

## Common Murres recolonize Matinicus Rock after 130 years!

**P**roject Puffin researchers were elated this summer to discover six Common Murre chicks huddled with their parents under massive granite boulders at Matinicus Rock, Maine's most remote seabird

nesting island. The famed seabird mecca, part of the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge, is located 20 miles offshore in mid-coast Maine. The discovery marked the long-awaited return of murres to this

historic nesting place. The successful nesting represented a 110-mile range expansion from the nearest colony at Machias Seal Island on the U.S.-Canada border, and culminated 27 years of hopeful waiting by Project Puffin researchers. A murre egg at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology collected in 1883 from "Matinicus Isle" provides evidence that murres nested on Matinicus Rock long ago.

The 2018 discovery of murre chicks at Matinicus Rock is especially poignant because of the historic role that "The Rock" played in the bird protection movement. Murres, along with all Atlantic seabirds, were hunted extensively in the 1800s for their eggs, meat and feathers. The devastating slaughter led to the extirpation of many seabird species, but also inspired the hiring of lighthouse keepers as the first bird protection wardens. In 1900, William Dutcher, Audubon's founding president, hired William Grant, light keeper at Matinicus Rock, as North America's first seabird warden. The early years of North America's bird protection movement culminated in the landmark Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which made the hunting of migratory birds illegal. Now, 100 years since passage

*Continued on page 2.*



COMMON MURRES BY JEAN HALL

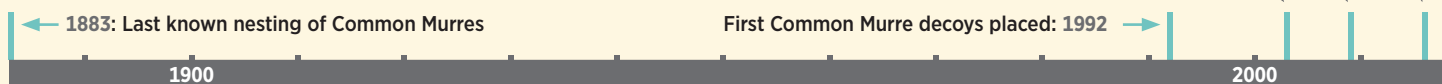
**2003: Numbers of prospecting murres increase; murres nest at Machias Seal Island**

**2009: First egg found on open ledge**

**2016: First egg found under boulders**

**2018: At least 9 eggs laid and 6 chicks hatch!**

Timeline for Common Murres on Matinicus Rock



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Common Murre and its chick in a boulder-crevice nest on Matinicus Rock—one of the first hatched on the island in over 130 years.

of that act, murres are nesting again at Matinicus Rock. Even though Matinicus Rock seabirds are now safe from hunting, it took over 130 years for murres to breed there again. Slow recovery for long-extirpated colonies is typical for seabirds that usually return to the colony where they hatched—a characteristic known as philopatry. Murres, puffins, and gannets all fall into this group. When there are no survivors from the original colony and other colonies are far away, recolonization depends on a few brave, less philopatric birds discovering the new site and taking a chance to nest there. Project Puffin researchers noticed that a few murres visited Matinicus Rock almost daily prior to 1992, but seldom came ashore. To encourage colonization, adult murre decoys, along with egg and chick decoys, were set out on a cliff. Murres immediately came ashore, but fewer than five murres per day frequented the island until 2003 when their numbers increased dramatically.

Although annual murre courtships and copulations occurred, the first egg was not laid until 2009 by a murre nesting among the decoys. This gave researchers cause for much celebration. Unfortunately, that first egg vanished within a week—likely a gull’s snack. After a huge storm washed away most of the murre decoys in 2012, Project Puffin deployed only a small decoy colony with accompanying recorded murre sounds until 2016 when decoy use stopped.

By this time, murres had been regularly observed prospecting for nest sites among the nesting Razorbills, and it was

hoped that they would nest nearby, as the two species often nest near one another on other islands. Serving as living decoys, Razorbills appear to encourage the murres to nest. They seemed to attract the murres to boulder nesting habitat, where several laid eggs in deep rock crevices in 2016 and 2017. While those eggs did not hatch, the course was set for the successful nesting of 2018.

At least nine eggs were observed in 2018 and at least six chicks hatched. With the trend toward increasingly warm ocean

temperatures in the Gulf of Maine, it may seem odd that alcids such as Razorbills and Common Murres are expanding their range southward. These southern expansions may be possible because Murres and Razorbills can dive down to 300 feet, where they can access fish such as Atlantic herring and white hake that seek colder, deeper water in years when surface waters are warm. Another factor favoring the southward expansion of Razorbills, murres, and puffins is the growth of the large alcid populations at Machias Seal Island; here nesting habitat is becoming crowded, sending some younger birds elsewhere. Ongoing efforts to keep gulls from nesting at Matinicus Rock are also helping alcids rebuild their populations at this historic nesting place.

