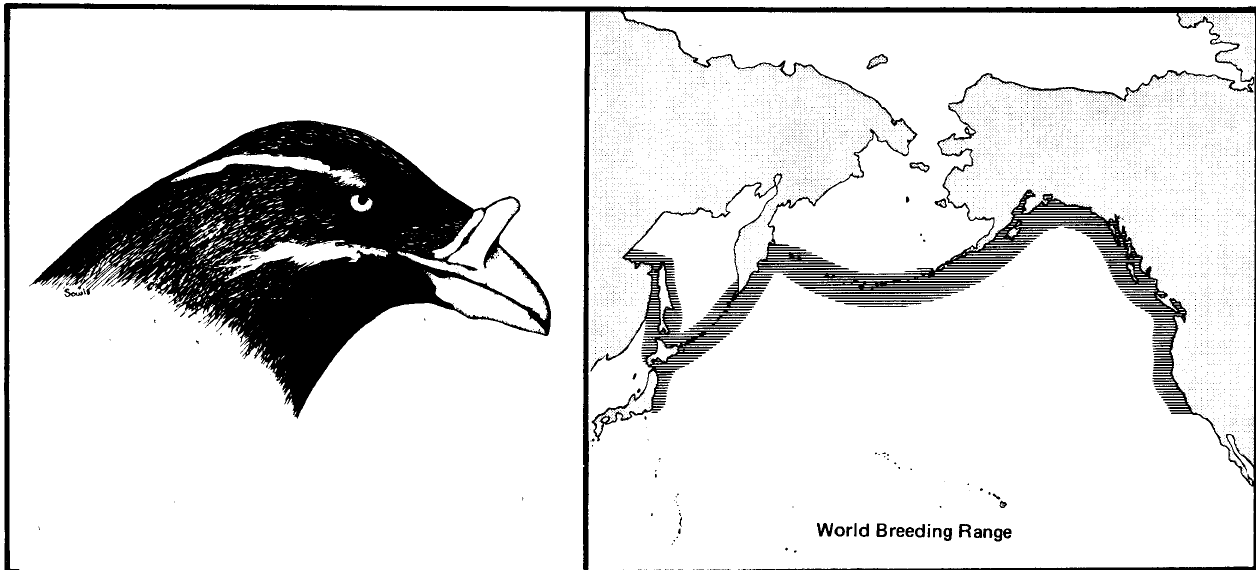


## Rhinoceros Auklet (*Cerorhinca monocerata*)

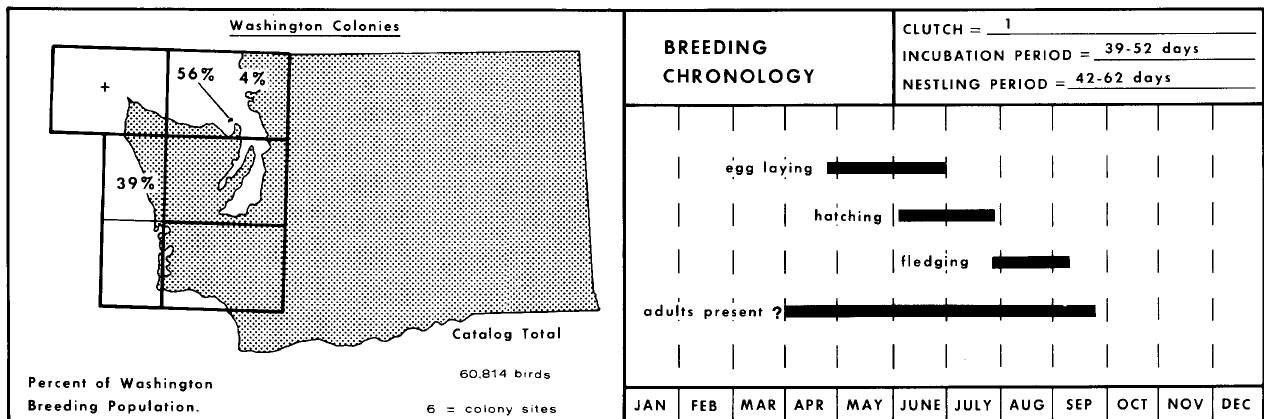


Rhinoceros Auklets are one of the most abundant seabirds breeding in Washington, where their southernmost large colonies in the eastern North Pacific are located. While the species breeds from California north around the rim of the Pacific from the Aleutians to northern Japan, it is abundant only around a few large colonies in Washington, British Columbia, southeastern Alaska, and Kamchatka, Siberia, and Hokkaido, Japan (Udvardy 1963).

