

## August 2010: Meditations on Puffins

As August arrives and summer reaches its peak, I think of puffins. By early to mid-August, fledgling Atlantic puffins will have begun to exit their burrows one by one, leaving their parents behind, to fly out to sea and begin their independent lives. The fledgling flies off in the night to avoid the dangers of predators like gulls. Because they disperse far out into the Atlantic, no one is really sure where they go. The young bird hangs out in the open ocean for several years, then returns to its home island to nest. Scientists are not entirely sure how it finds its way home, either. A puffin may live as long as 30 years, so it can afford to be a late bloomer. After a few years of scoping out the home island, at around the age of five it decides to find a mate, settle down, dig a burrow, and raise a chick of its own. And the cycle begins all over again.

For a bird that's as closely studied on its breeding grounds as the Atlantic puffin, it's interesting that so many mysteries still surround its life. During the late spring and summer months on several nesting islands off the Maine coast, researchers sit behind blinds from dawn to dusk cataloguing the birds' every move. Last year eight puffins that had nested on Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge were fitted with geolocator leg bands by Project Puffin staff. Five of these birds have been spotted this year, according to a recent report issued by Project Puffin, but staff have not yet been able to recapture the birds to remove their leg bands and retrieve the geolocators, which potentially hold information that might offer clues as to where puffins go in the winter when the researchers aren't able to follow.

Atlantic puffins have historically been numerous in the north Atlantic. When I was fourteen, I remember seeing hundreds of them off the coast of northern Scotland—my first sightings of a bird that has since become a wildlife icon of my home state. In Iceland, the birds are so numerous they are regularly eaten. In fact, the name *puffin*, according to an Iceland puffin website, means “fatling” and used to refer to chicks of the unrelated Manx shearwater, which were also eaten. That's why the shearwater scored the Latin name *Puffinus puffinus*, and not the puffin as one might expect. The Atlantic puffin's Latin name is *Fratercula arctica*, or “little friar (or brother) of the North,” presumably because of its neat black and white plumage similar to religious garb.

Here in Maine puffins were over-hunted for food and feathers. By the 1900s only one pair remained in the state, on Matinicus Rock right here in Penobscot Bay. They were protected there by thoughtful lighthouse keepers, who kept away hunters and predatory gulls, and the colony eventually grew. Today, thanks to that same oversight model, the island continues to be an important nesting refuge for puffins and other seabirds. Only researchers may land there when the birds are in residence.

In the 1970s Steve Kress began restoring puffins to Eastern Egg Rock in nearby Muscongus Bay, an island which hadn't hosted nesting puffins since the 1880s. This summer researchers on Eastern Egg Rock counted 99 active puffin burrows by mid-July and anticipated discovering more burrows and surpassing last

year's record high count of 107 pairs by the end of the field season on the island. The puffin is slowly but surely making its way back into Maine waters, now nesting in established colonies of varying sizes on Eastern Egg Rock, Seal Island, Matinicus Rock, and Machias Seal Island.

Machias Seal Island, which is part of the United States or Canada depending on whom you ask, has long been a bastion of puffins. While the colony there is protected, it did not have to be restored as on other islands. A couple of summers ago I was fortunate enough to be able to join a birding group on the puffin charter boat out of Cutler harbor. After experiencing seabird cruises to Matinicus Rock and Eastern Egg Rock, on which seeing a few dozen puffins was cause for great excitement, I was unprepared for the hundreds—even thousands—of birds we saw on Machias Seal Island. Puffins were everywhere, zipping around the boat like little wind-up toys, flying in to the island with beaks full of herring, and bobbing in big rafts offshore. Although we'd heard reports that the island's tern colonies were having a zero success rate, puffins were clearly thriving—more than 3,000 pairs nest there!

Because of the island's importance as a nesting site for not only puffins but other seabirds with precarious populations, only a certain number of visitors are allowed to disembark each day. Walking on the island is restricted to a few clearly marked pathways, as well, because stepping in the wrong spot could crush a tern nest or damage an underground burrow. Groups of two or three people are ushered to the enclosed blinds (with no stopping allowed on the way) for short stints of up-close observation. Once in the blind you have to be careful not to open so many of the sliding windows that the birds around you become aware of your presence. Eggs and chicks are endangered if a parent bird is spooked and disappears.

But following the rules was completely worth it when a puffin landed on a ledge about ten feet in front of me. From so close, the puffin's colorful bill and dapper plumage were striking. The puffin is a much smaller bird than most people realize, so the experience was also more gratifying than leaning over a boat railing to peer at a speck in the water. More puffins came and went. A puffin pair touched bills and entered a cleft in the rocks that must have enclosed a burrow. (Puffins are monogamous.) Overhead we could hear the pitter-patter of little feet as puffins congregated on the roof of the blind. It was an extraordinary experience.

This year's young, which will be taking flight soon, will look a little different than the adults I saw on Machias Seal Island. A bird in juvenile plumage sports a gray face and less flamboyant bill than an adult, and so doesn't stand out with that "sea parrot" look that makes the puffin such a recognizable icon. Soon, the adults will molt into their darker, winter look, as well, and then head off to unknown waters, not to return until next spring.