2018  
YEAR  
OF THE  
BIRD

2018 commemorates the  
100-year anniversary of the  
passage of the Migratory  
Bird Treaty Act in 1918.  
100 years since passage of  
the act, murres are nesting  
again at Matinicus Rock

Ocean Heat Wave Disrupts Puffin Nesting

Even before the 2018 summer field season started, there was ominous news from Canadian oceanographers. In April, researchers at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia located unusually warm, deep water entering the Gulf of Maine. Such masses of warm water are becoming increasingly common off the Maine coast, an area historically noted for consistently cool water. Associated with melting polar ice, and warm water incursions from the Gulf Stream, these “ocean heat waves” result in a rollercoaster pattern of cool and warm summers that affect everything from plankton to puffins in the Gulf of Maine.

In 2018, puffins at Matinicus Rock and Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge began feeding their chicks small haddock rather than more typical foods, such as Atlantic herring and white hake. Fortunately, haddock was in good supply, with parents bringing home as many as ten beak-loads per day, often stuffed with half a dozen haddock. But in mid-July sea surface temperatures (SST) began to rise; by early August SST had climbed to nearly 70 degrees, setting a new record for outer Penobscot Bay. This warming led to a decline to just one to three feedings per day and some of the fish were butterfish, which are often too large for chicks to swallow.

Food for puffin chicks became scarce when forage fish moved to deeper, cooler waters, or further north. Although puffins are capable of diving more than 200 feet, they usually feed in the upper 60 feet of



Puffin chick Grace on August 8 (left) before the food surge, and two weeks later, on August 21 (right). At 68 days old, Grace stayed in the burrow more than two weeks longer than normal, but the extended stay and longer-than-usual parental-care strategy seems to have paid off. Photos by Keenan Yakola.



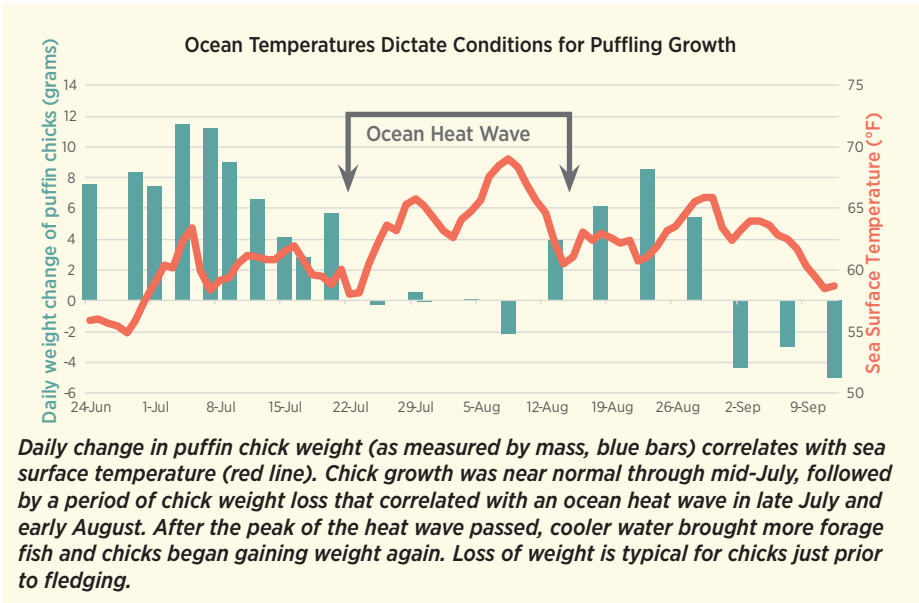
the water column because deep dives are energy-expensive and exhausting. As SST warmed, most chicks began losing weight and some starved. The mid-coast Maine heat wave lasted until mid-August; after that, SST dropped by about eight degrees to more typical temperatures. The cooler water in mid-August resulted in a late summer surge of white hake and smaller butterfish that arrived just in time to help the surviving puffin chicks. Puffin parents resumed more frequent feedings, with some chicks receiving ten or more feedings per day. This allowed some once-starving chicks to increase their body weight by half.

Migrate, or Stay to Feed Chicks?

Some puffin parents stayed on three weeks longer than usual, delaying migra-

tion in order to feed their chicks. This adaptability permitted many puffin parents to ultimately fledge healthy chicks.

Other studies have documented extended chick rearing for as much as 83 days for puffins—a huge contrast to the normal 38–44 days. However, chicks reared over such long periods are usually underweight, with lower survival rates than chicks that fledge in shorter periods. Longer chick rearing may also add stress to parents who have to work harder and longer to rear chicks when forage fish is scarce. The summers of 2012, 2013, and 2016 also had warmer than normal SST, and correspondingly low food deliveries for puffin chicks. The surprising thing about last summer’s observations is that food supply fluctuated greatly within the same nesting season, correlating with the ocean heat wave that moved through the Gulf of Maine.



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Donate \$100 or more to support Project Puffin and receive a certificate of adoption for one Atlantic Puffin, along with a biography and a color photo.