The species derives its name from the keratinous "horn" found on its bill during the breeding season. Although this species' common name implies it is an auklet, it is more closely related to the puffins. Rhinoceros Auklets are excellent divers and feed on small fish and cephalopods (Heath 1915; Richardson 1961; Leschner 1976).

Rhinoceros Auklets nest primarily in burrows dug into the ground in both forested and unforested islands. Burrows may be up to six meters in length and often fork two or three times before ending in a nesting cavity (Heath 1915; Willett 1915). The recent discovery of Rhinoceros Auklets at Sea Lion Caves, Oregon (Scott et al. 1974; Varoujean and Pitman 1979), and at caves in the conglomerate cliffs at Point Arguello, California (Sowls et al. 1980), indicates that this species may also nest in rocky mainland habitats.

Rhinoceros Auklets almost always enter and leave colonies at night when feeding chicks. This predominantly nocturnal behavior may have evolved as a means of reducing kleptoparasitism by gulls. In California and Oregon, Rhinoceros Auklets may often be observed on or near colonies



during the day; but north of Washington they appear to be strictly nocturnal in visits to colonies, although some birds may be seen foraging near the colonies. This difference remains unexplained but may be related to the availability of food and its proximity to the colonies.

**WASHINGTON COLONIES**

Rhinoceros Auklets nest at three main sites in Washington: Protection Island (34,216), Destruction Island (23,600), and Smith Island (2,588). In addition, small numbers nest at Tatoosh Island, Alexander Island, and East Bodelteh. Reports of small colonies in other parts of the inland waters, particularly southern Puget Sound, have not been verified in recent field surveys (Wahl and Speich 1984). While a few more pairs nest in the State in limited suitable habitat, the total estimated nesting population is relatively accurate.

**HISTORICAL STATUS AND VULNERABILITY**

Rhinoceros Auklets are conspicuous in inland marine

waters of Washington near the Protection Island colony in particular and have been mentioned from the early days of field ornithology in Washington. Suckley and Cooper (1860) reported the species was nesting on Protection Island in 1854. However, little data are available as to population size in most sites and, while local residents state that the colony on Protection Island is larger than in the past, no census data exist prior to about 1956 (Richardson 1961). Certainly there have been variations in population size due to natural and human factors alike.

Rhinoceros Auklets are very sensitive to disturbance during the nesting period. Adults will readily desert their nests if disturbed during incubation or brooding. Their burrows are often near the surface of the ground and are easily collapsed.

This species has suffered in the past from ground predators introduced onto nesting colonies. Dogs brought by lighthouse personnel killed many birds (see Manuwal 1978), and while automated light stations have changed this

situation, potential introduction of dogs and other predators into Washington colonies is a serious concern.

Like all alcids, Rhinoceros Auklets are extremely vulnerable to oil spills. During the breeding season they concentrate around colonies at night, and they tend to forage in large flocks in areas of strong tidal currents, particularly in inshore waters where oil spills are perhaps of greater likelihood. During the winter, when Rhinoceros Auklets are present only in low numbers in Washington waters, large numbers

of this species, presumably many from Washington colonies, are present along the California coastline (Speich, pers. obs.).

While there are indications this species is increasing along the west coast of North America (see SOWLS et al. 1980), and while it may be that more Rhinoceros Auklets nest on Protection Island now than in 1956, there is no evidence in Washington that there have been any significant new colonies established. Populations in Washington may be reaching the limit of available nesting habitat.

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**FIELD NOTES**

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The authors would appreciate copies of your field notes for updates