenville Arch (5,000), and Rounded Island (2,200). While these larger colonies are probably used each year, murres also appear to shift nesting colony sites; assessments of populations require monitoring of all possible locations.

Colonies of murres are easy to find but are difficult to census. Variables such as time of year, time of day, and the unknown breeding status of many individuals complicate the task. The estimates of murre numbers presented in this catalog represent the number actually counted and make no allowance for members of breeding pairs that may

be away from the colony. Ainley (1976) estimated that two-thirds of the total number of birds actually nesting may be away during some censuses. Thus our estimated totals may be somewhat low. We feel, however, that all sizeable nesting sites have been found. The Common Murre is much less numerous, perhaps as a function of availability of suitable nesting habitat, as a breeding bird in Washington than it is in California, Oregon, British Columbia, or Alaska.

HISTORICAL STATUS AND VULNERABILITY

Due to very infrequent surveys until recent years, trends in populations of nesting Common Murres in Washington are not known. Differences in census methods and incomplete coverage of the coastline by many observers make comparisons impossible. While in the case of Tatoosh Island there is less human presence due to automation of the light station, the murre population there is relatively small in comparison with the larger colonies elsewhere. The

amount of eggging carried out on murre colonies in the past is unknown, but this could have depressed populations in the State as it did elsewhere.

Nesting Common Murres are very sensitive to disturbance by boats, low-flying aircraft, and humans on foot. When disturbed, adults flush from the colonies and may knock eggs and chicks from nest sites. The remaining chicks and eggs are subject to increased predation from gulls, ravens, and crows. Common Murres are highly vulnerable to oil contamination and were some of the most frequently oiled birds in the 1971

San Francisco oil spill (Smail et al. 1972). They are common in outer coastal waters off Washington throughout the year and in inside waters in winter. Since they spend virtually all their nonbreeding lives in the water, forage by diving, and congregate both around colonies on the water and in flocks during the rest of the year, they are among the most vulnerable of marine birds to oil spills. Murres also have suffered heavy mortality in gill nets (see DeGange and Newby 1980). Net mortality to murres has been observed in Washington, but the magnitude and impact on local nesting populations is unknown.

FIELD NOTES

The authors would appreciate copies of your field notes for updates