To learn more or sign up, visit [projectpuffin.audubon.org/donate-project-puffin](http://projectpuffin.audubon.org/donate-project-puffin) or call us at (607) 257-7308





## Introducing Don Lyons

The Seabird Restoration Program is pleased to introduce its newest staff member—Director of Conservation Science, Don Lyons.

**C**ome to Audubon's Seabird Restoration Program (SRP) from Oregon State University, where I have worked on seabird science and conservation for 20 years as a graduate student, post-doc, and Assistant Professor in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife. Many of the projects I have been involved in are direct derivatives of the SRP.

Restoring seabird colonies using social attraction, understanding the relationship between seabirds and their forage fish prey base, tracking seabird foraging, dispersal, and migration using both banding and electronic tagging approaches, and assessing the impacts of changes in ocean climate on seabird breeding success and population resiliency. I have always pursued research that has direct conservation relevance and have been fortunate to make contributions in several arenas, including colony restoration for the critically endangered Chinese Crested Tern in Asia, investigating steep declines of Aleutian Terns in Alaska, and reducing conflicts between Caspian Terns and threatened salmon populations in the Pacific Northwest.

I am thrilled to join the SRP and contribute to the amazing science, conservation, and human legacies this program has established, and pursue opportunities to expand it's reach! Certainly the remarkable puffins and other seabirds of coastal Maine were an important part of my decision, but what has me really excited is the opportunity to work with such a dedicated array of seabird enthusiasts. I'm so impressed with both the people within Audubon who devote their careers to seabird conservation, but also the people outside of Audubon who devote their discretionary time and resources to support seabird conservation. That combination of passionate folks is something I'm very pleased to align myself with.

I look forward to reporting to you on our science and conservation progress!

Don Lyons  
Director of Conservation Science,  
Seabird Restoration Program

## Season Summary

**H**heavy rain and cooler temperatures during early chick-rearing and a drop in fish availability starting in mid-July took their toll on seabirds this year, with below-average breeding success in most species. The surprise of the season was an abundance of small haddock, which for the first time appeared in the diet of tern chicks as well as in puffin chick diet. Sea surface temperatures reached near record highs again this year, and air temperatures on the islands were unnaturally warm.

### Matinicus Rock

- **High Counts:** Six Common Murre chicks, 717 pairs of Arctic Terns, and 268 pairs of Common Terns (highest since 2011).
- **Matinicus Mystery Manx:** This only known U.S. colony of Manx Shearwater produced at least five chicks (right) and geolocators were placed on two adults to discover their winter home.
- **Fewer Puffin Fledglings:** Warm seas contributed to Atlantic Puffins fledging an average of fewer than one chick per pair, the lowest since 2013.



ABOVE: FRANK MAYER & SHANNON BLAKE BAND A MANX SHEARWATER CHICK

### Stratton Island

- **More Terns:** A record 175 Least Tern nests were tallied after mainland nest failures prompted terns to relocate to Stratton's sand beach. A record 128 Roseate Tern (photo below) pairs nested, the highest number since tern restoration began in 1984.
- **Oystercatchers:** Two pairs of American Oystercatchers nested, fledging 3 chicks at this northern limit of their range.
- **Vegetarian Predator:** A muskrat was caught eating tern eggs and was removed from the colony.



ROSEATE TERN BY JEAN HALL

Egg Rock Update 2018

### Outer Green Island

- **Largest Tern Colony:** Despite attacks from Peregrine Falcons, Merlins, and gulls, the colony fledged 1,926 Common Tern chicks. The colony increased to 1,553 pairs, an 8% increase over 2017, ranking this as Maine's largest Common Tern colony. Right: Common Tern chicks ready for banding.
- **Tern Diet:** Herring was an important food for Common Terns. It made up 41% of their diet.
- **Bad Weather:** An extreme thunderstorm with rain, hail, and 70-mph winds passed over the island in early July, flattening the camp and causing failure of the 4 Roseate Tern nests.



JEAN HALL

### Eastern Egg Rock

- **More Puffins:** Record-high of 178 (up six pairs from 2017) nesting puffin pairs counted.
- **Gull Neighbors Move:** More than 800 pairs of Laughing Gulls moved from Eastern Egg Rock to nest on nearby Western Egg Rock.
- **Nesting Tern Increases:** Arctic Terns rose to 86 pairs and Common Terns to 1,021 pairs, the most since 2009, due to habitat improvements and fewer Laughing Gulls.



JEAN HALL

### Jenny Island

- **More Terns, Better Habitat:** Common Terns increased to an all-time 1,426 pair high (10% increase over 2017) and Roseate Terns to 24 pairs, the second highest count for the island. Invasive plants were removed and replaced by native grasses to improve tern-nesting habitat.
- **Tern Diet:** Herring made up nearly half of foods delivered to Common Terns and a third to Roseate Terns.
- **Predator Visit:** A Peregrine Falcon raided the colony at least 14 times and Black-crowned Night-herons pilfered eggs. Despite the predation, Common Terns fledged 1,340 chicks (left) and Roseate Terns fledged 15 chicks.



JEAN HALL

### Seal Island NWR

- **Puffins Expand to New Areas:** An estimated 565 Atlantic Puffin pairs nested on the island, continuing colony expansion into new nesting areas.
- **Nesting Success for Great Cormorants:** 32 pairs of Great Cormorants produced 64 fledglings, a successful season for this state-threatened species, but this was the only successful Maine colony.
- **Razorbills on the Rise:** The Razorbill nest count reached a new high count of 59.
- **Troppy Returns:** The famous Red-billed Tropicbird returned to spend its 14th summer.



STEPHEN W. KRESS

### Pond Island NWR

- **More Terns:** Common Terns increased to a record 1,065 pairs, with 2 pairs of Roseate Terns and 11 pairs of Arctic Terns.
- **Bad Weather:** Heavy rains caused the loss of many chicks, but Common Terns still fledged 1,363 chicks; Arctic Terns fledged 12.
- **Predator Visits:** A Snowy Owl (below) was captured on June 1 and relocated far from the island. Peregrine Falcons, Merlins, Bald Eagles, and Herring and Great Black-backed gulls visited frequently and took chicks. A mink also visited and took chicks.



PROJECT PUFFIN PHOTO



KEIRAN YAKOLA

Egg Rock Update 2018



Education and Outreach

Front Row Seat

Chair-gripping nature drama marked summer 2018 on the explore.org cams! Seal Island NWR's puffin burrow-cam chick, Grace, survived burrow-prospecting puffin attacks and near starvation to successfully fledge. On Hog Island, osprey stars Rachel and Steve battled Great Horned Owl attacks and fended off eagles to rear their chicks. After two fateful owl raids, the Hog Island team put a spotlight on a dressed mannequin to discourage predation of the remaining osprey chick.

Puffin Boat Tours



JEAN HALL

Our education team broke an outreach record this year! Despite nine canceled trips due to rough seas and weather, Audubon educators reached over 9,200 visitors narrating 114 puffin-watching trips to Eastern Egg Rock. June through August annually, tours to Eastern Egg Rock depart from New Harbor and Boothbay Harbor, Maine aboard the Hardy Boat and Cap'n Fish boat lines.

Learn more at projectpuffin.audubon.org/puffin-tours

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Many of the 2018 island staff were sponsored by friends of Project Puffin. Sponsoring one of our seabird researchers is a rewarding way to help seabirds and an early career conservation biologist. To learn more about how to become a sponsor, write to: puffin@audubon.org.

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Herz International Seabird Fellows

The Seabird Restoration Program welcomed four Josephine Daneman Herz International Fellows to Maine in 2018. These four talented scientists joined Project Puffin's program in Maine to exchange knowledge, culture and expertise with our researchers. Joining us was Ariana Duarte Canizales (left) and Ana Gabriel Cárdenas who run the Grupo de Ecología y Conservación des Islas (GECI) seabird restoration efforts on Guadalupe Island, Mexico. We were also pleased to welcome María (Coté) José Vilches Villa (middle) from Island Conservation in Chile and Lyanne Pierina Ampuero Merino (right) from the Punta San Juan Program in Peru. Lyanne is a Junior Researcher at Punta San Juan in Peru and Coté works for the Island Conservation seabird program in Chile on Chañaral and Choros Islands.



STEPHEN W. KRESS

Hog Island Audubon Camp

Sharing puffin and seabird conservation through our camp programs continued in 2018 with courses such as Saving Seabirds, Field Ornithology, Joy of Birding, Coastal Maine Bird Studies for Teens. Some of the country's best-known naturalists and ornithologists such as Scott Weidensaul, Richard Crossley and Pete Dunne shared their experiences and led the groups' adventures. New this year was the Mountains to Sea teen birding session. Eva Matthews Lark and Christian Hagenlocher led the teens, birding from Maine Audubon's Borestone Mountain Sanctuary in Guilford, Maine, to Hog Island! Participants in the Road Scholar course 'Saving Seabirds' (left) helped seabirds by painting conservation decoys.



SALE SCHUBERT

2017-2018 CONTRIBUTORS

Contributions listed were received from October 1, 2017 through September 30, 2018. Space restrictions prevent us from listing our 1,469 Supporter-level friends. Every donor is important to us and we sincerely regret any omissions. Your continuing participation makes our work possible.

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## Project Puffin

SEABIRD RESTORATION PROGRAM

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A program of National Audubon Society.

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